

Open to all

Debbie North talks about the importance of getting outdoors



Ordnance Survey (OS Maps) has recruited the next wave of OS Maps GetOutside Champions in its long-term mission to help more people to get outside more often.

I'm delighted that I'm one of them. I feel very proud and honoured to be supporting Ordnance Survey in this mission.

The GetOutside initiative was founded four years ago to help combat the major decline in physical health in the UK. The initiative already reaches around six million people each year.

There are 100 champions at the moment. We all have one thing in common – a love of the outdoors. We

Debbie North uses all-terrain wheelchairs to explore the countryside

all come from different backgrounds – from mountaineers to scout leaders, environmentalists to conservationists. And from the young and... not as young as we used to be.

As OS Champions, we have the perfect opportunity to share our love of the great outdoors as individuals and as a wide-ranging, enthusiastic and vibrant team, showcasing the best of Britain with stories and tips to be active outside.

I'm often asked why I love the outdoors. My answer is that I love the freedom, the fresh air and to be able to

feel the elements on my face. Back in the day, being on a Yorkshire hillside or a Cumbrian mountain was a great escape from the pressures of everyday urban life – work and domestic. The ‘rat race’. All that’s still true – minus the urban as I live rural now and have done since 2007 – but there’s a different element there.

Debbie at the Water Cut sculpture in Mallerstang



When I had to stop walking because of spinal degeneration, it broke my heart. I honestly thought I’d only see the hills and mountains from the safety of a car park or through the passenger window. Obviously, things have changed and I am able to get out there. So each and every time I’m in the great outdoors, it’s a reminder for me to appreciate and savour everything about it... the sights, the sounds, the smells... and yes, even the weather.

As well as being an OS Champion, I work with The Outdoor Guide (TOG) with Julia Bradbury. TOG is a free online walking resource founded by the TV presenter and her sister Gina Bradbury-Fox. I run AccessTOG – the wheelchair-

friendly section of the website – promoting countryside that’s accessible for everyone. Where Julia walks, I wheel – creating, developing and promoting wheelchair accessible walks all over the UK; from walks suitable for a manual chair user, to adventurous challenges in my all-terrain wheelchair.

I travel all around the UK with the TOG team, filming ‘walks’ which then feature as videos on www.theoutdoorguide.co.uk. These videos are a valuable resource for people with disabilities who can watch them from the comfort of their own home before making an informed decision as to the suitability of their own wheelchair for the trip.

I think it goes without saying that

2020 has been a very strange year!

When lockdown was first announced back in March, Ordnance Survey adapted its successful GetOutside content hub as GetOutside Inside and, working with the Outdoor Industries Association (OIA), brought together a whole host of ideas and inspiration for the enjoyment of the outdoors within the locality of home.

With the expression "Permitted Exercise" on everybody’s lips, people rediscovered walking locally. In fact, usage of the free OS Greenspace app has seen a 1 728 per cent increase since February.

Though it has been a tough year for everyone, there are some positives to

have come out of these unprecedented times. Many people have reconnected with Nature and the outdoors over the past few months and are discovering a love of walking.

“ We found paths on open access land that we never knew existed

The OS champions have been amazingly creative in their ideas for spending time outdoors close to home and for keeping physically fit. We had great fun doing activities such as camping in the garden or front room, and climbing mountains on the staircase.

For me, I've been exploring the fells above where I live in Cumbria. Many days my husband Andy and I have had the fells to ourselves. We found paths on open access land that we never knew existed and spent time browsing maps and really getting to know our home locality. Even when the lockdown began to ease and visitors began to flock to the Lake District, there have been very few folk in the area where I love to walk near home.

For many folk like me who have been shielding, getting outdoors again comes with anxieties and apprehension. This is why I'm keen to be promoting

walks that are away from the popular Cumbrian tourist honeypots – the Lake District in essence.

Cumbria is a big area. The county isn't just the Lake District and there are many beautiful walks to explore in places such as the Eden Valley.

One of my favourite walks is to the Water Cut Sculpture in Mallerstang – a straight-forward walk for an all-terrain mobility wheelchair/scooter.

On a more adventurous note, I've been to the rim of High Cup Nick too – though that was quite challenging, even for my beast of a wheelchair and isn't an outing to be taken on lightly. We actually commented that ascents of Skiddaw and Blencathra were technically less difficult than 'The Grand Canyon of the North'.

A more gentle walk can be found along the Podgill Viaduct at Nateby and along the Smardale Gill Viaduct walk – both of these walks are suitable for a manual wheelchair user.

Now it's your turn. Unfold those OS maps of Cumbria and look for places beyond the usual, well-walked, well-populated areas. Instead, have a wander up to the Water Cut, or Dufton Pike, or Birkett Hill. Or any of the many beautiful places on offer in the county. ■

Debbie's walks can be found on www.theoutdoorguide.co.uk

The GetOutside website – www.GetOutside.uk – and the new GetOutside app also give ideas for days out.

COMPETITION WINNERS

The winner xxxxxx competition was xxxxxxxx