

Making Box Hill more accessible on foot

Access has been vastly improved up to iconic landmark, Box Hill in the Surrey Hills National Landscape thanks to the refurbishment of 300 steps.

Originally installed by volunteers back in the 1980s, the steps had become eroded and difficult to navigate with visitors often detouring off the steps onto slippery and dangerous terrain. The steps, which traverse the steep hillside linking the Stepping Stones path to the summit have been excavated and rebuilt to protect the biodiversity of the site and encourage residents and visitors to access the popular beauty spot in a more sustainable way.

Thanks to funding from the North Downs Way National Trail, through the Interreg Experience Fund, Natural England and Surrey County Council, over £53,000 was allocated to the project. Surrey County Council's Countryside Access Team commissioned, and project managed the extensive works which also included improving additional paths between the river and the steps.

Landscape construction specialists Maydencroft, undertook the work over a 3-month period with the challenging location of the steps meaning much of the construction had to be done by hand rather than machinery with materials carried to the site each day by a team of workers. A floating pontoon was even installed across the River Mole to help get materials to the site.

The new steps have been constructed using around 15 tons of recycled plastic which has been manufactured from a total of 7,731,360 milk bottle tops. This hardwearing material was chosen due to its longevity, helping to reduce future maintenance costs, prevent plastic from going into landfill and the felling of trees for materials. If oak boards had been used instead of recycled plastic a total of five oak trees would have needed to be felled.

Marisa Heath, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for the Environment comments: "This iconic site is much loved by residents and visitors. The refurbishment of these steps encourages everyone to access the site in a more sustainable way, offering the visitor a choice to travel via public transport and safely climb up to the famous viewpoint without the need to bring a car and without disturbing wildlife by coming over the created path. It is also very encouraging to see the use of recycled materials out in Surrey's countryside, helping to not only to reduce the long-term maintenance burden on Surrey County Council but also tackling climate change by the reduction of emissions."

Peter Morris, North Downs Way National Trail Manager comments: "It is wonderful to see how successful partnership working has enabled this engineering feat to be completed quickly and efficiently for the benefit of all users. Box Hill, in the Surrey Hills National Landscape is one of the highlights on the North Downs Way National Trail. It is important that everyone has an opportunity to enjoy and experience this 153 mile long-distance trail, so making it accessible is vital. Thanks to all partners including Surrey County Council, the National Trust, Maydencroft and the European Regional Development Fund for supporting the project and helping to secure the future resilience of our natural and cultural assets."

Stephanie Fudge, National Trust General Manager Surrey Hills comments: "Since the steps were re-opened to the public, we have had some great feedback about the ease of access along this trail. It is one of the most popular routes at Box Hill and it has improved the experience of walkers. There are a couple of rest points with views that many visitors take advantage of. It has been wonderful working with Surrey County Council and the National Trail on this initiative and we are grateful for the support."