



The great outdoors: Peter and Helen Hewlett map out their business future with walking holidays in North Wales

COMMUNITY-minded business can do more than create employment and make wealth for the owners – it can help underpin a community's way of life," says Peter Hewlett who founded the Edge of Wales Walk with his wife, Helen, and six neighbours.

He spent 30 years as managing director of a family timber merchant in Nottingham before selling out three years ago. "Timber is a mature industry where size matters," he says. "The building industry is consolidating, so we worked in an ever more demanding environment where pressures from the multinationals compounded all the difficulties created by pensions and red tape. Budgets, deadlines, cash flow, long hours. After a while you feel you deserve a change."

The timber company profitably sold, Mr Hewlett made a fresh start, promoting walking holidays on the Lleyn peninsula in North Wales. It meant a new product, new market, new location, new language – and a new purpose, for although Edge of Wales Walk is a business it is a "not for profit" social enterprise.

The Welsh-speaking Lleyn peninsula has an ancient landscape of tiny green fields and whitewashed cottages, rocky coves and sandy beaches.

It is also rich in history. Megaliths and Iron Age forts abound, and along the coast runs a line of pilgrim churches dating back to the sixth century. Medieval pilgrims walked from one to another on their way to

Starting out

by Ross Davies

the holy island of Bardsey. The Hewletts feel rooted locally. For years they have had a house at Aberdaron, the village from where the boats for Bardsey used to leave. All three of the Hewlett children went to Welsh universities.

But the Lleyn peninsula is no rural idyll. It suffers from an exodus of young people, agricultural decline and the many alternatives to traditional family holidays by the sea. Both the landscape and culture are under threat, and incomes so low that the Lleyn is high in the qualification rating for EU structural funds. "The potential for developing cultural/activity based tourism backed by grants and private capital was obvious," Mr Hewlett says.

The Hewletts' response was to walk into the leisure business. They put up £60,000, and six neighbours

another £40,000 between them, drawing another £92,000 of matching funding from the Wales Tourist Board. Now the venture offers a package of accommodation, information and luggage transfer along the 47 miles of footpaths from Clynog to Bardsey.

The three employees are paid a modest wage, and when surpluses arrive the money will be re-invested.

A £200,000 walking centre is planned for Aberdaron, which will offer changing rooms, catering, showers, a drying room and serviced accommodation with facilities for the disabled. "We need the walking centre to attract more customers outside the summer, and walkers offer the best chance of bringing year-round sustainable tourism here," Mr Hewlett says.

The greatest difficulty to date has been the complexity of the form-filling to secure additional funding, although Mr Hewlett, a Cambridge history graduate as well as an experienced businessman, is better at this than many new entrepreneurs. A thousand walkers later, the company's service is now being extended to cover another 48 miles of footpaths, taking in Caernarfon and Porthmadog.

Mr Hewlett's advice to future "social enterprise" start-ups? "Money return is essential to success, but the Edge of Wales investors know that their investment may not make them rich. Their real return lies in knowing that they are helping Lleyn to get back on its feet."

Edge of Wales Walk

Founded: 2003

Founders: Peter and Helen Hewlett

Start-up funds: £100,000

Staff: Three

Turnover: £125,000

Website: www.edgeofwaleswalk.co.uk