

Report prepared by Angie Price – Town Clerk

SLOW WAYS PROJECT

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to make Members of the Economic Development & Planning Committee of an initiative in respect of mapping footpaths in your local area.

Detailed Information

National Geographic are supporting the “Slow Ways Project” and hope that communities across the UK will get involved.

Slow Ways is an ambitious new project led by a National Geographic Explorer by recruiting an army of 500 volunteers to create the most comprehensive network of walking routes in Great Britain – linking every village, town and city via the nation’s intricate web of public rights of way.

The Slow Ways project is the brainchild of geographer and explorer Daniel Raven-Ellison, who is seeking to find a silver lining to the cloud of coronavirus lockdown. With the population confined to home, his intrepid routes-without-boots scheme requires nothing more than a computer, map-reading skills and a galvanised public spirit. His goal is to plot more than 4,000 walking routes on an online map, using the 200,000km of footpaths and bridleways that trace their way between village, town and city.

“At what point did we lose how these routes actually work from our collective public imagination?” asks Raven-Ellison.

The motor car clearly shoulders much of the blame for this – distorting our perception of distance and devouring the quiet lanes and sunken roads that would once have borne only footprints and hoofprints. Yet rarely has the need for these ancient pedestrian routes been more acute. In the face of physical and mental health crises, alongside climate and nature emergencies, the Slow Ways routes emerge as a perfect solution, returning walking from a recreation to a practical, cash-saving mode of transport.

While people are very conscious of going out to walk for fun, there’s something very beautiful in the idea of slowing down for *functional* walks,” says Raven-Ellison.

Whether it’s walking to see friends, family, going shopping or heading for a night out, distances are often shorter and take less time than we think, he adds. Many large towns and smaller cities can be crossed on foot in less than an hour, while a typical 16km Slow Way is walkable in under three hours – a morning’s exercise before perhaps catching the bus or train home.

Unlike national trails and historic long-distance walks, the Slow Ways routes will not divert to beauty spots or add a wiggle to take in a local point of interest, says Raven-Ellison. If there is a choice between a high route and a low route, the choice should always be lower and easier, he adds. Fulfilling this functional brief, Slow Ways will typically be less than 20km in length and wherever possible will pass through a village every 5km, offering walkers frequent chances to stop, buy a drink and a bite to eat, and take a rest.

Working in conjunction with Ordnance Survey, each Slow Way will be plotted on the OS maps platform and then published freely online, creating a searchable database of routes that will enable people to walk to their nearest town or city, or build a daisy-chain of multiple Slow Ways for long-distance trips. Walking from Weymouth to Windermere, Brighton to Bradford or Newquay to Newcastle will all become possible when the nationwide network is complete.

Each Slow Way will be named after the two settlements it connects, taking the first three letters of both place names and merging them into a single title. The route between Salisbury and Winchester, for example, would be called Salwin.

A weekend trial with 70 volunteers over a weekend in February kickstarted the project and saw nearly 1,000 routes plotted, stretching a blister-inducing 16,000km. And now, with the nation in lockdown, Raven-Ellison is hoping to engage a community of walkers in linking the entire country via right of way.

“COVID-19 is strange and scary and threatening, forcing millions of us to stay at home and indoors, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be collaborative, imaginative, creative and productive,” he says.

To join the project, volunteers have to participate in a 60 to 90-minute training webinar, which will cover the technical aspects of plotting and recording Slow Ways, as well as the collective spirit required to help the project succeed.

“There are a lot of people who like walking, who are good with maps, who are creative and who are, right now, bored or isolated and might like a bit of community,” says Raven-Ellison.

“This is a bold, iterative project full of challenges to solve together. It’s a great opportunity to come together and make something really amazing. What a celebration it would be if the routes were all made by this summer and by autumn, if COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, everything is in place for people to go out and start walking these routes. It’s a unique opportunity to collaboratively create a beautiful, free and important new walking network for Great Britain.”

Recommendation

That Ledbury Town Council promote the Slow Ways Project within Ledbury in the hope that groups and individuals will get involved with the project.