

The Right to Roam *Our* Land

70 YEARS ON from the Kinder Trespass – The Countryside Rights of Way Act

A big step forward, but a long way still to go

Last Saturday, 27th April (2002), saw the small Peak District village of Hayfield celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the mass trespass on Kinder Scout. In 1932, following a rallying speech by Young Communist League activist Benny Rothman, about 400 ramblers marched out to the slopes of Kinder and into the history books and mythology of outdoor activists everywhere. The subsequent arrests and prison sentences attracted world wide attention, and while some at the time debated the effectiveness of the mass trespass as a tactic, most would now agree that it was a pivotal event, linked directly to the 1949 National Parks and Access Act, and the first access agreements signed in the Peak District in the 1950's .

The quarry where the original ramblers gathered is now a car park, complete with commemorative plaque and it was here that the celebrations took place, for the first time without Benny, who died in January 2002.

Hundreds of people braved the blustery Pennine weather to join in the celebrations, including a sprinkling of local M.P's and outdoor celebrities such as *Sir* Chris Bonnington. Michael Meacher represented the government, sharing the platform with Sir Martin Doughty, sometime leader of Derbyshire County Council and current Chair of the Peak Park, whose father was on the original trespass. Veteran folk singer Mike Harding provided music but the most surprising and ultimately moving presence was that of the 82 year old Duke of Devonshire, there to apologise for the action taken by his grandfather against the trespassers. Only twelve years old at the time of the original incident, this gaunt, imposing figure spoke with complete conviction, and while the apology itself was graceful, uncompromising, and heartfelt, his later remarks on how much pleasure it gives him to see visitors using his land shows how far attitudes and thinking need to change. (Excuse me, m'lord, *Whose* land?!)

The event ended with a rousing rendition of McColl's 'Manchester Rambler', but apart from this, the Duke and an unpleasant interlude when some thugs from the 'Countryside Alliance' attempted to jostle Meacher and make a case for their 'human rights' to kill foxes for fun, it was a strangely muted affair. Benny's death quite rightly occupied many of the speeches

(though with very little mention his membership of the C.P. or his wider involvement in trade union struggles), but overall it lacked the campaigning edge that had been at the heart of the previous occasions in 1982 and 1992. There was a great deal of self congratulation on the Government's passing of the Countryside Rights of Way Act (CRoW), which *is* a landmark Act, but little attempt to offer leadership or inspiration on how to address the difficulties in practice that remain or how activists should most effectively continue to campaign –there would have been a cool reception should anyone present have dared to suggest a direct action mass trespass! Perhaps it was the dampening effect of the weather but more likely an uncertainty of how best to go forward when Government appears friendly and helpful, but is still not delivering. Both the previous events took place under extremely unsympathetic Tory governments and Thatcher's ghost was wheeled on by several speakers to remind us of how lucky we should feel to have New Labour on our side.

Yet the typical 'New Labour' fudges of the Act mean that while there *is* now a legal framework for access, the need for hard campaigning to defend, consolidate and extend gains in reality is at least as crucial as it has been in the past. At best, the Act will only give access to 12% of the land and still excludes vast areas of woodland, coastland and riverbanks that could be accessed by walkers with no ill effects to the environment. All new access will have to be incorporated into a national 'definitive map', a process which could take several years and gives plenty of leeway for landowners fighting rearguard actions to drag out appeals or plough up moor land to keep the land private.

In addition, the Government is about to give itself strong centralised planning powers for large scale 'infrastructure' projects which can be used to override local environmental concerns, so while the CRoW act is a big step forward, there has never been a time when continued vigilance and campaigning have been so important – without it, access will be just another New Labour 'smoke and mirrors' chimera.

Campaigning Groups:

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The Land is Ours (TLIO) campaigns peacefully for access to the land, its resources, and the decision-making processes affecting them, for everyone, irrespective of race, gender or age.

www.tlio.org.uk

The Open Spaces Society - Britain's oldest conservation society, the Open Spaces Society exists to protect common land and public rights of way. www.oss.org.uk

Red Rope – socialist climbers and walkers organisation which campaigns on access and other issues www.gn.apc.org/redrope/