

# Parish Case Study: St Bees



## Taking the Plunge

The first tourist came to St Bees in 1850 when the Lord Mayor of London arrived by the new railway, and from this humble beginning our beach became one of the busiest in Cumbria. Local day trippers grew thanks to Cumberland motorbuses after WW1, and later with mass car ownership after WW2. In response the district council bought the beach in 1960 and built a car park, promenade and children's playpark.

These public facilities had always been run with no involvement from the parish. But the children's playpark had not fared well, having been first built in a boggy hollow, and when moved to a drier area, was poorly equipped. Against a background of Gov't cutbacks in May 2012 Copeland Council asked St Bees PC to run it, with a dowry grant towards re-building with new equipment. The PC could get funding that Copeland couldn't but we'd have to lease the land for 25-years, make provision for running costs, and raise an additional £100k for the rebuild. This would be the biggest project the PC had ever undertaken, but we decided it was feasible. Work started on the park design and sounding out funders.

The playpark was progressing quite nicely, until in November 2012 Copeland dropped a bombshell by announcing significant budget cuts for the 2013-14 financial year, including closing the St Bees beach toilets. We heard this news with horror. The play park was very desirable, but the toilets were absolutely essential. After remonstrations with Copeland it was obvious they were immovable, and we reluctantly accepted a PC take-over as the only workable solution. We negotiated against the ticking clock of a 3-month deadline; closure was scheduled for the first day of the 2013 Easter holidays. The play park went on the back burner.

We had to agree a 99-year lease of the building, put a maintenance regime in place and find the money for running costs. These would have to come from the precept so we canvassed parish opinion. Finding wide support we were just in time to increase the 2013-14 precept by 30%. The day to day cleaning and maintenance was put out to tender and won by a local holiday park who were both experienced and suitably equipped and we formed our own management sub-group – dubbed “the privy council”. Closure was averted, but only by paying Copeland to continue past the deadline until our arrangements were ready.

After getting the toilets running smoothly our attention returned to the playpark. It was an ambitious design over a large area including a 6-metre climbing net, parallel zip wires and a large galleon looking out to the Isle of Man. Finally, in July 2014 the new playpark was opened in a heatwave and immediately inundated with delighted children.

Now, ten years later, having just crossed the threshold of LGR it's interesting to analyse what happened. At the time the parish and district councils seemed to operate in parallel universes. Thinking had to change on both sides. We had to drop the belief that the beach was not a parish responsibility, and Copeland had to recognise that the parish was a valuable partner in sustaining and improving facilities. In the end, financial and political pressures drove events.

The effect of running the play area and toilets have come at a financial cost to the parish. Currently over 40% of our precept goes on beach running costs, and the precept was increased by 51% over the first three years and is now double the level of 10 years ago.

This story has probably confronted many local councils over recent years and it will be interesting to see how this plays out in the unitary era. Has equilibrium been reached? or will the unitaries pursue the trend of pushing responsibility down to town/parishes further? There have been many references during the LGR process to parishes playing a bigger role, but what does this really mean? How will we engage before events force our hands? - as it did at St Bees.

Doug Sim  
St Bees PC



6 metre climbing net and galleon



Twin zip wires, RNLI base and St Bees Head



Galleon, RNLI base and start of Coast to Coast



The old play park



View from the Galleon



General view at opening