

Blazing the trails

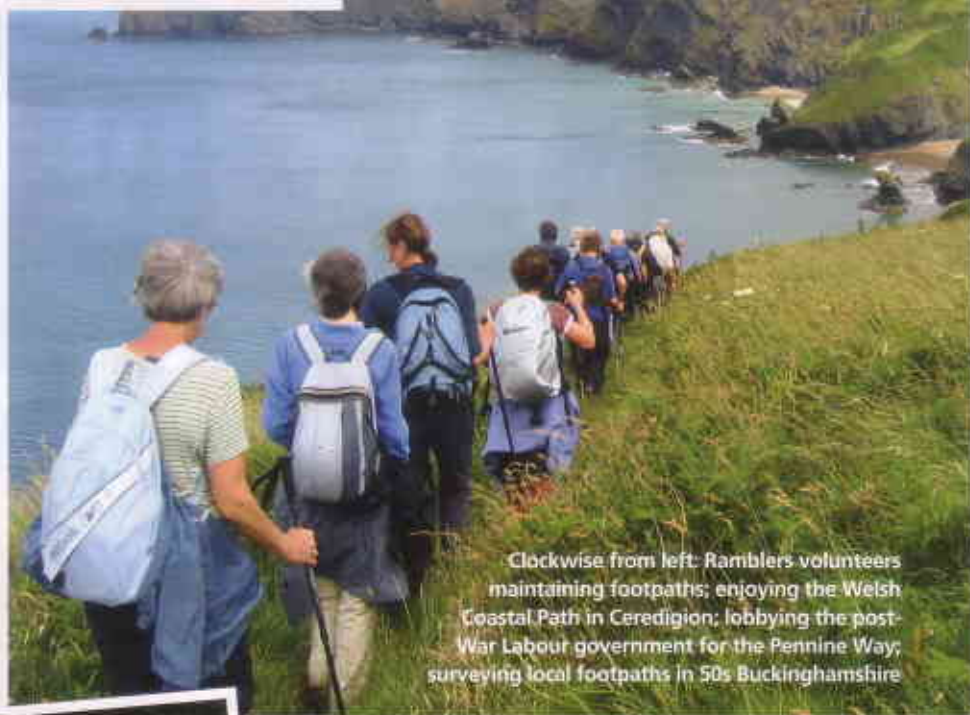
Pick up a pre-war Ordnance Survey map and one thing stands out - or, more correctly, it doesn't. Because, however hard you look, you won't spot a single public right of way

In 1935, even local councils had no record of the footpaths and bridleways in their areas. But all that was about to change. After a vigorous Ramblers campaign, the wide-ranging National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 required councils to survey and record all the rights of way in England and Wales - totalling over 140,000 miles today.

"We campaigned for the legislation, and then our volunteers helped parish councils with the enormous task of researching all their local paths," says Adrian Morris, the Ramblers' head of walking environment. "By 1958, the Ramblers had persuaded Ordnance Survey to start showing this new data on its detailed local maps, giving walkers a clear picture of the rights of way network for the very first time. These maps are still checked by local Ramblers volunteers today."

But it didn't stop there. Ever since 1935, Tom Stephenson - the Ramblers' first full-time secretary - had dreamed of an adventure trail stretching from the Peak District to the Scottish border. The Pennine Way was a long time coming, but the 1949 Act had laid the foundations of our modern national trails and, in 1965, Tom's dream at last became a reality. Ramblers also helped to establish many other trails, including the Thames Path, Glyndwr's Way and the Cotswold Way.

Back at Westminster, Ramblers campaigners continued lobbying for



Clockwise from left: Ramblers volunteers maintaining footpaths; enjoying the Welsh Coastal Path in Ceredigion; lobbying the post-war Labour government for the Pennine Way; surveying local footpaths in 50s Buckinghamshire



further improvements in rights of way legislation. "In 1968, Parliament required councils to signpost their footpaths," says Adrian.

"Then in 1981, we helped to defeat proposals that would have abolished the right of appeal against footpath closures and diversions."

Nevertheless, walkers were still frustrated to find paths ploughed up and planted with crops. "The Ramblers already had firm ideas on tackling this

issue," says Adrian, "so we jumped at the chance to work with Lincolnshire MP Edward Leigh. He successfully piloted the Rights of Way Act through Parliament in 1990, placing time limits on reinstating paths after ploughing and cropping."

With so much legislation already in the bag, you'd think that the rights of way network would be done

Then and now
Number of public and
township trails in Britain

1935 = 0
2010 = 600+

A brief history of the Ramblers

1935

Ramblers' Association founded from a renamed National Council of Ramblers' Federations



1941

The Ramblers submit proposals to Parliament for long-distance paths and national parks

1947

The Hobhouse Committee Report sets out plans for 12 national parks in England and Wales

1948

Tom Stephenson is appointed as the Ramblers' first full-time secretary



1949

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act lays foundations for access to countryside

1951

The Peak District becomes Britain's first national park, and the Ramblers establishes its first group in Croydon



☞ A usable path network isn't just about leisure; there are health, economic and community benefits, too ☞

and dusted. It isn't. We've all seen paths that are blocked or unusable – and there's an increasing problem with 'alley gating' in urban areas, too. Throughout this General Election year, the Ramblers' walking

manifesto is

calling for action to put things right (see p18). But Ramblers aren't just looking to politicians for answers.

"More and more of our local volunteers like to do practical work," says Adrian. "That tradition goes right back to 1935, although these days we provide insurance, as well as guidance on health and safety, so that our footpath workers can get on

with the job on the ground. Altogether, they save local councils over £500,000 every year on maintenance – and that's a real help in these recessionary times."

Yet even that figure looks tiny compared with the £750 million that walking generates for the Welsh tourist economy. That kind of sustainable development is driving major investment in the Welsh Coastal Path, which is set to fully open in 2012, eight years ahead of its English counterpart. Ramblers volunteers are heavily involved in opening up sections in Ceredigion, the Llyn Peninsula and Cardiff Bay, as well as working with the Welsh Assembly Government on marketing the new path.

"A usable path network isn't just about leisure," says Adrian. "There are health, economic and community benefits, too. Getting people out of their cars makes for safer neighbourhoods, and reduces carbon emissions. We work to make all that possible, and the biggest challenge facing us now is to ensure impending council budget cuts don't consign many footpaths to the scrapheap through neglect." ■

EYEWITNESS Creating the Thames Path

"The idea of a long walk along the Thames from Putney to Lechlade, in Gloucestershire, goes back to the 1930s. So when we achieved the wonderful National Parks Act in 1949 that allowed the creation of long-distance paths, it's not surprising that this Thames walk was virtually top of the list. But trying to link up the towpath without using long-gone river ferries proved too problematic, and it was consigned to a dusty shelf.

When I first got involved around 1970, it was obvious that officialdom would do nothing to solve the Thames problem. So, I organised a Ramblers survey of the Thames route using footpaths right to the river's source, and created a guidebook which, to everyone's amazement, proved

a bestseller. We addressed conferences and lobbied authorities but I've no doubt the popularity of our little guide was the main factor in persuading the Countryside Commission to adopt our concept.

The Thames Path National Trail was formally opened in 1996 and is seen so much as a Ramblers' creation that we are still the authors of the official guide, updating it every year. It's a good feeling knowing this walk has become a permanent part of our national heritage, and that you helped it into existence. Someone once dismissed the Thames Path as 'an impossible dream' – it's good to know you can make them come true."



David Sharp (above right) discussing the proposed Thames Path National Trail with Environment Minister David Trippier MP (left) in 1990

1958

The Ramblers persuades Ordnance Survey to show rights of way on its local maps for walkers

1965

The Pennine Way becomes Britain's first national trail



1968

The Countryside Act is passed requiring all local councils to signpost their rights of way



1971

A local Ramblers campaign defeats a reservoir plan to flood Farndale in North Yorkshire. (See page 8)

1973

David Sharp (see above) proposes the Thames Path National Trail

1974

Welsh Council is established – later to become Ramblers Cymru ▶

