

Walking for wellbeing

Lauren Mcgaun seeks sanctuary in the countryside



The view from the top of Malham Cove

Walking has never been a passion of mine, but over lockdown I have done a lot more of it.

Having been a city dweller for most of my life, moving from Leeds to Ackworth when I was 18 was a whole new experience. Suddenly, I was surrounded by countryside. As lockdown progressed, going on walks were a relaxing distraction for me. They provided a routine in a time where all routine had gone.

Others have felt the same, seeking sanctuary in a time where many young people's mental health has suffered.

According to data from the ONS in

February, more than 40 per cent of people said that visiting local green spaces has been even more important to their mental wellbeing since the coronavirus pandemic began.

“Before the pandemic, it was so easy to get wrapped up in every day life”

With the Yorkshire Dales on my doorstep, I recently went on a visit to the picturesque village of Malham with my mum and stepdad. This was my first time visiting the limestone cliffs, and the views really don't disappoint.

Surrounded by lush green fields and winding river, it is evident that this part of the world really is God's own county. While the walk up to the cliff was strenuous and exhausting, there was something so rewarding about it; seeing all the other walkers as I reached the top, I felt a huge sense of accomplishment.

The walk was topped off with a lovely meal at the Lister Arms – a must visit recommendation for walkers in the area.

Going to the countryside can be more than a simple walk. There is so much to see and do, and a day trip could easily be turned into a weekend getaway.

I have also loved the opportunity to get outdoors more with my mum, allowing us to catch up and form a closer bond during our walks. Before the pandemic, it was so easy to get wrapped up in everyday life that I often forgot what was most important –



“...there is a huge interest in outdoor content for young people”

spending time with family. It has therefore been so humbling and heart-warming to see young people appreciating all the small things in life over the past year.

In 2020, Malham Cove saw visits increase to just under 1,000 on average per day, up from 500 the previous year. The age demographic of these visitors has also seen a seismic shift with only 13 per cent of those under 34 visiting the Yorkshire Dales in 2017 compared to 29 per cent in 2020.

Top locations, including Malham, Grassington and Aysgarth, see a satisfaction rate of over 80 per cent year on year, so it's no wonder that younger people are becoming more attracted to the countryside, with the scenery, tranquillity and walking routes cited by visitors as some of the top aspects enjoyed.

Isabella Rothwell, a 22-year-old student who lives near Holmfirth, agrees: “The fact that I can take my dog with me and just enjoy what I have on my doorstep, and it has helped me appreciate how much I love living in the Yorkshire countryside.

“Sitting three hours or more at a laptop is mentally draining and going for a walk in the countryside helps me relax and clear my head.”

Laura Molloy, a City University student from Ackworth, has also found herself walking more during the pandemic.

“During the last lockdown, I was going through a really intense period with my degree and the stress of that combined with minimal daylight was really frustrating. I found that where I would have usually spent my free time watching Netflix I



Above, walking alongside the beck to Malham Cove; facing page, Lauren enjoys spending quality time with her mum

couldn't think of anything worse, and I only wanted to be outside."

Laura says it has helped her significantly and allowed her to appreciate the outdoors more. "I think the pandemic definitely exposed how important the countryside is in our communities and that these spaces should be protected and appreciated!"

Laura and Isabella cite some of their favourite walks as Meltham Mills Reservoir, Bolton Abbey, Wintersett and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

Walking also brings huge tourism benefits for the region. In 2019, the value of tourism activity in the North York Moors was estimated to be £729 million and, in the Yorkshire Dales, visitors contributed £374 million to the local economy.

As we recover from lockdown, it has been ever more important to support small businesses, so it is really encouraging to see countryside routes flourishing with increased income over the past year.

Cat Thomson, also known as 'flyingscotsgirl' on Tik Tok, has taken to social media to document her walks around the Dales, encouraging other young people to get outdoors.

Her videos capture the beautiful scenery of the Dales, attracting thousands of young viewers and informing them of new walking routes. She has racked up over 25,000 followers on Tik Tok and over 30,000 on Instagram, indicating that there is a huge interest in outdoor content for young people, and this enthusiasm is here to stay.

"I love the feeling of getting away from the bustle of city life, the sense of achievement of having achy feet and also



the stunning views you can find. It's a great way to get some perspective and that feeling of "blowing the cobwebs away."

Cat is originally from Edinburgh but has loved her relocation to Leeds and its proximity to the Dales. She also says that walking in the countryside allows her to escape the chaotic nature of city life and enjoy its tranquillity.

"I feel incredibly lucky to be based in Leeds and have the countryside,

mountains and coast all within a two-hour drive," she added.

As uncertainty of new variants and the lasting effect of the covid pandemic set to be present in the coming years, there seems to have never been a more important time for young people to embrace the Yorkshire countryside. The outdoors offers a much-needed sanctuary for myself and my peers, allowing us to take our minds off constant deadlines and other anxieties. 🐾