

Discussion Paper on Tourism for the Robertsbridge Area For REG Meeting July 2014

1 Vision

- 1.1 Our aim is to create a strategy for tourism for Robertsbridge and the surrounding area, which will strengthen the local economy, whilst enhancing the quality of life for both residents and visitors – and conserving the local environment.
- 1.2 Our vision would be to offer a unique combination of attractive and interesting townscape, particularly the High Street in Robertsbridge and Salehurst, with a diversity of things to do and see, set within attractive countryside, whilst providing the opportunity to visit other special attractions in the surrounding area. Robertsbridge and surrounding area can become a centre of excellence for green tourism, especially walking and cycling, with good quality shops and eating and drinking places, operating as sustainably as possible. Public transport must be co-ordinated with understanding to service all these aspirations. Places for overnight stays will be critical to the whole project.
- 1.3 A working party should develop the strategy; it should include those people with a direct interest in enhancing the tourism opportunities, ie providers for leisure-related facilities, attractions, providers of services, shops, restaurants, bed & breakfast providers, transport, local politicians and anyone else who shares the vision.

2 Audit

- 2.1 We need to establish what tourism assets Robertsbridge and area has or aspires to have over the plan period; these are:
 - heritage railway
 - local museum
 - pubs/restaurants/cafés/camp sites/overnight accommodation
 - transport facilities including taxis and car parks
 - outlets associated with horse riding and cycling
 - arts, architectural, historic and heritage connections (inc historic buildings, churches, the Abbey and famous inhabitants or visitors)
 - other businesses or attractions which tourists can benefit from including sporting facilities
- 2.2 Create a library of all tourism related information currently available in print and online. Judges' tourist information point – a rack with leaflets is a good start. This should include all historical and literary references.
- 2.3 Research what is in the immediate area which provides additional tourism attractions. Robertsbridge has certain advantages above other places in 1066 Country; it has a railway station, close to the heart of the village, and is just off the A21, unlike other places of attraction. Therefore it has a good case for being the transport hub to arrive at before going on to other attractions such as:
 - Bodiam Castle
 - Kent & East Sussex Railway
 - Brightling and the Jack Fuller associations

- Pashley Manor
- Great Dixter
- Batemans
- Darvell Reservoir
- Darvell Wood
- Bewl Water
- Bedgebury Forest
- Scotney Castle
- Battle Abbey
- Battle town
- Brede Pumping Station
- Sissinghurst Castle
- Rye and Winchelsea
- 1066 Walk (Pevensey Bay to Rye)

Given the geographical extent of these attractions, we need to be alive to the fact that we must actively encourage the participation of communities such as Hurst Green and Bodiam, amongst others in this enterprise.

2.4 Identify what we do not have, eg:

- joined up public transport
- good signage in key places
- leaflets to identify walks, cycle/bridle paths, hostelrys, 'Welcome to Robertsbridge'
- joined up effort to co-operate with all bodies interested or dedicated to promote local tourism or improve that which we have. Could the Gray Nicholls cricket bat factory be persuaded to become a visitor attraction?

2.5 Examine whether we can promote other assets, which have not so far been fully recognised or highlighted. For example we need to look at whether we can promote the architectural heritage of the High Street, which 1066 Country has identified in the 'Visit Robertsbridge' poster, or explore the connections with literature and the arts (Rossetti/Belloc/Kipling). Another attraction might be specialist shops like Old Saddlery Books.

3 Next steps

3.1 We must liaise with local authorities and other similar organisations to see what they can do to enhance the opportunities we have; Parish Council, District Council, County Council, 1066 Country, Hidden Britain, Tourism South East, High Weald AONB Unit, South East Water (Darvell Reservoir), Forestry Commission, Woodland Trust, South Eastern Trains, bus companies, National Trust, Caravan Club, Ramblers Association, Cyclists Touring Club. We do not have business expertise in this area, but we certainly can generate enthusiasm.

3.2 A SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) will be carried out to identify what we need to concentrate on. We need to identify Robertsbridge's unique selling point, recognising we are not Battle, either Abbey or Town.

3.3 To promote thinking, a few questions are

- 1 Are there specific types of tourists we would want to target?
- 2 What are the tools we need to promote tourism?

- 3 Would an initiative such as “Walkers are Welcome” assist us? There are currently no Walkers are Welcome Towns in East Sussex.
- 4 What sporting activities are available in the area, eg clay pigeon shooting, guided walks, fishing, cycle rides, equestrian events, ballooning, golf, sailing, windsurfing?
- 5 Are there specific events locally which can be used to promote tourism, eg Robertsbridge Bonfire, Christmas Capers?
- 6 Is there something unique we can do which would attract attention and visitors? Our twin French village, St Brice, has its Juggling Festival, and I am not aware that prior to the festival starting there was a juggling heritage in St Brice.
- 7 Is there a scope for a village heritage trail, majoring on buildings? Can we build on the work done by people like David Martin and the Local History groups?
- 8 We need to improve signage off the A21, in the village, and at the rail station.
- 9 Would car parking be a concern, particularly when Rother Valley Railway starts? There are three public car parks in the village – railway station, Station Road, Clappers – as well private ones with the pubs, the village hall and on-street parking. Car parking particularly in Station Road needs to be resolved.
- 10 Do we want a label for these activities other than Robertsbridge?
- 11 We need to identify and work with what may be going on already – eg the walking tours ex London to Bodiam via places in the village like the George and the Salehurst Halt?
- 12 Can we introduce additional transport facilities like bike hire or more publicised taxi services?
- 13 Any chance of getting help from ESCC to improve the current footpath and bridleway network? Are green lanes a possibility? We need to succeed with the Robertsbridge – Bodiam cycle way.
- 14 Cycle tours based on a route from Robertsbridge station, going back to say, Wadhurst via Bodiam and Bewl, could be set up. We need help from SouthEastern Trains.
- 15 Could we make arts events or activities an attraction under the Robertsbridge Arts Partnership label?
- 16 Given the amazing improvement physically at the Station, can this be taken advantage of?

This paper is designed to stimulate ideas and provoke a constructive response for the sustainable benefit of Robertsbridge and its surroundings. The ideas here may be right, they may be wrong; let us find out by discussing them. If we are successful with a tourism strategy, everyone will benefit.

The strides the RVR has made particularly over the last couple of years to make Robertsbridge the focal point as a heritage railway mean that we need to prepare ourselves now for their success.

Opportunities for funding need to be explored, and we must be ready to take advice from wherever and co-operate with whomsoever.

Stephen Hardy
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