

From The Sunday Times

November 22, 2009

## Remote access in the UK for broadband users

**How will Alston Moor, an isolated corner of Cumbria, get faster internet speeds than London?  
With a little high-tech DIY**



Paul Huish can now stay connected in Alston Moor

Cally Law

High in the hills of Cumbria is a place called Alston Moor. It's remote, hilly and, until 2002, didn't have much to offer beyond scenery and fresh air. It certainly wouldn't have been anybody's first choice as a place to start a business.

Now "England's last wilderness", as the locals like to call it, is set to become one of the best-connected areas in the country, with the sort of internet speeds most city-dwellers can only dream of. While the government figures out how to provide rural areas with "next generation" high-speed broadband at some unspecified date in the future, the most sparsely populated parish in Britain has decided it can't wait. The people of Alston Moor are doing it for themselves.

The trenches for fibreoptic cable are already being dug by the very people who will be using it. Within months, inhabitants of these windswept reaches of the North Pennines will be receiving, via that cable and a microwave link to the Tees Valley, internet speeds of 20 megabits per second (Mbps). Eventually that will rise to 100Mbps — fast enough to download entire television programmes in seconds.

Daniel Heery, 38, the driving force behind the Alston scheme, is something of a pioneer. Seven years ago, BT decided it was "unviable" to provide basic broadband to the area, and so Heery, a community development worker who moved there in 1997, took matters into his own hands: with government funding and help from local people, he started Cybermoor, Britain's first broadband co-operative. Transmitters were nailed to cowsheds and chimneys, beaming signals from home to home over rugged valleys. Cottages that didn't have a phone line were suddenly able to communicate with the world — first at speeds of 0.2Mbps, now at up to 10Mbps.

"We hooked into the school's broadband supply via microwave and we had children teaching their grannies how to use it," says Heery. "It cost about £350 per household for the equipment and £65 for the connection." BT did eventually provide broadband in 2005, though the more remote cottages are still out of range. "One remote farmhouse had been up for sale, but everybody who viewed it wanted broadband," Heery says. "It cost the owner £2,000 for us to make the connection, and the house was sold."

Indeed, the effect on property values across the area has been dramatic. "Prices made a quantum leap of 20%-25%," says Jeremy Higgs, owner of Pennine Ways estate agent in Alston ([pen9ways.com](http://pen9ways.com)). "It's still having a huge impact. Just last month we let a property to a lady who works from home and needs broadband. She wouldn't be here without it."

Many of Britain's other rural areas are not so fortunate. BT claims "speeds of up to 8Mbps are available from all of BT's broadband-enabled exchanges today, serving 99% of UK homes" — but the devil is in those two words "up to". Many country dwellers are lucky to get 0.5Mbps — far below the minimum 2Mbps needed for general web browsing

— on their “up to 8Mbps” service. And, as fast, reliable internet access becomes essential for everything from homework and health to banking, those who live in rural areas are in danger of being left on the country-bumpkin side of the new Digital Divide.

The Commission for Rural Communities, a government watchdog, says demand for broadband has risen faster in the country than in urban areas over the past five years, with broadband increasingly considered the “fourth utility”: more than 80% of people surveyed by Broadband Expert, a comparison website, want connection speeds included in property details or as part of the Home Information Pack. Swindon Borough Council, meanwhile, announced plans last week to cover the town with a “WiFi mesh” that would give all residents free wireless access by next April.

Nick Shaw, a retired businessman from London who lives with his wife, Erle, in Cattistock, Dorset, finds it hard to imagine life without broadband, which he uses to look after his financial affairs. “People can’t afford to buy in the countryside unless they can set up a business at home,” he says. “Not having broadband is like not being able to read and write.”

Nor is it just newcomers who need access. Judy Lobb lives on a 230-acre farm in north Cornwall, farmed by her husband’s family since 1943. She does the farm accounts with her daughter-in-law, Rachel. “Since the cattle-tracing system came in 10 years ago, animals must have passports and movements have to be recorded,” she says. “We also buy spare parts for the tractors on eBay. And we shop, too. It saves taking the car out and paying 10 bob to park it.”

This summer the government, anxious to avoid a “two-tier Britain”, pledged to deliver quality broadband access by 2012 “to every home, every community and every business across the country”. It has also announced a new fund — raised partly from an annual £6 “landline” tax — to help bring super-fast broadband to the third of the country that is uneconomic to reach. Quite when such Next Generation Access (NGA) — and its access to services such as online banking, iTunes and BBC iPlayer — will arrive is not clear.

Just as Alston’s new high-tech connections are boosting prices locally, so properties caught in areas without are suffering. “Some of our clients won’t consider properties unless broadband is available,” says Bob Humphrey, regional director of Stacks Property Search in southwest Wales. “It’s a normal part of most people’s lives these days, and to move to somewhere that does not have that facility is a serious deal-breaker. BT’s explanation is often that a home is too far away from the exchange, but ‘Off the beaten track’ is what our clients want — to get away from city pressures, but still be able to have contact via the internet.”

For many buyers, simply having broadband isn’t enough; high speeds are crucial. Beverley Francis, an agent at Strutt & Parker’s Sevenoaks office, says a sale recently fell through purely over the speed of connection. “When the buyer found out the internet speed was 4Mbps — fine for most people — he withdrew his offer; he wanted 8Mbps,” she says.

Hugo Thistlethwayte, director of buying agents Prime Purchase, says his clients looking at West Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire are more realistic. “Anything north of 1Mbps is acceptable, unless the purchaser is a City trader and needs all the Bloomberg screens,” he says. “As broadband speeds get better in the countryside, the price of rural homes will increase. It’s not just shopping from the Boden catalogue anymore, you can buy from all over the world. You don’t have to put up with whatever the local Spar sells, you can have truffle-infused oil.”

In Alston, Carol and Paul Huish have five holiday cottages, but eight years ago, when they bought them, they didn’t even have a phone line. “Now we’ve got a website and a business,” says Carol. “We must be available 24 hours a day. Daniel is an unsung hero.”

As she, together with the rest of the Alston Moor community, looks forward to speeds of up to 100Mbps, it’s perhaps time the rest of us got digging.

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