



You may recognise **Debbie North** from her appearance

in television series such as Channel 4's *The Yorkshire Dales & The Lakes*. Here, Debbie shares her experience of visiting Smardale Nature Reserve as a wheelchair user.

I work with Julia Bradbury and The Outdoor Guide (TOG) running the wheelchair-friendly walks section of the website. The brainchild of both Julia and her sister, Gina, TOG is an online resource which details all of Julia's walks and many others. All of these are available for free download and also include information on places to eat, drink and sleep.

One facet of the work I do with TOG is the ongoing research of walks suitable for wheels, ranging from prams and buggies through to manual wheelchairs and up to and including all-terrain wheelchairs. With this in mind, the aim of our walk on this particular outing – I was accompanied by Rachel Briggs, Recreation and Access Officer for the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority and Andy, my husband – was to explore and audit a new section of the Dales, which officially grew by almost a quarter on 1 August 2016.

This walk with wheels begins in the seemingly sleepy village of Smardale, a couple of miles or so to the west of the market town of Kirkby Stephen, the nearest place for any amenities you might need. To be very clear, we weren't just taking in the route for pleasure – we were here to work! And our very clear goal was to decide whether the route can be added to the 'Miles without Stiles' programme, a series of wheelchair-friendly walks allowing access for all in the countryside.

Armed with tape measures, GPS, gradient measure and chocolate, we prepared to leave Smardale behind and head along the path which follows the route of the old dismantled railway.

An information board announces the start of the walk – a linear 'there-and-back' trek unless you arrange for transport at the other end – and within moments you delve into the delightfully

Accessible nature reserves: Smardale



▲ Debbie manages the wheelchair-friendly walks section of *The Outdoor Guide*, set up by Julia Bradbury and her sister, Gina. Visit www.theoutdoorguide.co.uk for more wheelchair-friendly walks

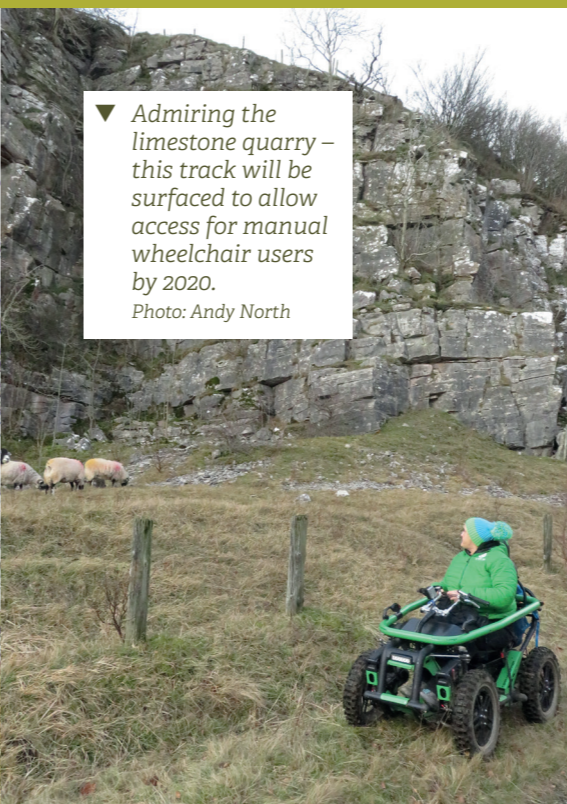
▼ Debbie uses an all-terrain wheelchair to explore and enjoy the outdoors. Photo: Andy North



Disabled facilities

- ❖ The former car park at Smardale is for disabled parking only. There are **xx** spaces here.
- ❖ The new car park, opened in March 2019, has **xx** disabled spaces. From here, visitors will follow the raised walkway to the hamlet of Smardale and through the disabled car park to access the nature reserve.
- ❖ The nearest accessible RADAR toilets are located in Kirkby Stephen.

▼ Admiring the limestone quarry – this track will be surfaced to allow access for manual wheelchair users by 2020. Photo: Andy North



named Demesne Wood with trees that look as though they're clinging on for dear life to the deceptively steep-sided slopes beneath the track.

What is certain, though, is you will reach Smardalegill (all one word on the OS map!) Viaduct – 90 feet high and 14 stone arches to take the track over Scandal Beck – and feel as though you're in a most remote place. In reality, you are. Up to this point, the track is perfectly accessible and the viaduct itself attainable for manual wheelchair users provided they have strength and stamina... or their partners do!

Nestled between Begin Hill and Smardale Fell, with limestone outcrops and views over to the majestic Howgills, the viaduct is a place that needs to be kept secret. Sort of. It's fascinating to think that steam trains would have made their way through here, flanked by the steep-sided hills which themselves are literally littered with evidence of times gone by.

After the viaduct, the track becomes grassy and potentially muddy in places and I'd recommend this be the turning-around point for manual wheelchair users. You really do need a sturdy all-terrain wheelchair for the next section to ensure smooth and safe passage. The next section of the walk delivers the limestone quarry, old kilns and a dilapidated house that looks as though it belongs in *The Blair Witch Project*. Just on from this building – a railway worker's cottage presumably – you pass under a bridge that will be familiar to all Coast-

to-Coast walkers. They will walk over the bridge before climbing up Smardale Fell towards Kirkby Stephen after a long foot journey from Shap. Being here brought back happy memories from 1999 and 2003 when Andy and I walked the iconic Wainwright route. Alas, that's no longer possible, so in 2015 we made up our own wheelchair-friendly version.

Eventually, the grassy section comes an end and, unless you've arranged for transport here, it's time to turn around and head back to Smardale. This gives you a trek of about 6.5 miles in total but you may want to add some other 'may or may not' moments to your walk. The Scotch argus butterfly, redstarts, wood warblers, pied flycatchers, buzzards, treecreepers, sparrowhawks, bluebells, early-purple orchids. Andy and me.

For details of this walk and other wheelchair-friendly walks in this area and across the UK, visit www.theoutdoorguide.co.uk

Q&A

❖ **Where did you get your wheelchair?**
The TerrainHopper is a 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair. It's designed and made in the UK www.terrainhopper.com

❖ **What does it allow you to do?**
This wheelchair has the capabilities to move over all types of terrain, including rocks, sand, snow and mud. It enables me to get back into the countryside and enjoy longer, more challenging adventures.

I can now get back into the hills and dales. It's a Class 3 mobility vehicle, which means it can legally go where a walker can go. I tend to look for bridleways when planning a new route as they generally are barrier free.

❖ **How far can you go?**
The TerrainHopper has lithium batteries which last about 25 mile, depending on the gradient and ground covered.

❖ **Where are your other favourite places to visit?**
I am very lucky to live in such a beautiful part of the country and I love High Cup Nick in the Eden Valley. The views from the top are amazing. It's clear to see why it's nicknamed the 'Grand Canyon of the North'. You can find the link to the route I took to the summit here www.theoutdoorguide.co.uk/walks/wheelchair-friendly-walks/dufton-to-high-cup-nick/

❖ **Where's next on your list of places to visit?**
My next project is with the Yorkshire Dales National Park. We are filming three more wheelchair-accessible routes around the Dales.

