

Young Reporters Scotland 2016

The Dava Way

By Keavy Bell and Jason Cameron

The Dava Way is due to celebrate its 10th Anniversary in September this year. This has become a very popular walk and cycle route but what many people do not realise is that it has taken a small group of dedicated volunteers years of hard work to get it to the condition we see it in today. The trail which is approximately 24 miles long follows the old Highland railway line from Forres to Grantown.

The Dava Way Association which started in 1997 is unusual in that it is thought to be the only voluntary organisation in Scotland which has negotiated and then maintained a route of this length for the cyclists and walkers. When they were first faced with the task in hand they had quite a daunting challenge ahead of them. Much of the route was overgrown with vegetation, areas were flooded, a major bridge crossing had been removed and consultations also had to take place with landowners which all took time and therefore actual clearance work did not begin until 2003.

Although part of it had to be diverted along a side road, by 2005 enough of the route was completed to allow an official opening. This was held on the Divie Viaduct and over 300 people enjoyed walking and running along the route for the first time. By 2007 the route was completed without the need to use the road.

The Association is a registered charity and over the years has raised a considerable amount of money which has enabled them to carry out major work along the way. One of the biggest projects they undertook was the replacement of the bridge over the Altrye burn. Much of their work would not have been possible without the support and help from other groups such as The Budge Trust and Moray Leader who funded information boards and signposts to be erected along the route. Paths For All and Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust have also had significant impact in helping to upgrade surfaces and replace gates.

However, much of the backbreaking work is undertaken by the small group of volunteers who are out in all weathers in their spare time clearing ditches, upgrading paths, creating picnic areas and generally generating a route which we can all enjoy. New volunteers are always welcome to join in and recently a group of Forres Academy pupils joined them during their Activities Days to help clear an area around Edinkillie Hall. The group spent a day clearing fallen trees which had come down in the January storm. Branches were put through a chipping machine and the chippings were then used to tidy up the picnic area around the Hall. Peter Mitchell, leader of the volunteer group on the day, was very complimentary about how the pupils worked: "Their help has been invaluable due to the storms in January which uprooted many trees and blocked the path. Their work here today has enabled us to clear the path and make it accessible."

This hard work allowed an entry of 109 walkers to take part in the biannual Ghost Train Walk which was held over midsummer. Walkers were transported to Grantown on Spey

and then walked the route, through the night, back down to Forres. Refreshments were provided at certain points along the way including a midnight treat at Dava and a delicious cooked breakfast at Edinkillie Hall. Walkers were charged £20 and then could raise money for their own charities or raise some more money towards the Dava Way Association. Neil Sinclair, Chairperson of the Association said: "We all had a great night, the weather did not let us down and even the ghosts turned up unexpectedly."

There is no doubt that this is one of the most diverse and stunning routes in this area. There is something of interest for everyone. Roe deer, red squirrels, pinemartins, a wide variety of birds, moths and butterflies can all be spotted along the way. You can enjoy the wilderness feel of wide open moorland to the more intimate pine and birch woods. There is also no need to complete the whole route in one go as there is plenty of parking spots along the way which allows easy access to the various sections. The Association have now provided seats and picnic areas along the way for you to have a well earned rest. Retired teacher, Donnie McDonald, who moved from Shetland to Forres is a frequent walker of the route. He said: "The Dava Way, as well as being a wonderful walk in itself, also provides easy access for additional forays into the surrounding woods and hills. The picnic spot at the Scurrypool must be one of the world's best picnic spots."

Recently, the Association have published a book called 'A Dava Way Companion' which is available in local bookshops and from Amazon. An app is available free for Apple and Android and it highlights 18 waypoints along the route and at each location it provides background information about the history or landscape of the area. To access this app search for 'Dava Way' and in an instant you can have all the information you need at your fingertips. The association have also installed a 'footfall counter' on part of the walk to see just how much the route is being used. In a period of three months, from 15 March – 14 June this year, 6410 walkers and 736 cyclists were recorded having used the route. Mr Sinclair said: "This proves to us that all our effort in maintaining and upgrading the paths are worthwhile."

With their 10th birthday coming up the group are keen to hold some sort of celebration and are open to ideas or suggestions, please visit the website www.davaway.org.uk and leave your comments.