

Rheged

Find your roots on Route 66

Locum Destination Review reports on the opening of Rheged on the A66 in Cumbria, northwest England, the world's first 'cross-over' roadside destination combining a visitor attraction with a conference venue, temporary exhibition galleries, a regional showcase, a retail platform for local products, an art gallery, fine dining to fast food, and – even – a petrol station.

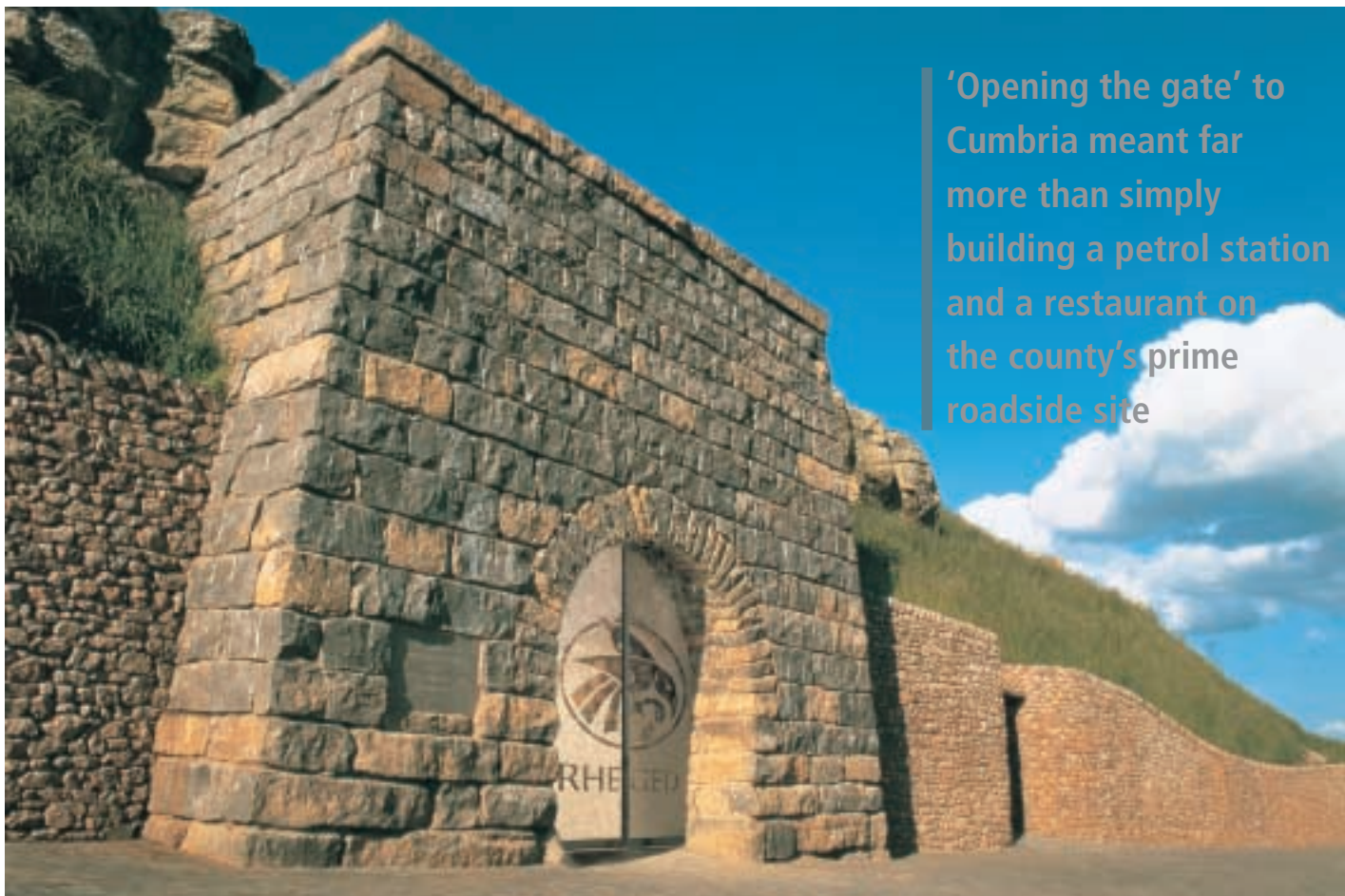
On 4 August 2000, a brand new facility was opened on the A66 just off Junction 40 of the M6 at Penrith, Cumbria. This key junction of the primary north-south and northern trans-Pennine routes, at the roundabout where the Keswick and Ullswater roads into the Lake District diverge, is an obvious site for a major roadside services operation.

This plain economic fact was immediately apparent to John Dunning, chairman of Westmorland, the company that runs the unique motorway service area of the same name. The Westmorland MSA is the UK's only privately owned service area on a major motorway route, and has consistently received accolades for its levels of catering quality, customer service and user satisfaction. Currently, Westmorland is cited by Egon Ronay as 'the one that sets the standard for others to follow' in the UK.

Rather than merely replicating this successful formula in a second location, the Westmorland team made a visionary leap when they began to develop the idea for a more-than-MSA on the A66.

Geographically, this is the gateway to the Lake District; it is Cumbria's primary point of access to the outside world. For John Dunning, a passionately committed Cumbrian, 'opening the gate' to Cumbria meant far more than simply building a petrol station and a restaurant on the county's prime

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roadside site. For John and the Westmorland team, the 'gateway' to Cumbria should open visitors' minds as much as opening their route into the Lakes and beyond. Westmorland had long ago also learned that providing a differentiated, high-quality environment is a great way to open visitors' wallets. The logical move was to create far more than an MSA.

The Westmorland team assembled a tight group of creative architects and content designers to turn the vision into reality. Through astute PR and dogged determination over a very long period of project evolution, the project also attracted the support of a team of visionary public funders, in which Tony Winterbottom, now Director of Projects at the London Development Agency, was instrumental.

Many years and many hard-fought planning battles later, the result is extraordinary. The result is Rheged. The largest grass-covered building in Europe encloses a truly radical mix of spaces, businesses and visitor-facing product. External natural rock interfaces seamlessly with set-designed artificial rock features on either side of huge panoramic windows, affording stunning views to the distant fells. The interior is permeated with light from two large skylights, and the sound and sight of flowing water from external waterfalls and an internal fountain constantly soothe the mind.

Visitors to Cumbria are initiated into the mysteries that await them further along the A66 through a three-part visual experience. The 18-minute part-still, part-moving image pre-show designed by John Sunderland, presented on a 30-foot by 10-foot screen in its own auditorium, features 'real Cumbrians' talking about the people and places of their own stunningly beautiful homeland. This is intercut with frenetic scenes from the journey of a young American returning from Manhattan to his Cumbrian roots.

Visitors then move to the main feature, which is presented in a 250-seat theatre on a bespoke large-screen film format. This incorporates three main narratives: Taliesin's tale of the ancient Celtic kingdom of Rheged, Wordsworth's *Michael*, and the story of the returning young American. The 40-minute show has a perhaps over-ambitious historical span – ranging from Arthurian legend, through early Christianity and the Reivers to the contemporary – but this is more than offset by stunning camera work, the director, Bernard Quayle, making best use of the large format to present the sheer drama of the Cumbrian countryside.

After leaving the theatre and passing through a brief post-show, visitors find themselves in a well-stocked Tourist

Information Centre, capable of organising accommodation and attractions bookings, which encourages visitors to explore in person the diverse and 'profound' Cumbria conveyed by the film.

The visitor flow then leads into a Rheged-managed retail area devoted to products of and about Cumbria. This 'Made in Cumbria' retail outlet is one of the commercial expressions of Rheged's commitment to partnership with the county and district authorities. This shop, along with a number of units tenanted by leading Cumbrian businesses, acts as part of a regional showcase for the people, products and skills of Cumbria.

After the shops, following an extremely ingenious spiral path downwards through the building, visitors have a range of eating and drinking options. The Bluebird Bar, the Terrace Café, The Reivers Brasserie and the Taliesin Restaurant between them cater for a wide range of tastes, budgets and time-frames. Signature chef Paul Heathcote has lent his name to Rheged, training the staff and acting as menu consultant – literally adding his signature to the restaurant's range of wines.

Plans are afoot to include a cultural-sector element in the destination mix, with planning now underway for a Museum of British Mountaineering. Westmorland and the British Mountaineering Council are working together to create an exhibition of mountaineering artefacts, including such treasures as Mallory's ice axe, using leading-edge interpretation and presentation technologies.

Rheged is also positioned in the visitor market as the Northern Uplands Discovery Centre. In everything it is and does as a truly integrated destination, Rheged brings the many undiscovered corners of England's most sparsely populated county to a wide audience – it is an excellent example of creative destination-making.