



## **UK Town Twinning Portal Newsletter**



This is the first of what we hope will be a periodic newsletter issued specifically to our members, that is, twinning groups which have signed up to have their details published on the "Portal".

There is a dual purpose to the issue of this newsletter, firstly, to update you on the progress of the site and any new features, and secondly to inform you of our plans for the future development of the site.

We hope that you will find this to be a useful and valuable addition in our service to the UK twinning community.

### **Circulation**

This represents the current listings on the "Portal" website. At the time of writing we have **126** twinning groups listed, some of these are "umbrella" groups, for example:- The Devon Twinning Circle and the Lincolnshire Twinning Federation, who represent several groups within their area of operation, so including their member groups we represent **259** separate twinning groups throughout the nation covering a total of **353** individual twinning links around the world.

We currently have listings for groups in **43** UK Counties and Unitary Authorities.

These figures are growing weekly and have been achieved in just ten months since we launched the site on a national basis.

This phenomenal growth rate has been due to your support and co-operation for which we are grateful. Thank you one and all!

### **History of the "Portal"**

The site [www.towntwinning.org.uk](http://www.towntwinning.org.uk) was first launched in October 2002 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Sandy Twinning Associations link with Malaunay, in Normandy, France. The launch of the site was first publicly announced in Malaunay during the anniversary celebrations and was closely followed with a sister site by the Comite de Jumelage in Malaunay <http://www.jumelage-malaunay-sandy.org>.

Our original website was not particularly successful due to poor design (I hold my hands up to this, but claim the excuse that it was my very first incursion into web design) and difficulty in maintenance, but it did serve its purpose for a while. Being well aware of the problems it was decided in late 2005 to completely redesign the site and whilst working on the new design we happened to have a joint function involving three of our neighbouring twinning groups at which we came to the conclusion that there was very little co-operation between groups either on a local or national basis.

This very brief discussion led me to consider a completely new direction for the site, and after discussion with the committee and support from those three neighbouring groups we decided to open the site up on a national basis to try and foster a degree of co-operation and discussion between us all.

The redesigned site was launched in November 2005 and run on a trial basis until late March 2006 whilst we built the initial content and ironed out any bugs.

The first invitations to join were sent out in the last few days of March 2006 and the last ten months have seen the "Portal" grow to its present size.

Up to this point most of our members joined as a result of an e-mail invitation, however, it has not been possible to discover e-mail addresses for every group in the country and we found people asking how they could join. We hope to have solved that now by including an application form within the site, this can be found by following links within the site or by clicking on [www.towntwinning.org.uk/applicationforlisting.htm](http://www.towntwinning.org.uk/applicationforlisting.htm) .

### **Discussion Boards (Forums)**

Most twinning groups have seen somewhat of a decline in interest over the last few years due to many reasons.

The growth in the travel industry and the ease of reaching the more exotic locations of the world have, in addition to the ease of day trips to the traditional twin destinations such as France caused a decline in public support and enthusiasm for the traditional links which were originally formed after the second world war.

Twinning Associations in general are finding their membership is falling and we are having difficulty in attracting new blood, constant demands upon the public purse are causing some councils to withdraw financial support for twinning activities.

In short, many groups are finding they have problems which is why we felt a discussion board would be a useful (if not vital) adjunct to the site.

Unfortunately, although we have a few discussions started we really would like to see more interaction from our members. Which is why we would ask that you inform all the members of your group of the existence of the boards and make it clear that the discussion boards are open to anyone to partake, not just group officials and committee members.

As I said, we all have similar problems and perhaps between us we may find a way to alleviate some of the problems, perhaps you have found a solution to a problem which may help someone else, please do not keep it to yourself, share it, or if you are the one with a problem, ask for help, and we are sure someone else has faced and hopefully found a solution to the very problem you are facing.

Until recently the boards were only readable by anyone who had signed up to them, this has now been changed and the boards are open to anyone to view them, however, it will not be possible to post until you are registered on the boards, this facility is open to anyone. As soon as you have registered you will receive an e-mail asking you to validate your registration, once you have validated you will be free to post.

Please use this facility and therefore gain the most benefit from your membership of the "Portal".

### **Recent Additions**

The "Find your Local Group" section was originally on a single page, but as we grew that obviously became rather unwieldy so to ease your search for a particular group we now list by County or Unitary Authority, the decision on which of these applies is dependent upon the listing in the "Gazetteer of British Place Names".

The "Travel Information" section contains links to various organisations or services that may be useful in planning your twinning trips, and include a 'currency converter', a '10 day weather forecast' for anywhere in the world and information on 'time zones' anywhere.

We recently added links to a few of the low cost airlines as they are becoming increasingly used by twinning groups for group travel as well as individuals. Also we are hoping soon to add to this a list of the major ferry companies and their destinations.

The "Useful links" section is starting to grow and is being divided into sections,

- 'Twinning' contains links to various groups such as the LGIB, Europa, and other twinning initiatives such as educational twinning organisations.
- "International" contains links to organisations such as the 'Franco British' and the 'Anglo German' organisations.
- "Travel" contains links to Group travel organisations (useful if looking for somewhere to take your guests) and Travel Insurance.
- *Shortly to be introduced* - a new group which it is hoped will contain details of Public and Bank Holidays around the world, (these are always changing but it will be a useful guide when planning your overseas trips), the rules of Boules, and other useful information.
- If there is any useful links you would like to see please tell us,

The "Articles" section is well worth a look, there is a series of articles giving ideas and suggestions for any group wishing to develop their own website, "Je Crois", a three part article by Jon Norris giving his own somewhat tongue in cheek look at France and the French, some impressions of twinning by members of the Harlow Twinning Group, a two part article (or should I say, article and sequel) by Jack & Anne Loader from Hartford Twinning Association telling the story of how they solved the problems of taking their dogs on their twinning visits, this contains some very useful information for anyone considering taking their pets abroad.

We also hope in the very near future that we will be publishing some articles from Sedbergh Twinning Association about how their town was twinned through a television programme, and some of the twinning activities by their local choirs. (These have now been published since writing this)

We have also had some requests from African Countries looking for a UK Twin, if you know of anyone looking for an overseas project you can find some basic information within the discussion boards, further information and contact details can be obtained from me at [towntwinning@gmail.com](mailto:towntwinning@gmail.com)

It is worth pointing out that there is currently good government support for the creation of links in Africa and other third world countries.

### **The Future**

Extensive plans are being considered for the future and include among other things:-

- Investigating the possibilities of negotiating discounts for registered twinning groups.
- More news of our members groups activities.
- Advice and suggestions on successful fund raising and warnings of common errors
- Continued advice on the law as it applies to group travel.

These plans are not listed in any order of priority and are a mixture of long and short term plans. None of these plans are set in stone and we are always interested to know what you want to see, your satisfaction is our priority at all times.

On an even longer term basis we are considering some changes in the design of the site which could result in our member groups each having their own page on the site which they could maintain themselves. However, this is a very long term plan and will depend on various factors including server capacity, and could be a useful feature for those groups who do not have their own website.

## **In conclusion**

We hope this newsletter will assure you that once you are signed up to the "Portal" you are not forgotten. There are changes on the site at the very least each week if not daily and we are always working in the background to ensure that we bring you the latest and most useful news and information.

There is always of course time to listen to you and your members and we welcome your input, either through the discussion boards, by e-mail, snail mail or telephone/fax and to that end we ask that you circulate this among all your group members.

In conclusion I am pleased to report that the "Portal" has created a lot of interest in the twinning world and the staff have had to make presentations on the site to the County Twinning Committees of Northamptonshire, West Sussex, a visiting German delegation and on BBC Three Counties Radio, and the LGIB has kindly given us permission to use any of the material on their website provided we acknowledge the source (a really generous offer for which we thank them)

Finally, the admin team and the members of the Sandy Twinning Association (our sponsoring group) would like to wish you all a very successful year of twinning/friendship activities.

Alan Wicks

National Co-ordinator for the UK Town Twinning Portal

[www.towntwinning.org.uk](http://www.towntwinning.org.uk)