

The Peak District National Park opened in 1951 and was the first of its kind in the UK. It is centred on the Kinder Scout massif, that beautiful, dark, brooding plateau of rugged moorland lying between the great industrial conurbations of Greater Manchester to the West and Sheffield to the East. It is through this proximity to large populations of politically aware factory workers that access to Kinder Scout became the symbolic and physical battleground of the struggle between feudal landed gentry and increasingly militant workers, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. So it was no coincidence that this was chosen to be the first National Park and it has since become and remains one of the busiest in Europe, with 10 million visits every year. The park is incredibly well managed by the National Trust, which has large landholdings, and the Peak Park and the Ranger Service, who together are somehow able to balance the often conflicting needs and demands of farmers, locals, hikers, mountain bikers, campers and car park tourists who flock there every weekend.

The 1932 mass trespass onto Kinder Scout is an event that has immense significance in the history of working class struggle, and continues to resonate through campaigns such as those by the Occupy movement today.

The very idea of trespass, and the implied concept of ownership, goes to the heart of all class struggle, and there is still much we can learn from the 1932 action – not least because it was spectacularly effective. On the 75th anniversary Roy (Lord) Hattersley described it as ‘the most successful act of direct action in British history’. It is widely seen as having given a crucial impetus to the creation of the national parks and still acts as a rallying point for the whole right to roam movement, a point made repeatedly during the week of celebrations held around Edale and Hayfield, which were poignantly attended by the only two surviving members of the trespass.

The mass trespass was part of a long campaign to gain access to open moorland appropriated by the landed gentry during the enclosures. The main target for generations of campaigners was Kinder Scout, the beautiful dark, brooding plateau of rugged moorland lying between the industrial conurbations of Manchester and Sheffield. It was this proximity to large populations of young and politically aware factory workers that made Kinder the symbolic battleground for the struggle between

the feudal landed gentry and a militant working class, a struggle that began in earnest in the late 19th century and continues to this day.

Individuals had long trespassed on the moors, often walking long distances from Stockport and the outskirts of Manchester just to get to the hills, where they faced constant harassment and often violence from the gamekeepers. Lengthy negotiations had been taking place between the Ramblers Association and the landowners, but many were becoming impatient with this process. Members of the Communist Party British Workers' Sports Federation in Manchester became increasingly frustrated and decided to force the issue. Benny Rothman organised the event and a young Ewan McColl, who was later to immortalise the struggle in his song 'The Manchester Rambler', acted as the self-proclaimed press officer, ensuring full coverage in the Manchester Evening News and Manchester Guardian.

## **Police and protesters**

On the day, Rothman cycled to the rallying point in Hayfield, partly because he couldn't afford the train fare and also because he was concerned that police might try to prevent supporters from joining the protest. Despite the efforts of the Derbyshire constabulary, more than 400 Manchester ramblers did make it to Hayfield, with a smaller Sheffield contingent arriving in Edale on the far side of the plateau.

The leader of Hayfield parish council attempted to read the Riot Act, while police focused on what would today be called 'kettling' the trespassers to prevent them gaining access to the Kinder approach routes. Then, according to an unpublished interview with Benny Rothman (conducted by Graeme Atkinson in 1978, used here courtesy of Kinder Trespass Archive Project, Hayfield), the walkers broke through and streamed across Hayfield cricket pitch and onto Kinder Road, 'singing the Red Flag and the Internationale'. In the same interview, Rothman says that the police were much less fit than the trespassers and unable to keep up with their pace, allowing them to regroup in a quarry at the foot of Kinder, where Rothman and others addressed them and outlined their strategy for gaining access to the top of the plateau. They then marched past the reservoir, onto the slopes of Kinder and into the history books.

There were some minor scuffles with hired 'gamekeepers', but most of the hikers

reached the top and briefly met with their Sheffield comrades, before heading back into Hayfield and the waiting police, who made five arrests (a sixth was arrested in a separate incident). Benny Rothman said that all five were ‘Jewish or Jewish looking people’, and he certainly believed that this was deliberately racist behaviour by police.

The trial of the six took place some weeks later, with full national coverage, and there was widespread outrage in liberal and left circles when all of the accused received prison sentences. And so the trespass entered popular folklore, becoming synonymous with the struggle for greater access to the countryside.

Behind the scenes, of course, there was a great deal of low profile, day-to-day hard work in lobbying and negotiating, led by the tirelessly committed Tom Stephenson of the Ramblers Association. He and many others initially resented what they saw as attention-seeking behaviour that might threaten the painstaking and precarious progress being made. Tom later recanted, however, and accepted that without the mass trespass, progress towards access would have stalled and the setting up of the national parks would not have happened. Even at the time, he was canny enough to use the event to put pressure on the landowners and politicians by raising the spectre of further mass trespasses should more tangible progress fail to be made.

## **Why the trespass succeeded**

So why was it so successful? First, it was well planned, with a careful eye on positive publicity – the protesters even had a Guardian special reporter ‘embedded’ with them on the trespass – and they were able to gain public sympathy by panicking the authorities and provoking them into a wholly disproportionate response. The prison sentences created instant martyrs to the cause and the heavy-handed, patently unjust reaction exposed the nature of the rich and powerful feudal landowners to a wide urban audience.

Another key factor was that the actions were very focused and had a clear objective. Yet it was not seen as a single issue campaign, either by the participants or the authorities. For those taking part, it was consciously and explicitly part of a wider, revolutionary struggle to overthrow the capitalist system. Several of those on the trespass fought – and died – in the International Brigade in Spain four years later

and many of the others continued a life of political activism in their trade unions in Manchester and Sheffield.

The Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000) has consolidated gains in access and helped extend it, but overall progress towards a 'right to roam' in the English and Welsh countryside has been patchy (there are different, far more extensive rights in Scotland). There still remain significant areas of the country where access is restricted, threatened or resisted, with landowners such as the Duke of Westminster fighting every inch of the way.

Even in Hayfield itself, the gateway to Kinder, the trespass can still ignite strong feelings. In 2011 the parish council astonishingly turned down grant funding of more than £90,000 awarded to set up a permanent exhibition of the mass trespass.

The trespass was a crucial event that must not be forgotten, but neither should it be remembered as simply an isolated historical event. Rather we should celebrate it as an inspirational moment in a continuing struggle that we cannot afford to lose, and learn its lessons well.

The Kinder Trespass Archive Project, Hayfield, is committed to establishing a permanent archive and exhibition to commemorate the mass trespass and link it to the continuing struggle for access to our countryside. Its website is [www.kindertrespass.org.uk](http://www.kindertrespass.org.uk)