

Parish Focus: St Bees



Parish Profile: St Bees by Doug Sim

The parish of St Bees has a dual character. It is both a popular beach holiday destination on Cumbria's only Heritage Coast, and a working village with a broad demographic. The resident population is 1,900, with a large and varying number of day trippers and overnight stays. This last year has probably been the busiest for visitors since the 1960s.

The village is named after its saint - St Bega - said to have landed here in 850 AD, and has a Norman Priory and an Elizabethan School. There is a bird reserve and long sandy beach with a promenade and visitor facilities, and it's the start of the Wainwright Coast to Coast Walk. At the beach is a large caravan park, beach café and hotel. The old village centre clings to the valley side half a mile from the coast. The Main Street is a conservation area that snakes up from the railway station, and dotted round the village there are 38 listed buildings, plus four pubs, a general store, and a railway museum.



The balancing act is one of resources. Nearly 40% of our 56k budget is spent on beach facilities; principally a large play park and the public toilets. In 2014 we were obliged to take these over to prevent their closure by the district council, which had managed facilities like this since WWII.

The council feels engagement is extremely important, and we try to cater for both residents and visitors. We run a 600-page village website which features local history, visitor information and PC matters, and gets about 100,000 page views a year; these are largely from non-residents. The site has just been re-designed to allow optimum smart-phone browsing. We also have an active Facebook page, which is great for picking up on parish issues and keeping parishioners in the loop; readers/contributors are mostly local residents. These supplement the obligatory notice boards, and the parish magazine monthly updates.

Engaging face-to-face, councillors are buttonholed in the village and there are the regular council meetings. But we have gone beyond this minimum requirement, and have embarked on French-style "meet the council" receptions, with wine and refreshments and a presentation/discussion on PC challenges and plans. About five years ago we also had an "activity fair" when over 20 organisations in the village each had a stall, so that newcomers could find out what happens, and longer-term residents could be reminded. Much livelier than the annual parish meeting. We also organise the popular Santa parade round the village, ending with the switch-on of the parish Christmas tree.

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We are engaged with the Sellafield Parishes Forum and the WCSSG (nuclear stakeholder groups), and the West Copeland Locality Group. Other significant interfaces are with Northern Rail – St Bees passengers had increased to 80,000 annual journeys before COVID – and St Bees Independent School, which has recently re-opened.

We manage three public gardens and the floral street displays, largely through “Village in Bloom”, a sub-committee of the council, and run three public car parks. We have a regular tree planting campaign, manage a monastic nature area and have allotments that are the envy of train-spotters. We have worked with CCC for 30 years on traffic calming, and we have a Speedwatch group. We have recently installed three defibrillators, and know of one life that has been saved.



This year’s minor projects include footpath upgrades and new history interpretation boards at the station and beach.

We also have the Platinum Jubilee, hopefully marked, as jubilees have been, by a beacon on St Bees Head.

Our current major projects (completion timescale 2-10 years) are the promotion of a level off-road cycle track between St Bees and Whitehaven which will link into Hadrian’s cycleway and the C2C, and the creation of a travel hub at St Bees station. We have been heavily involved in promoting the cycling route on the Whitehaven area LCWIP consultation, and for the hub we are in discussion with several stakeholders to provide additional off-street parking, and such as electric charging points for bikes and cars.

Good engagement also means good recruitment, and the council’s 14 seats are well-subscribed. Enthusiasm reached fever pitch in 1979 when over 20 candidates stood for election. Later, for one casual vacancy a candidate ran a campaign with leaflets, doorstep canvassing and a loudspeaker van.

The council has had an eventful history, starting with the first agenda item at the very first meeting when a radical clergyman, the Revd Pagan from Durham, donated a farm to the council! He wanted the PC to use the income to buy up more farms to let at a reasonable rent, and so on. The idea was Utopian, but impractical, however it was agreed the revenue could be used for the parish, and this enabled the purchase of a hall for the village.

You can find out more about the Revd Pagan’s scheme, the Phone Box Stakeout, and the Boy Scouts’ attempted rescue of a 400-ton ship, in the booklet *100 Years of St Bees* which I wrote in 1995 for the centenary of parish councils. The 1,000 copies soon went, but it’s on eBay, and is free online (See link below).

Links

St Bees website <https://www.stbees.org.uk/>

100 years of St Bees <https://www.stbees.org.uk/home/parish-council/parish-council-history/>

The author

Doug has been a St Bees parish councillor for 43 years, and is currently chairman. He is a member of CALC Executive Committee, and is leading the CALC communications improvement group.