

For Robin Sadler

Good morning. My name is Robin Sadler. I'm a businessman based in Masongill, a very small village situated between Kirkby Lonsdale and Ingleton. I have a publishing company which serves retail customers in the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales, the North Yorkshire Moors and Northumbria and a retail business in Kirkby Lonsdale. I have been Chairman of the Kirkby Lonsdale Chamber of Trade since 2005 and I am a director of the town's Community Interest Company.

During the next 10 minutes or so I will be relying on this CV and my good friend and fellow director at the KL CIC, Allan Muirhead, who has penned much of what I am about to deliver, to help me address the title of this presentation "what Westmorland, the Dales and the Lune Valley has to offer".

Coming from Kirkby Lonsdale, you'd expect me to claim that the town is the central hub for all the area has to offer. Sedbergh folk may say otherwise, but we invite comparisons and are certain that the differences make it worth your while to visit both.

In and around Kirkby Lonsdale, there's scenery to explore, photograph or paint; there are activities from gentle walks to challenging caving adventures; there's unique shopping facilities and as wide a range of accommodation as you could wish for. I

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suppose that's no different to many other corners of this country, but we believe we have a uniqueness which ticks a lot of boxes.

We're also a confusing part of the world. Kirkby is geographically in Cumbria. It's been there since local government re-organisation in 1974, 45 years ago.

Previously, it was in Westmorland. But its post code, LA6, gives the postal address as Kirkby Lonsdale, Carnforth, Lancashire. And since 2017, a small part of the town, mainly around Devil's Bridge and one side of the River Lune, has been part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. So, Westmorland, Cumbria, Lancaster or Yorkshire? Take your pick.

The natural beauty of the area is, perhaps, well known. From a vantage point over the River Lune close to St Mary's Parish Church, the poet John Ruskin observed, and I quote - I do not know in all my country, still less in France or Italy, a place more naturally divine. It is one of the loveliest views in England, therefore in the world. Unquote.

JMW Turner painted Ruskin's View in 1822. The water colour sold to a private UK buyer in 2012 for just under £250 000.

Then there's Devil's Bridge. This is a totally unspoiled, natural recreational area. The river Lune flows, sometimes at speed, to

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the sea at Lancaster. Swimmers, canoeists, those with dinghies and even rubber tyres, are drawn to the area while others enjoy picnics in a small corner virtually unchanged over the years. There is parking close by, and a popular tea bar attracts its own clientele, including hundreds of motorcyclists every weekend of the year.

The story behind the bridge, which cannot be dated with any accuracy, tells of the devil appearing to an old woman living on the banks of the Lune with her animals. He offered to build her a bridge in exchange for the soul of the first body to cross it. She agreed, the bridge duly appeared, and the first to cross it was - her dog. The devil left, somewhat unhappy at the old woman's trickery!

There are dozens of walks to be enjoyed in the neighbouring fells which, jointly, make up The Howgills, and there's caving at Bull Pot, high on Casterton Fell at the western end of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. If you take the A65 east when you leave Kirkby Lonsdale, you come to Ingleton where you can explore more caves and underground waterfalls. There are also limestone deposits throughout the area, with outcrops to be seen on various stretches of the River Lune.

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Let me turn now to the economy of the area. We see ourselves as a thriving business community, often bucking the trend when it comes to recessions and seasonal reductions in footfall.

Sedbergh, well embedded in the Dales, sells itself as a book town. There may not be as many book shops now as there once were, but it is still worth exploring the streets and byways to find the rare, the unusual, the first edition. Famous for its school so closely linked to rugby union, Sedbergh attracts those who want a base from which to explore more of the Dales National Park.

Kirkby Lonsdale, on the other hand, offers an eclectic range of individually owned shops, like the Bath House, Just n So, Chocolat and Lunesdale Bakery offering the discerning visitor handmade, often locally sourced and certainly hand picked ranges. We have only two national brands on the high street, and one of them is a chemist's shop.

Our schools also attract families and businesses. Queen Elizabeth School, now run as an academy free of county council influences, is a vibrant, growing facility with around 1500 pupils. Soon to open is a studio school, offering apprentice training to pupils who have a leaning towards a more practical approach. The training offered will cover a variety of skills, chosen to be directly relevant to business in the surrounding area.

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Once famous for a ridiculously high number of pubs and hostelries - 30-plus I'm told back in the 19th Century - we now have 10. But these are outnumbered by, would you believe, hairdressers. There's obviously a lot of hair needed doing in Kirkby Lonsdale!

It's also with some pride that we point to our ability to bring in new businesses whenever a shop or service closes. Rarely are units unoccupied for longer than a few weeks.

It's not long since we were a seasonal town. These days we enjoy a 12-month-52-week season. So the footfall attracts new businesses, and new businesses attract increased footfall.

We realise we're in a highly competitive market when it comes to promoting our 'offer' and encouraging visitors to consider us a 'must see' destination. Funnily enough, it was a negative event which helped us find a new way of marketing ourselves. Our tourist information shop, public toilets and weekly Charter market all faced closure when our district council undertook a cost-cutting exercise. The Town Council stepped in and offered to take on all these services. Long term leases were agreed and the services remained open, but were now the responsibility of the town itself.

We have a small town council - just nine members. The idea of a Community Interest Company was considered, and two people

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registered the Kirkby Lonsdale & Lune Valley CIC with Companies House in July, 2011. They recruited volunteers to staff the visitor information shop, secured grants to turn the toilets into pay-to-use, after major refurbishment - and amended the market rules to attract more traders.

Public meetings were held to gauge how residents might respond to new events, links were established with the town council, the Chamber of Trade, the Civic Society, churches and schools. There was a history of a weekend event, run by the KL Chamber of Trade, every September which brought thousands to the town. It had been a Victorian Fair for around 30 years but in its later years it became increasingly difficult to organize without huge financial underwriting. The Chamber of Trade therefore channeled its energies into its flagship event, the Christmas Fair, which takes place on the first weekend in December.

About four years ago, the CIC decided to partner the Chamber of Trade in a new style Christmas market and fair, and that is now the town's main annual event. Market Square - normally a car park - becomes a chalet village offering goods and services linked to Christmas, there are parades featuring local organisations, young people, floats and, most importantly, Santa Claus who switches on the Christmas tree lights as he passes through the town, before meeting the children in his grotto.

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Late night shopping is also a feature of the weekend. Visitor numbers have increased each year as the event develops its own identity with its range of goods on offer and the variety of entertainment which supports the weekend.

The most ambitious exercise the CIC undertook was to set about acquiring a lease for a town centre building previously occupied by the HSBC bank, who closed their branch at short notice. The owner of the property was persuaded by the community-linked activities of the CIC to agree to a five-year renewable lease and a move was made.

The building required extensive improvements and alterations. These were achieved through prudent spending and supportive grants. The result was a building which could be offered to other tenants and it is now home to a solicitors' office, an estate agency the Yorkshire Dales Authority's area ranger as well as the town's Information hub and gift shop. These provide income to the CIC which has, in turn, led to the employment of two part-time staff - the Town and Tourism Manager and her assistant.

No one knew quite what to expect when the Yorkshire Dales National Park increased in size and absorbed a small part of the town - mainly around Devil's Bridge where the town's publicly owned Jubilee Field fell under their control, along with a few

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miles of the river bank, heading back towards the source of the Lune.

To be honest, it's been a seamless exercise. Kirkby is now a gateway to the national park and does, we believe, attract more visitors because of this. The park authority has a presence in the town and the rangers hold regular planning surgeries, also inviting callers to discuss any and all issues relating to the authority's activities.

We feel we now have a strong, identifiable structure to the management of the town, its activities and its attractions. The town council and the community interest company are at the hub. Between them, they co-ordinate activities which not only attract visitors and encourage value for money, but also work to maintain the economic viability of the town.

Accommodation providers have been brought together to ensure a comprehensive list of self-catering, b&b and camping and caravanning facilities is available. Town walks led by a Blue Badge qualified local resident prove popular. The history of the town and the surrounding area is currently being translated into audio-visual presentations to be made available at a new small theatre being created in a part of the visitor information and gift shop. It'll be known as The Vault – on account of the fact that it's

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in the old HSBC strong room! That opens this spring, thanks to joint funding including support from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Town councillors serve on the CIC, the CIC is represented on the Chamber of Trade, the Town and Tourism Manager works in partnership with the school authorities. Our public hall's management committee has lay members sitting alongside town councillors and CIC members. This joined-up working ensures that problems are quickly identified and dealt with, responsibilities are shared, and new ideas can be considered by a wide cross-section of our community.

Perhaps most importantly, this structure enables feedback from the general public to be easily assimilated and acted upon. One example - our public hall, the Lunesdale Hall, is currently undergoing an extensive feasibility study to make it fit for purpose for the rest of this Century and beyond. It isn't a listed building, but it is imposing. One thought was to demolish and rebuild - word was spread albeit informally, and the study group were left in no doubt that this was not an option. So, change of use and internal alterations are now being considered.

I hope I've given you a taste of what we have to offer, what drives us to make old Westmorland, the Dales and the Lune Valley a first-class visitor experience - in a corner of the country which offers so much in a fairly compact area. Kirkby Lonsdale

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has a slogan which is one that really fits the whole area – “it’s well worth a visit”.

Thank you for your time.