

Appendix 1 – Hope Valley Explorer – Review of the 2021 Season, plus options for 2022 and beyond

1) Background

a. Hope Valley Explorer 2019

The Peak District National Park Authority undertook a tendering exercise in early 2019 for a bus operating company to deliver the Hope Valley Explorer (then Hope Valley Hopper) visitor experience bus service. Stagecoach South Yorkshire won the tender for a three-year contract to operate the service from 2019 onwards.

The Hope Valley Explorer service launched in July 2019 and operated for 42 consecutive days during the summer school holidays between Sunday 21st July and Saturday 31st August 2019. In order to act as a visitor experience service, the bus included on-board commentary, hop-on-hop-off day tickets and associated discounts for ticket holders for a Castleton café and Fairholmes cycle hire centre. Ticket prices were; single day ticket £6 or £12 for a family. Single journeys were priced at £4. In order to promote multi-modal sustainable journeys, the Hope Valley Explorer called regularly at Bamford, Hope and Edale railway stations (Hope Valley Line).

The 2019 Hope Valley Explorer was provided by two buses which operated from the Stagecoach depot at Chesterfield. The buses accessed the National Park via Dronfield and Owlbar, passing through Hathersage enroute to Bamford. From Bamford, the service had three legs, providing access to the Upper Derwent Valley (Fairholmes), Hope, Edale, Castleton and Mam Tor via Winnatts Pass. During the course of the season, the service carried approximately 2,600 passengers, (an average of 62 passengers per day) and received positive feedback from users. Saturday was the busiest day for users overall across the season.

In addition to acting as a visitor experience bus, the Hope Valley Explorer provided the only public transport link to Edale during the Toddbrook Reservoir emergency in the Summer of 2019. This was due to the closure of the Hope Valley Railway through Whaley Bridge.

b) Hope Valley Explorer 2020

Early discussions at the beginning of 2020 were aimed towards delivering a longer season for the Hope Valley Explorer. The intention was to again offer a daily service during the school summer holidays. In addition, the service would operate on weekends and Bank Holidays from the Whitsun bank holiday weekend and throughout September (a total of 70 days).

Unfortunately, the uncertainty created by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic led to an early decision (March 2020) between the National Park Authority and Stagecoach to suspend the Hope Valley Explorer operation for 2020.

2. Hope Valley Explorer 2021

At the time of initial planning for the Hope Valley Explorer season for 2021, the United Kingdom was still in the middle of the early 2021 Covid-19 lockdown. Again, uncertainty played a role in planning for the 2021 season. Whilst the preference would have been for a longer season as originally envisaged for 2020, the decision was taken to delay the operation until such time as the majority of travel restrictions were expected to be lifted. Therefore, the Hope Valley Explorer 2021 season was restricted to a summer / autumn operation on weekends and bank holidays only (30 days in total). The service began operation on Saturday 24th July and ceased on Saturday 30th October 2021.

A decision was taken to retain the 2019 pricing structure for 2021 in order to attract visitors on to the service. For the 2021 season Derbyshire Dales District Council agreed to provide £3,000 to part-fund the service.

a) Changes for 2021

Planning the Hope Valley Explorer Service for 2021 meant that there was a requirement to consider the need for social distancing for passengers coupled with the need to allow sufficient carrying capacity. In order to achieve this, larger vehicles were required to operate the service. Unfortunately, this meant that due to the physical constraints of the route, the service was unable to run to Edale. Instead the service operated between Bamford and the Upper Derwent Valley (Fairholmes), Hope, Castleton and Mam Tor via Winnatts Pass.

The Hope Valley Explorer was operated by two buses from the Stagecoach depot at Chesterfield. In order to promote public transport access to the Hope Valley, for 2021, the service operated via Chesterfield Railway Station on the inbound and outbound journeys each day. The service also made regular stops at Bamford and Hope Railway Stations during the day. In order to widen access, the inbound and outbound journeys were split between a journey via Barlow and Owl Bar; and one via Baslow and Grindleford.

For the 2021 season, both of the Hope Valley Explorer buses had bike racks fitted, allowing for the carriage of three cycles at a time. Whilst the on-board commentary was retained for 2021, amendments were made based on feedback from 2019, the 70th Anniversary of the National Park; and amendments arising from the removal of the Edale leg of the journey.

b) Statistics for 2021

The following statistics provide an indication of the operation of the service during 2021: -

- i) Total number of passengers carried – 1,811
- ii) Average number of passengers carried per day – 60
- iii) Average number of passengers on Saturdays – 70
- iv) Average number of passengers on Sundays – 48
- v) The highest number of passengers (119) was carried on Saturday 28th August (Bank Holiday Weekend)
- vi) The lowest number of passengers (17) was carried on Sunday 17th October

There was a noticeable drop off in patronage following the onset of Autumn. During September, Saturday figures were by and large favourably comparable with August, whilst the Sunday figures were not. During October, figures for both days were low compared with previous months; although the last day of operation (Saturday 30th October) saw the 3rd highest number of passengers over the whole year (97). In some cases, poorer patronage during the autumn months may be weather related; for example, the forecast for Sunday 17th October indicated a largely wet day. Average performance across all the months of operation can be seen in Table 1 on the following page.

c) User Survey

Users of the service have been encouraged to provide comment on the Hope Valley Explorer Service during 2021. At the time of writing only 14 responses had been received, with 9 of these being submitted on or following the last day of operation. Of these responses, six were made by Explorer users living within a 10 to 20-mile journey by road of the point at which they boarded the bus. The remaining respondents travelled from Doncaster (37 miles), Ilkeston (47 miles), Walsall

(72 miles)¹, Sutton Coldfield (74 miles), Birmingham (98 miles) and Cardiff (183 miles) respectively from the point where they boarded the bus². In the case of the latter, it is unclear whether the journey on the Explorer was part of a staying visit to the area³. The low number of participants means that data from the survey should be treated with caution (14 responses represents 0.7% of the total number of bus users throughout the 2021 season). However, it is worth reflecting on the following statistics: -

- i) 7 of the respondents mentioned either the PDNPA or Stagecoach website as being where they heard about the service.
- ii) 3 of the respondents referred to the scenery as being the thing that they enjoyed most, whilst 3 referred to the convenience of the service.
- iii) 8 of the respondents said that the Explorer was Excellent value, whilst 2 stated that it was very good value; 2 stated that it was average and 2 thought that it was poor – it should be noted that one of the latter also said that the best thing about the service was that it was free!
- iv) 11 respondents stated that the commentary was useful (7 excellent and 4 average), 2 said that it was 'not for them' and one stated that it was not operational during their journey.
- v) 10 respondents said that they would be likely to recommend the Explorer to a friend or colleague; 6 gave the highest possible indication that they would.
- vi) 13 of the respondents said that they would use a similar service elsewhere in the National Park.
- vii) 10 of the respondents were first-time users of the Explorer, with 3 respondents having used the service previously in 2019 and 1 having used it before in 2021.

3) Planning for 2022 and beyond

The ambition for the Hope Valley Explorer has always been to operate a visitor service where the cost of the operation is not borne exclusively by the Peak District National Park Authority. The Hope Valley Explorer project drew its inspiration from the New Forest Tours visitor experience buses. Greentraveller were appointed in 2015 as consultants to carry out a feasibility study into the project. Based on the information available at the time the route recommended for trial was that which was operated in 2019; the only exception being a through connection from Edale to Mam Tor via Barber Booth.

Evidence from the two pilot years of the Hope Valley Explorer (2019 and 2021) indicates that the service is unlikely to run on a commercial basis. Over the two years of operation the average number of passengers per day has been fairly consistent; at 62 in 2019 and 60 in 2021. However, it should be noted that seasonality and weather have influenced peaks and troughs in patronage. Whilst patronage is important, the service's wider value to the Hope Valley has been demonstrated by the interest expressed by parish councils and businesses during its operation. Indeed, the National Park Authority was criticised in 2020 for not running the service. This was at a time when visitor numbers were high and public transport was still greatly affected by the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Interest in financially supporting and benefitting from the Hope Valley Explorer has been expressed by two major visitor attractions. However, based on the 2021 operation, both

¹ Two respondents gave the same postcode and identical responses, it is unclear whether these were two responses from one group, or two responses by one person.

² Distances are taken from most direct routes between points without toll roads on Google Maps.

³ One respondent chose not to provide point of origin data.

locations are currently only served by the inbound and outbound connector services from Chesterfield.

It would be possible to rework the current routes to add in additional destinations as part of a wider catchment for the service, under Heritage Explorer branding. However, this will affect the frequency of the current operation. One way in which this might best be achieved would be through two interconnecting routes: -

- i) The current Hope Valley Explorer route extended to Hathersage with 1 vehicle
- ii) The second vehicle offering a route connecting to Bakewell, Baslow, Chatsworth, Haddon Hall, Hassop Station, Longshaw and Peak Village as part of a wider tour.

Both vehicles would need to link up at some point, probably Hathersage.

The advantages of a split route approach are: -

- a) This approach could draw in additional income in support of the operation.
- b) The use of two routes could draw repeat customers and offers the potential of the sale of weekend tickets.

However, any dilution of the number of individual connections on the current route could affect its attractiveness for users.

There are also options to deliver the service through three vehicles either spread across two routes or with a third interconnecting route (possible a Trail and Dales Explorer), or as two separate interconnected routes using two vehicles each. However, this would also increase costs, so there would need to be a means of drawing additional funding in support of this.

a) Route options for 2022

As discussed above there are at least three possible options for 2022. The maps provided in Appendix 1 offer some possible options, but are indicative only. The development of new routes would require careful consideration in relation to operational feasibility, timetabling, and competition with commercial services. Any new routes would also incur additional costs for commentary and marketing etc. Detail of possible options are provided in Table 2

b) Season length for 2022

As stated previously, following the end of the 2019 season there was a strong desire to extend the season for 2020. This was to include weekends and Bank Holidays from late May, through until the end of September, in addition to daily operation during the school summer holidays.

The evidence collected across both seasons of operation highlight the effects of weather and seasonality on the popularity of the service with visitors. For 2021, it was felt that a weekend and Bank Holiday Monday operation would focus demand. The evidence from July and August indicates that this approach may have proved successful. However, it is also clear patronage has decreased over the Autumn months.

There are a number of possible options for the 2022 season, which are described within Table 3.

Table 1 – Monthly statistics for the Hope Valley Explorer operation during 2021

Month	Total number of days of operation	Total patronage	Saturdays	Sundays	All days (inc. August BHM)
			Average patronage	Average patronage	Average patronage
July	3	248	87	74	83
August	10	682	73	59	68
September	8	440	72	38	55
October	9	441	59	37	49
Totals	30	1,811	70	48	60

Table 2 – Explorer Route options for 2022

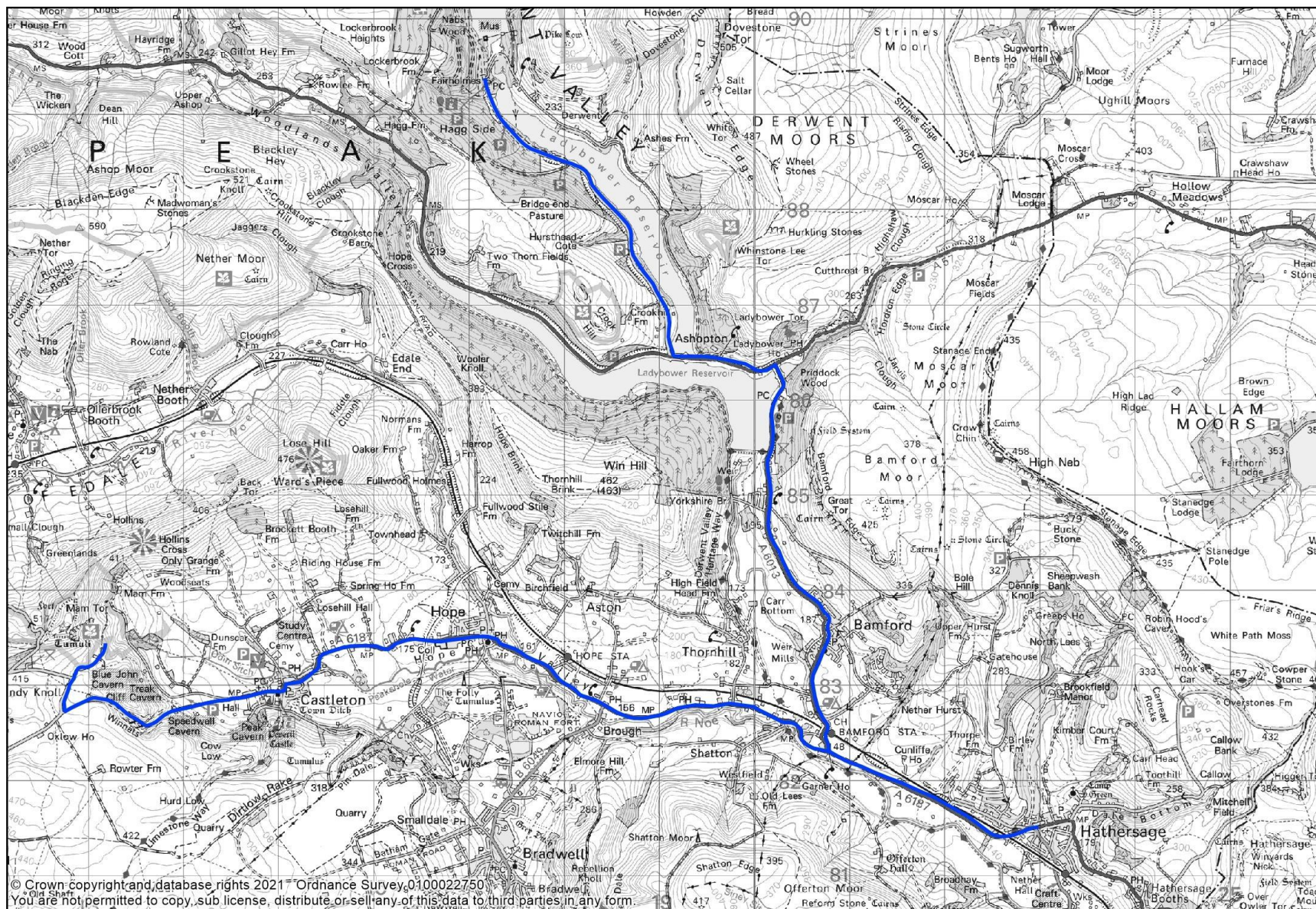
Options	Pros	Cons
Hope Valley Explorer as is (2 buses).	We have two years' experience of delivering this service. It is likely that the operation for 2022 would only require minor changes based on the experiences of 2019 and 2021.	It is unlikely to generate sufficient income to continue beyond the current tender. There appears to be limited options to secure additional funding at the current time.
Hope Valley Explorer and Heritage Explorer (incorporating Bakewell, Baslow, Chatsworth, Haddon Hall, Hassop Station, Longshaw and Peak Village – 2 buses).	The main advantage is the opportunity to bring in financial support for the service from Chatsworth and the National Trust.	Two vehicles running on separate routes may not offer the required frequency of timetable. Additional new costs for interpretation and marketing.
Hope Valley Explorer and Heritage Explorer (incorporating Bakewell, Baslow, Chatsworth, Haddon Hall, Hassop Station, Longshaw and Peak Village – 3 buses).	This approach could address any timetable concerns, with the three buses offering an interlinked service.	This would increase the cost of the service significantly and the increased revenue may not offer sufficient funds to make this feasible. Additional new costs for interpretation and marketing.
Three interlinked Explorer Routes: Hope Valley Explorer, Heritage Explorer and Trail and Dales Explorer (3 buses).	This would offer an opportunity to widen out the brand and possibly lead to better patronage across the project.	This would increase the cost of the service significantly and the increased revenue may not offer sufficient funds to make this feasible. Additional new costs for interpretation and marketing.

Table 3 – Explorer season options for 2022

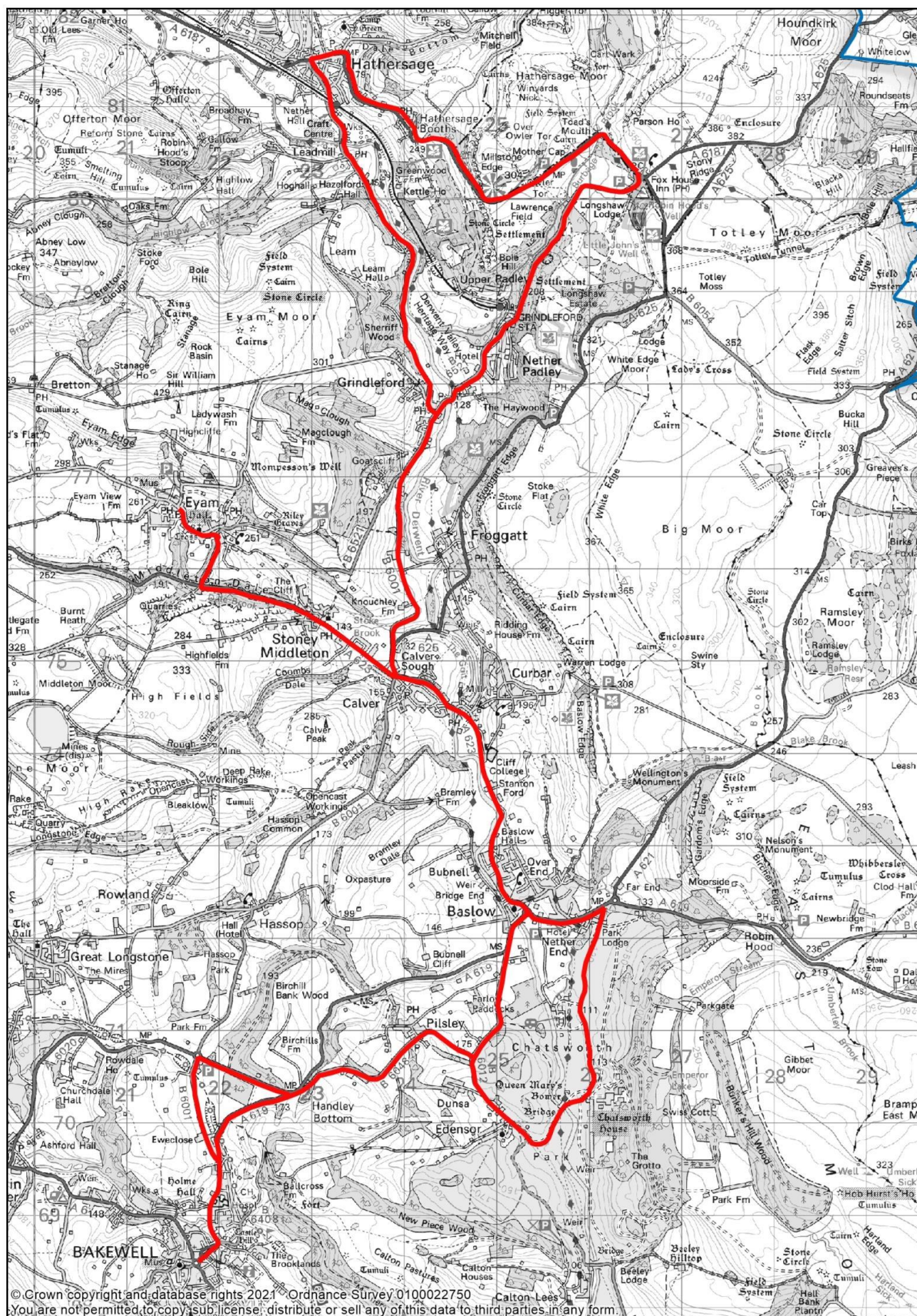
Options	Pros	Cons
Daily school summer holidays only (as per 2019).	Takes advantage of the busiest period for the National Park. Offers plenty of time to work up and market any route amendments.	The weekday services were relatively poorly used in 2019 compared with weekends. May dilute demand.
Weekends and BHM's during school summer holidays and through to the Autumn half-term (as per 2021).	Concentrates demand onto the busiest days in the National Park.	October services have carried relatively few passengers compared to the summer months.
Daily through school summer holidays plus weekends and Bank Holidays from Late May onwards through to September (as planned for 2020).	A long season offers better opportunity to increase patronage.	The weekday services were relatively poorly used in 2019 compared with weekends. May dilute demand.
Weekends and Bank Holidays from Easter through until the end of August.	Picks up the busiest days overall for the NP across a longer season.	Misses the autumn shoulder period...could be extended into early September.

Appendix 1 – Maps for possible Explorer routes for 2022

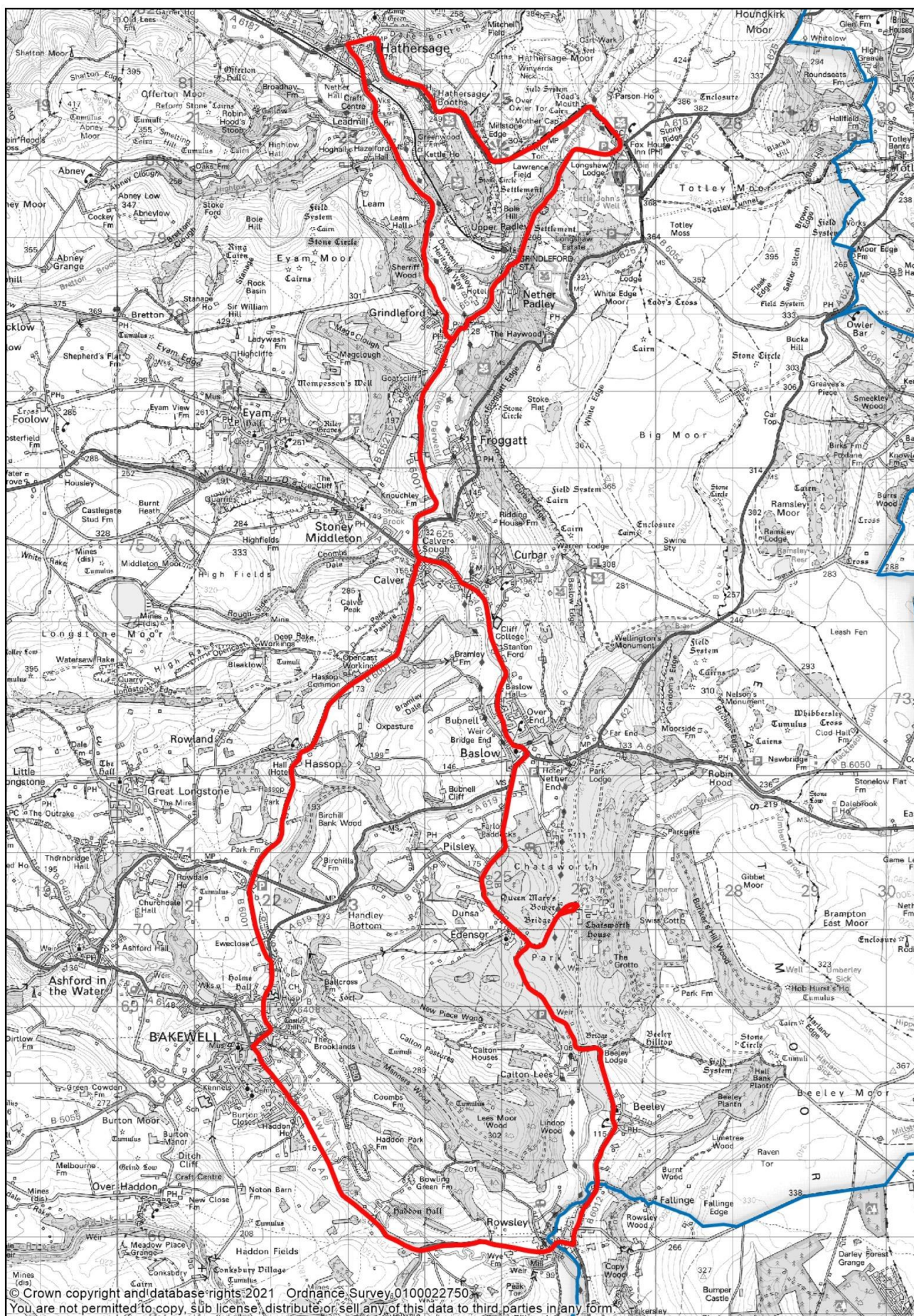
Map B1 – Hope Valley Explorer Route, extended to include Hathersage (Distance 1-way is approximately 13.5 miles)



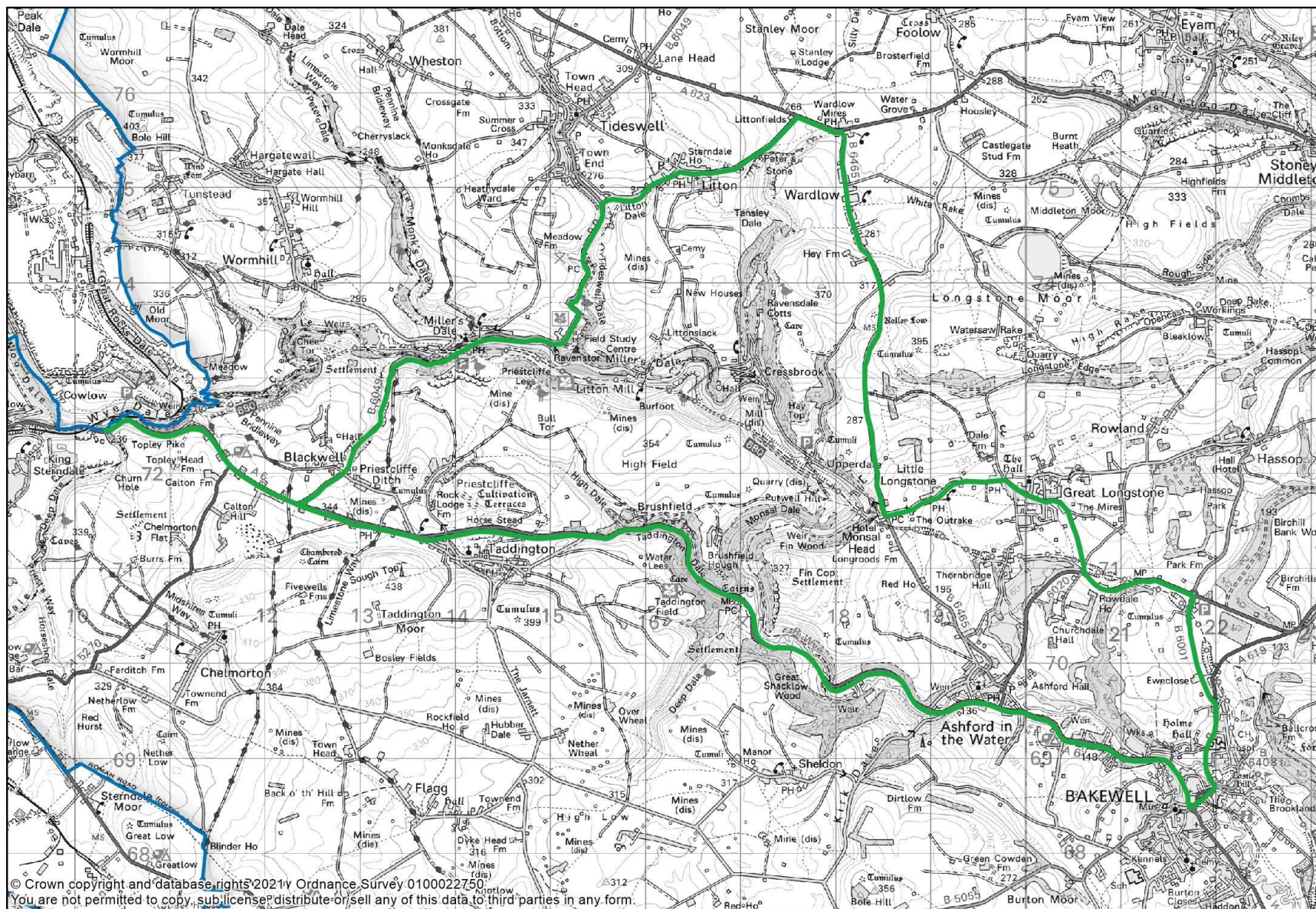
Map B2 – Heritage Explorer Route Option 1 (Distance 1-way is approximately 22.4 miles)



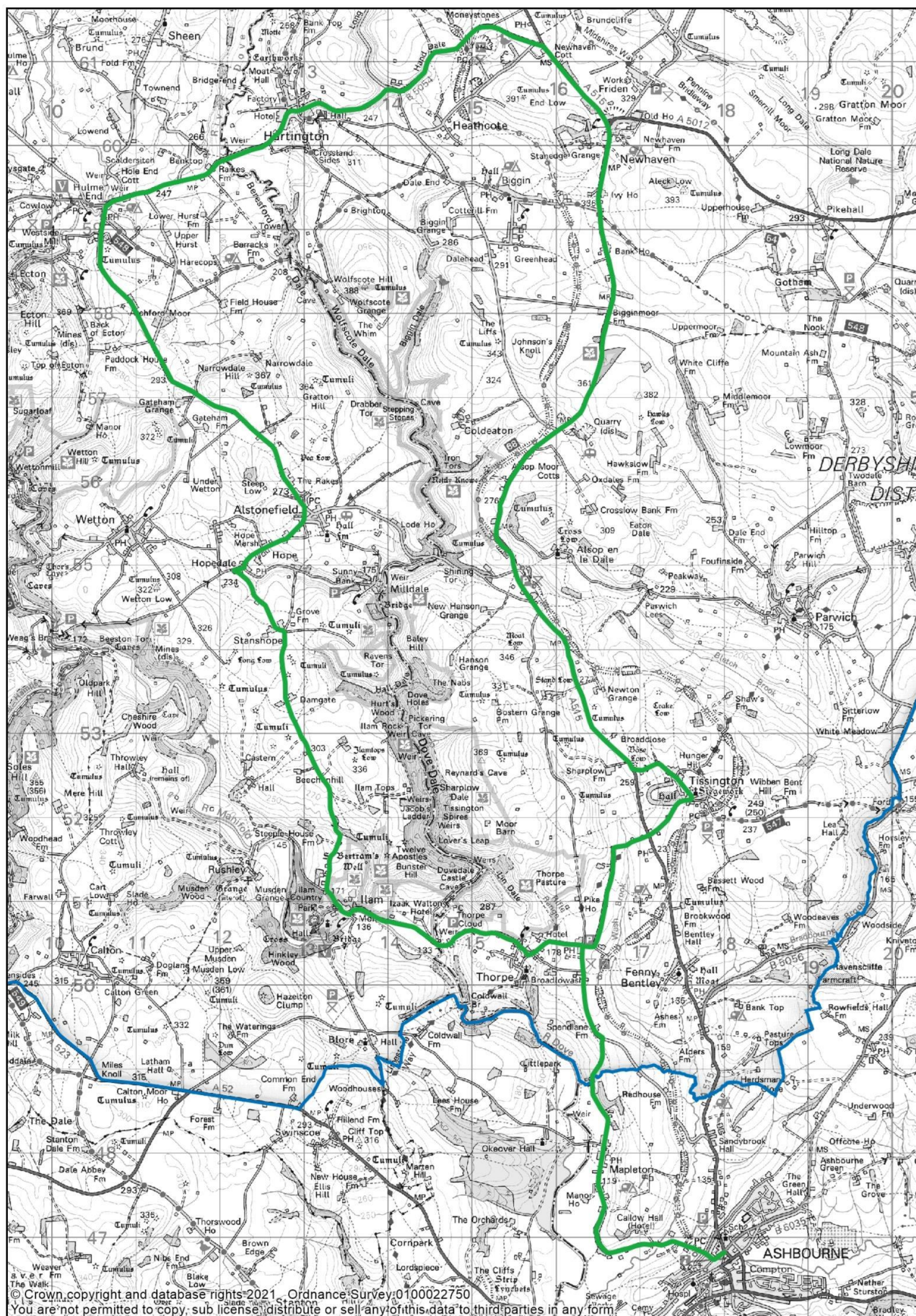
Map B3 – Heritage Explorer Route Option 2 (Distance for round-trip is approximately 30.5 miles)



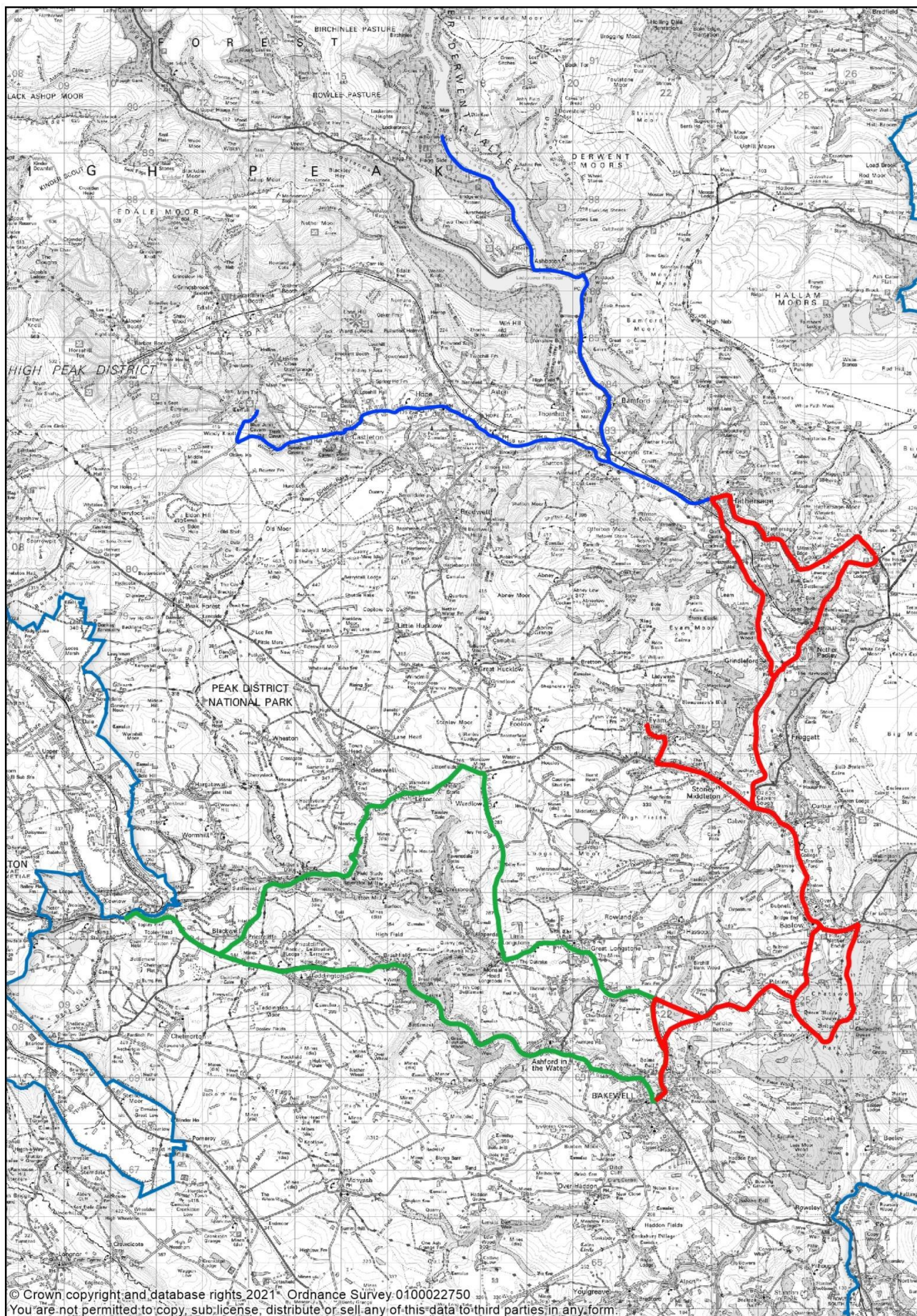
Map B4 – Trail and Dales Explorer Route (Distance for a circuit is approximately 21.3 miles)



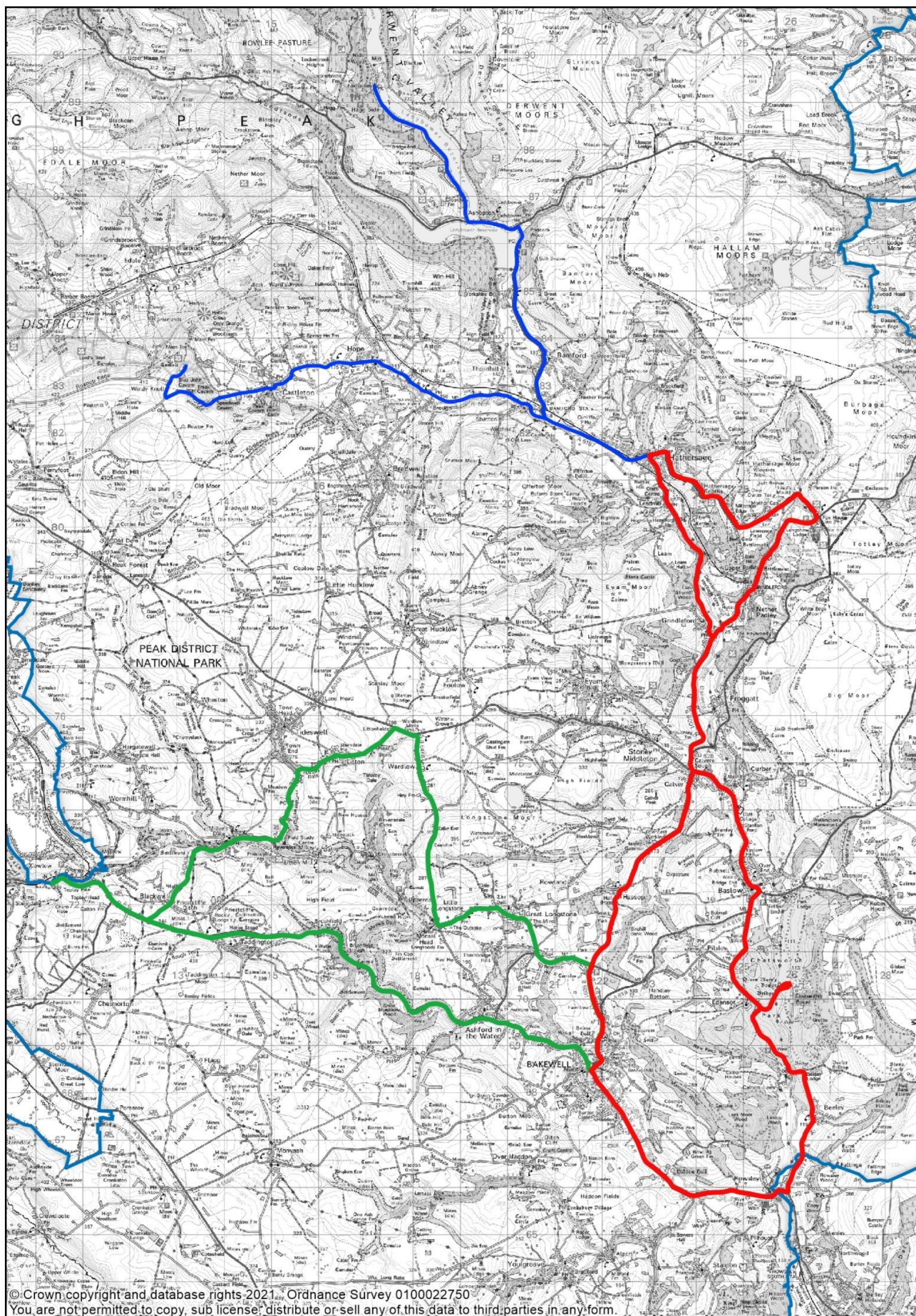
Map B5 – Trail and Dales Explorer Dovedale Route (Distance for a circuit is approximately 23.9 miles)



Map B6 – Interconnected Explorer Routes (including Heritage Explorer Route Option 1)



Map B7 – Interconnected Explorer Routes (including Heritage Explorer Route Option 2)



Map B7 – Interconnected Explorer Routes (including Heritage Explorer and Trail and Dales Route Options 2)

