

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF MAP ADDICT

# THE WILD ROVER

MIKE PARKER

A BLISTERING JOURNEY ALONG BRITAIN'S FOOTPATHS





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 HarperCollins e-books



*To my parents:*  
*Jane, David, Anne*

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## THE PATH

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*Many feet make one path.  
I like to walk on a foot path.  
I walk over the grass  
and turn to see if I have made a path.  
Two feet once only  
is not enough.  
I return to the foot path  
to fill one of the bunch.  
I add my feet.  
I look back.  
What a path we made.*

Ivor Cutler





# Chapter 1

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## (NOT IN) MY BACK YARD



*The primrose path gives way to the garlic path on Gower*

Of all the things you least want to come face-to-face with on an early morning dog walk, your own hypocrisy comes quite high on the list.

It was the wooden fingerpost that caused the first twinge. Bright and shiny, brand new and leaking fresh pine sap, the arrow and the motif of the little walking man picked out in gleaming yellow paint. A Public Footpath, it screamed. But I knew that already: I'd been walking this path, across the rushing river and through the fields, for years. Along the way a tributary stream funnels down a tiny valley, crossing the path at a ford overhung by my favourite oak. Moss-covered rocks huddle around the ford, each one a warm seat on which to rest and take the day's sunshine or rain. In eight years of walking the path and pondering life at the ford, I'd only ever been disturbed once at my special place by a fellow walker. And now everyone was going to be pointed towards it.

Over the next few days, I walked the other paths that surround the village, each one seemingly tailor-made for any subtle difference of mood, season or weather. If I need a good stretch after too many hours slumped in front of a screen, I'll take the hill track, a steep climb up an old holloway, past thorn trees twisted into animal shapes – the guardians of the village, according to some of the older residents – and up to a lofty viewpoint that never fails to give back some perspective to a foggy brain. In the autumn, I'll take the wooded path that forks off the back lane for its rusting colours and musky smells. If it's a bright morning, I'll take the short-sharp-shock path up through the forestry and on to a circular hilltop track that gets blasted by early sunshine. On a summer's afternoon, I'll ramble through the riverside fields, chucking sticks into the water for the dog, and then we'll both take a dip in one of the deep pools that sparkle green in the late day's sun. But the path over the little bridge and to

the magical ford is the one I'll do on any day, at any time, in any weather, for it combines exactly the right amount of wood and water, shelter and open skies, grass and rock.

The new signs had materialised on every single track. Out of nowhere, little yellow men had appeared all over the village, pointing eagerly down driveways and farm tracks. Brand new zinc gates, their Travis Perkins price tag still glued on, had been rammed in too, replacing those held together only by twine, rust and local know-how. An ancient network of paths, some trodden for centuries and known to generations in intimate detail, had been suddenly thrown open to the world. I was bloody furious, and felt as if a load of complete strangers had stomped into my kitchen, and were sniggering at my smalls drying over the fire. It was nothing short of violation.

Even as those first feelings of outrage bubbled up in a stew of bile, I was well aware that they were laced with the even more corrosive ingredient of raging hypocrisy. For decades, I had been sounding off about blocked footpaths and rights of way that appear on the map in crisp certainty but which, on the ground, are nowhere to be found. I'd cursed planners and councils for their lethargy in keeping paths marked and walkable. In 2001, when the foot-and-mouth crisis closed every path in the land, I'd written angry articles about the lightning speed with which the No Entry signs had gone up and compared it with the years that it took to remove them again. In every corner of the country, I'd hurled my hands up in horror at getting lost during the seemingly simple task of spotting a good path on the map and attempting to follow it. I'd ranted in print, on the radio, on TV, and to anyone who would listen, that councils really should take their responsibilities more seriously, not only to the walking public but as guardians of the hefty weight of history that had carved out such a cherished network of rights of way on our small island.

But that was There. Beyond, away, on someone else's patch, in places where I was a visitor and expected some modicum of consideration. And this was Here. Not for a moment did my spleen accommodate the obvious truth that my Here was nearly everyone else's There, and that they should perhaps be afforded the same hospitality that I so noisily demanded.

A few months on, the signs and the gates still look too new, too sharp, too much like prodnosed intruders. A couple of Welsh winters should batter them a little more comfortably into the landscape, but that's scant consolation, for they are already doing their damned job. Neighbours who live along the newly signposted tracks tell me that the footfall of passing cagoulewearers has increased noticeably. So it seems: I keep finding complete strangers on my paths, ambling uncertainly along and fretting visibly about the cows in the next field. On my better days, I manage a smile and a hello, even as I wish they'd vanish into the sweet air. On my rather less charitable days, I do my best to look like the surliest farmer of popular paranoia and glower at them from across the hedgerows. It doesn't work. Even my scariest facial expressions cannot compete with the signposted certainty that they are there by right: their ancient, inalienable right of way.

Is there anything that combines simple utility and quiet beauty better than a footpath? There it goes, just the lightest of touches across a field or through a wood, the sum total of countless feet over countless years. At one and the same time, it is the humblest of all our imprints on the landscape, yet one of the sturdiest too. And not just physically so, but culturally and emotionally too. We need our paths, like we need to breathe.

Britain's network of paths is unique in the world. Nearly all countries have their waymarked trails and designated tourist routes, but we have something so much better: a filigree network of rights of way that snakes through every landscape and connects every town and village. Our paths, bridleways, byways and green lanes are threads of common law in an increasingly privatised countryside, hidden grooves of peace and beauty through the chaos, short cuts into our history and identity. They are democracy at its most fundamental, open to all, where you don't have to pay, and they will take you as far as you could possibly wish to go. All you need are a pair of feet and the urge to use them.

In England and Wales, there are around 150,000 miles of off-road rights of way, together with over 6,000 square miles of 'right to roam' Access Land (about three-quarters of one of those famous international units of measurement, a Size of Wales). In Scotland, the situation is even better, for there is a natural presumption of access to all land, including tens of thousands of miles of path and track. This astounding resource is something of a shrinking violet, however. While roads and railways, airports and interchanges howl for our attention and our wealth, the paths slip by almost unnoticed.

Like most Brits, having a bit of a walk is in my DNA. It was what you did on a Sunday afternoon, wrapped up snug against the autumn winds or giving your skin a laundering in the first warm rays of spring. We weren't, thank God, one of those rambling families, mum and dad in matching cagoules, kids moaning unheard at a distance. In our house, even the dog's favourite walk was to the pub. But the paths, and the hills and woods, rivers and fields, were always there, and always within walking distance.

Once, my dad told me that we were all going on a walk, and that I could choose where. Of course, I rushed to the map to pick somewhere that looked interesting, and fastened immediately on the Clee Hills, midway between our home in Kidderminster and the Welsh border. 'Are you sure?' Dad said. 'It's a bit grim.' His job often took him out that way, and he'd come back with stories of dribbling inbreds and ancient feuds. Which is almost certainly exactly why I wanted to go there.

Stubbornly, I refused to change my mind, and, good to his word, Dad packed us all into the car, grumbled only slightly, and set off for Clee. I can't remember much of the walk, save for some filthy quarry tracks and a burnt-out 54-seater coach halfway up a hillside, the grass scorched and still smelling of petrol. As we stood, rather nervously, looking at it, someone pointed out the black sky heading our way. About thirty seconds later, a biblical deluge of hail, with balls of ice big enough to bruise, exploded over us. I wasn't asked to choose a walk again.

Mind you, Dad had some pretty leftfield ideas of his own as to what constituted a good walk. When the West Midland Safari Park opened, we were living on a new estate only a few hundred yards away. There was great excitement in the area at the opening of something so thrilling on our doorstep; in school, competition was fierce as to who'd yet been. Those that had would swan in, flamboyantly showing off their souvenir pencil case emblazoned with a lion. The rest of us would crowd round the lucky beggar, and pump them for titbits about the animals, the amusements, the food and whether their car aerial had been snapped off by a baboon. I couldn't wait to go, and kept begging my parents to take us there. The answer was always no, qualified with things like 'just look at the queues' or 'we'll wait until the crowds

have died down', rather than the more unpalatable truth that it was because money would have to be spent.

We must have all nagged pretty thoroughly, because Dad one day announced that we were finally going to the Safari Park. I very nearly combusted with excitement. At last, I was going to be able to hold my head up high at school, and join in the exclusive conversations about whether we preferred giraffes or tigers. Off we walked down the road towards the entrance, before suddenly turning off too soon and heading instead up to the perimeter fence. We then spent hours, largely in the rain, being frogmarched around the park's outer limit, peering through the fence at occasional intervals and trying to work out if that distant blur was a cheetah or a leopard. Or perhaps an Austin Allegro.

Only gradually did the realisation dawn that some paths were allowed, and some weren't. As a child, I roamed as free as I dared, by bike and on foot, out into the woods and fields around the town, along canal and river tow-paths, country lanes and muddy bridleways, with no thought as to whether it was officially sanctioned or not. Occasionally, I'd get shouted at by someone, but that happened most days anyway, so I thought nothing of it. Thanks to my growing collection of Ordnance Survey (OS) Landranger maps, I was soon aware of what the little lines of red dots and dashes meant, that these were official rights of way, as intrinsic a part of the Queen's Highway as any trunk road or motorway. Learning that was fascinating, and tracing their route across the map and on the ground was a joy, but it necessitated a loss of innocence that would never return.

These rights of way have only been marked on OS maps for the last fifty years (and only in their entirety for the last twenty-five or so), but today, they are unquestionably the main reason that anyone still buys paper versions of the Landrangers (1:50 000) and Explorers (1:25 000). The orange-covered Explorer maps, in particular, have become the walker's best friend, as they are at the smallest possible scale where field boundaries can be shown, an essential help on the many occasions when the dotted line on the map refuses to reveal itself on the ground.

Where better to start an inventory of the state of our rights of way than on your home patch? I sat by the fire one winter's night and gazed at the local Explorer map, mentally totting up the little green dashed lines that wriggled and wormed their way across it, picturing the routes and their views that I knew as I followed the map. There were so many – but just as many again that I didn't know. Whole footpaths and bridleways that I'd never once tried, of which I had no visual image or memory. As the fire crackled and spat, I resolved to draw a circle on the map, centred on my house, and to walk every single right of way – or at least, attempt to walk every one – within it. I pictured myself sallying forth from the doorstep like an ocean-going liner down the slip-way, plunging with a happy splash into the fields, forests and hills that surround me. I would conduct a thorough audit of my own back yard.

I started by drawing a five-mile circle around where I live, and swiftly realised that it presented a little too much of a challenge, one that looked as if it would take many months to complete. I pulled the circle in a little, taking a three-mile radius instead. Three miles sound nothing. It is nothing: I habitually walk four-and-a-bit miles into town, and it's a doddle, taking only a shave over an hour if I go at a decent lick. But looking at the six-mile-wide circle on the map was really quite disorienting. Within it, there were whole valleys, farms

and woods that I'd never been near, whose names I'd never even consciously digested. I had no idea who lived there, what their lives were like, who they were related to or were friends with and – most pressingly – whether they'd welcome a map-wielding rambler or set their dogs on me.

Every day for the first week of my audit, I set off on foot in a different direction, and found footpaths and bridleways that I'd never seen before. I still can't quite believe it, for I've been in this house for nearly a decade, and have been out walking almost every single day (the lot of the dog owner: so bloody what if it's lashing with rain). Yet, here were old holloways and green lanes, paths bumping down through woods and tell-tale darker lines of grass winding their way across fields that I'd never clapped eyes on before. It was nothing short of thrilling.

Then the snows came, and stayed. This perked up the experience even more, for I was clearly able to see from the footprints just how many other creatures, human and otherwise, were sharing the paths. All kinds of birds, rabbits galore, a few hares, dogs, foxes, cats and some that were intriguingly difficult to pin down. Ever since I've lived here, there have been occasional rumoured sightings of big cats. A few years back, the mutters swelled to a climax one spring, and whispered second- and third-hand sightings were a regular topic of almost every conversation. One day during that time, a friend and I were walking in the forest when a black shape shot across the path, paused and then vanished into the undergrowth some hundred yards ahead. We both inhaled sharply and squealed, 'What was *that*?' It hadn't much looked like a puma or panther to me, rather a wild boar, and I said so. 'Oh thank God,' my friend said. 'That's exactly what I thought, but I thought it sounded mad to say so.' Scrutinising the snowy paw- and hoof-prints, I've not been able to make any out that are distinctly porcine, but there were plenty that looked thrillingly mysterious.

This being rural Wales, the cloven footprints of sheep were to be seen everywhere. Sheep paths are always a useful way of traversing rough ground, for the animals follow each other with such dependability that a groove is soon worn into a hillside or through a wood, enough to take a careful walker. In the snow, the phenomenon was even more pronounced. Little indented paths, eight or nine inches wide, were scoured deep into the white stuff, as regular and as ordered as if they'd been carved out by tyres. In fact, at first I mistook them for tyre-tracks, the remnant of some mysterious single-wheeled farm vehicle that had been paraded drunkenly through every field. I might have lived the *Escape to the Country* dream for a decade, but that's how much of a thick townie I still am. Only after a few days of walking through countless sheep fields, and noticing many such tracks and how they were made up of hundreds of cloven-hoof indentations, did the truth dawn. Presumably, one started walking in a particular direction (the Alpha Ewe, as we'll call her), and the others all fell in behind her, excitedly wondering where they were going. And still they follow.

As I pounded the paths and hills around, the mystery of the new signs and gates only deepened. They were everywhere, on seemingly every right of way, even those that are barely ever walked. And on those that *can't* be walked: gates – even bridges – to nowhere. The oddest example was a sparkling new pine footbridge, straight off the shelf, gracefully spanning a small river between a dirt-track lane on the one bank and a tight thicket of brambles and pines on the other. There is an old right of way here, which, as part of my audit, I attempted to walk from the other end. It's a soggy old holloway, but it soon vanished

altogether in the conifer plantations. On the late nineteenth-century large-scale OS maps, it was the main track along the valley, but no-one has walked or ridden it in decades, and no-one could now, however hard they tried. But they would have a lovely new bridge to not take them there.

There was a pretty clear hierarchy at work in the correlation between gates and signs as well. Evidently, the local Rights of Way officer had trotted around the local farms with a mixed bag of news. 'On the up side,' I could imagine him saying, spreading his fingers across an old oak table or stone wall, 'I'll refit every gate on every path on the farm – all free, all brand new, straight out the factory.' Farmers like free, but they would know that there's a catch. There always is. The down side was that they would also have to have new signs pointing out paths and bridleways that have been unsignposted – and largely unused – for generations. You get yourself shiny new fences and gates, but you also get an increase in the footfall of passing ramblers, eager to pound their newly recognised rights of way. Or not, as it seems. Although every path in the vicinity seemed to have new gates and fences, far from every one was now signed.

There was the inevitable rural hierarchy at work. The longer your family had been in the area, or the further up the local greasy pole you had shinned, the fewer signs were deemed necessary on your land. Any farm or estate owned by incomers or the recently arrived (and by recent, I mean at least second generation) was subject to the full range of signs. The older local families just got the free gates and fences. If you're wondering how I knew whether it was locals or incomers living in every remote property I passed, there is plenty of tell-tale evidence. You don't usually have to look further than the farm's nameplate sign at the top of the track. Incomers have some lavish wood affair, usually embellished with a few flowers or butterflies, and hand-carved by a nice boy called Oliver. Locals generally use a vehicle number plate.

That said, almost all of the paths across the old farms were eminently walkable, and, with the help of the map and asking for the odd bit of guidance, easy to follow. They just don't particularly want to advertise them, and I can understand that. No-one gave me any grief; quite the opposite. I had numerous illuminating, sometimes hilarious, conversations with gnarled old farmers and their pink-cheeked wives in some of the outlying valleys and up in the hills, and learned plenty of new angles on the history of the area and its fiercely self-sufficient inhabitants. Had all the paths been smooth and signposted, I could perhaps have steamed on through, imperious and impervious to the land and the people on it. As it was, and as it should be in remote rural areas like this one, I had to engage with them, and the walks were all the richer and more enjoyable for it.

In fact, outside of the forests, the only paths that were absolutely blocked were on the land of not of the old farming families, but of a particular breed of incomer. Most of us rat-race refugees in an area like this fall into one of two camps: vaguely hippyish or vaguely Ukippyish, sometimes a bizarre hybrid of both. The hippies want organic veg, chickens in the yard and Enid Blyton adventures. The Ukippies want to escape the brown and black faces of their home town and hole themselves into their compound. There are strange similarities between them, for the impetus driving both groups is often the same misplaced search for a fantasy version of their own childhoods, a prospect condemned to remain for ever out of reach. They differ hugely in their approach to paths, however: the hippies embrace

(sometimes, all too literally) anyone wandering across their land, the Ukippies retreat behind barbed wire and stern, monolingual English signs telling you to keep out. The fact that they have become the immigrants that they so despise at home is an irony that never seems to trouble them.

From my audit, the dubious accolade of biggest path-blockers of all went to the Forestry Commission, whose wholesale re-ordering of the local map has been little less than Stalinist in its scope and execution. Dozens of paths on the map failed to appear in reality and, often, there was no trace whatsoever of their former selves. Of course, the need for timber was desperate, especially when the Forestry Commission was created in the aftermath of the First World War. And areas like this one, with mile upon mile of thinly populated, marginal land of no great potential for crops or livestock, were obvious candidates for afforestation. As a major local industry, it swept in on the back of the slate quarries and mines just as they were juddering to the end of their working lives. Forestry was much-needed work, and real work at that too: sweaty, bloody, outdoor and bursting with the kind of manly camaraderie that makes my generation, most of whom click a mouse for a living, go a bit weak at the knees.

In the village where I live, the Forestry Commission took over an old prisoner-of-war camp and filled it with workers, their families, a kids' playground, a village hall and community centre, a snooker club, a sports field, a library and the inevitable tin tabernacle. Events were plentiful and enthusiastic. Whist drives, am dram, jumble sales, WI meetings, eisteddfodau, parties and concerts whirled by in a cloud of gossip and giggles. In the winter, the Christmas concert was a must for all, but the big annual event was the summer gala, where folk donned fancy dress (dragging up and blacking up were especially popular) and schoolgirls were crowned as Forest Queens and paraded around on the back of logging trucks. Newspaper reports of the day make it sound like something straight out of 'Hansel and Gretel'. The lorries were decorated with 'evergreens and flowers of the forest', while the young Queen herself was clad in a white satin gown and a 'fur-collared mantle of dark green – symbolic of the forests'.

The first Forest Queen was crowned in 1954, the year that the Forestry Commission took over the camp and created the village-within-a-village. Queen Blodwen was her name, a 15-year-old from a big local family. 'This is a happy village,' gushed the area's lady of the manor to the county newspaper, but she was largely right, and so it remains. The local vicar went even further, thanking the Forestry Commission for stemming the exodus of locals: 'It was true to say,' he went on, 'that the neighbourhood was one of the few in North Wales which was not seriously suffering from the modern rural malady of depopulation.' Other Welsh towns and villages watching their slate industries slowly die were going the same way, but until the Commission's money began to run out in the 1970s, our village blossomed.

Before its brief hiatus housing captured German officers, the camp had been built in the 1930s as an instructional centre for the unemployed of Birkenhead and Liverpool. They were bussed out of Merseyside and made to work for three months in the hills, blasting the new forestry roads through whatever got in their way: farms, walls, houses, woods and mile upon mile of ancient path. It goes on still today, albeit without the jobless Scousers.

For most local people, then, the Forestry Commission is seen as a benevolent force, for it gave work, self-respect, homes, high days and holidays. Arriving here long after the party



ended, however, has given me a far sourer view of the Commission and its effects locally, for the blanket destruction and alteration of the landscape – the power to play at tin gods – created some serious arrogance in its protagonists. It always does.

On my bookshelves are numerous old guides to Wales. Some, when talking about this area mention something that sounds quite dazzling, a cave called the Siambr Wmffre Goch (the Chamber of Red Humphrey). This had given its name to an obscure local stream, only a mile or so long, and it's by that name that it appears even today on the OS map. A Ward Lock guide from the 1970s records the *siambr* as 'a cave behind a waterfall which long served as a highwayman's hide' – Red Humphrey being that highwayman. *The Shell Guide to Wales*, from 1969, is a little more effusive, calling it 'an extraordinary place', and going into some more detail: after passing through a cluster of ash trees, you come to 'apparently a simple, caved entrance into the hillside, but on passing through the arch you find yourself under the open sky, with a pool and a fall of water and a further cave-like formation ahead of you'.

The *siambr* sounded magical, like something out of a fairy story, and I've searched for it on a number of occasions. The valley of the little stream named after it has since been heavily forested, and it is a difficult search, necessitating either numerous scrambles and slides down sheer banks, or an attempt to walk along the stream and hop from slippery rocks to fallen timber. And all to no avail. How on earth can you lose a cave and a waterfall in a small Welsh valley?

I was keen to feature Siambr Wmffre Goch in one of my TV programmes and, having exhausted enquiries around the village, I wrote a piece asking for help for the local freeshed delivered to all the nearby villages. Our most celebrated local naturalist got in touch to suggest we go and search for it together, as he too has always been intrigued by the *siambr*'s reputation. Whereas before, when I'd been searching alone, I'd wussed out at the really scary bits, with Jack it was different. The man is fearless. When I met him at the bottom of the little valley, he took one look at how ill equipped I was for a proper search, wandered over to a stout young hazel tree, lopped off a straightish branch with his knife, swiftly pruned it of all twigs and presented it to me as the ideal tool to hack our way through the thick undergrowth. From tree part to bespoke walking-cum-scything stick in about 45 seconds.

Over the next few hours, we hacked, slashed and hopped our way up every last inch of the stream. Branches and brambles snapped across me, slashing my arms like a teenage goth. As Jack (a man nearly 30 years my senior) nimbly galloped between rock and tree trunk, I crashed along in his wake like a hippo chasing a gazelle. We found nothing. I was prepared for the guidebooks to have exaggerated the elfin appeal of the cave and waterfall, but to have conjured it out of thin air seemed bizarre, impossible. Jack was as mystified as I was, and we finished our day with a handshake and a solemn promise to share any information that might yet bubble to the surface.

Months later, I was walking through the next village up the valley, when an elderly man waved at me. 'You're the fella wanting to know about that highwayman's cave, aren't you?' he wheezed in an accent as thick as Welsh rain. I nodded eagerly. 'We blew it up,' he said, with an air of triumph in his voice. It transpired he had been part of a team planting the trees in that valley in the early 1970s. A supply of explosives, to blast out occasional rock faces, was part of the kit, and one day they'd egged each other on to blow poor old Wmffre Goch's

hideout into the skies. ‘Why did you do that?’ I asked him. He looked at me as if I were a simpleton. ‘Because we could,’ he said, and shuffled off down the street.

My footpath audit had been a revelation. Within three miles of my front door, I walked nearly 70 miles of rights of way, from gloomy squelches through dank forestry to hawthorn-trimmed holloways high over the hills. I found lakes, woods, views and neighbours that I never knew existed. And I don’t think that the experience was unique simply because I live deep in the countryside. Have a look at the map of your own back yard and, unless you live in the middle of a big city (or the more agro-industrial parts of East Anglia), there will be dozens of rights of way too within your own three-mile radius.

If my little local project had been such an eye-opener, just how much better could it get if it went further afield? The idea possessed me. I was desperate to go and see more, to open the circle across the whole of the country, and to discover the many stories of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, as told by their paths. I wanted to see the finest, the oddest and those most steeped in their own lore and custom. It was time to bring to life some legendary names off the map: Kinder Scout, the Pennine Way, the Elie Chainwalk, Framfield, the Lyke Wake Walk, the Thames Path, Offa’s Dyke, the Ridgeway, Winnats Pass, the Tóchar Phádraig. I took the maps out, and started dreaming.

By now, I felt quite ashamed of my early churlishness. Someone said to me that the British footpath network is worthy of being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, so rare and extraordinary is it. They’re right. And there was I wishing it, if not away, then certainly where it could be seen and not heard. Some kind of penance was called for.

The answer was obvious. I must sweat my misanthropy out by working on the repair of a public footpath, perhaps clad in sackcloth. I should go out and dig, hammer and saw with one of the many voluntary footpath-upkeep societies in Britain. Without them, the network would have disappeared under a siege of bramble and barbed wire years ago, and we would be left with the kind of situation found in most other countries, namely a few well-used, showpiece paths, glistening with signs, benches and nut-brown pensioners, but very little else. Online, I found a group in Kenilworth, which seemed like a suitably Middle England kind of destination, an Everyplace that might slyly reveal universal truths about us and the land secreted in its red soil. Furthermore, it was still part of my extended back yard, in that my grandparents had lived either side of the town in post-war Coventry and then Leamington in retirement, and my mum still lived half of the time in the spa town. So, even if I learned nothing, I could see some old haunts and my old mum.

As I left hers, we discussed what we imagined the members of the Kenilworth Footpath Preservation Group (KFPG) to be like. I predicted an all-male group, mostly bearded and mostly older than me. Mum disagreed on all scores, and she was right. Swinging my van into a large car park that Sunday morning, the first thing that struck me about the cheery-looking group in fluorescent yellow tabards was just how many of them were women. Segregation came swiftly, though: the ladies were sent off on their regular task of affixing yellow arrows to everything and a little light pruning, while the men and I gruffly headed into the spring sunshine to dig out a couple of stiles and replace them with gates.

The KFPG was set up in 1974 by one man, and he runs it still today. Meeting him, you’d think he was a fit 65-year-old, but in fact, he’s passed 80. His passion was undimmed,

although the increasing amount of red tape and regulation from the council was doing its best to quash it for him. His group now look after around a hundred miles of Warwickshire paths and it has provoked a huge upsurge in their usage. He was a quiet evangelist – the best kind for the rights of way network, channelling his drive into something so positive and constructive.

Fun, too. I had a brilliant morning with them, digging away into the cold earth and sharing jokes at each other's expense. Many of the most ribald comments between the men were about each other's politics, for it was evident that the group was a very Kenilworth hybrid of old-school Tories doing their bit for tradition, idealistic Liberals and dyed-in-the-wool socialists, inching forward the proletarian revolution by giving them access to the land. Love and concern for our rights of way seem to go right across the political spectrum. In the pub afterwards, I was shocked to learn that one of my fellow co-diggers, who'd left us by then, was a BNP activist. My shock obviously showed, for one of the younger members said to me 'Yeah, I know. If anyone had told me I'd be spending my Sunday mornings working alongside a BNP member, I'd have refused to believe it. But you know, the greater good . . . well, it's bigger than any of us, and that's what I have to keep reminding myself.' After the shock had subsided, I felt quietly awed by their easy-going tolerance, and that in itself is the best argument against the likes of the BNP.

The physical graft made for an exhilaratingly different kind of Sunday morning to my usual one, which generally consists of bacon, eggs, tea, fags, the papers and *The Archers*. I'd managed not to smoke for the previous couple of months: that, and the up-hill, down-dale exploration of the paths in my part of Wales, had helped me feel so much fitter. It was time to get out there and explore the country along its byways and bridleways, to sharpen my body and my mind on the nation's contours, as seen from close-up and at walking pace. As I raised my pint to the effusive path-clearers of Kenilworth, I knew exactly where I had to go next.



## Chapter 2

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# ON THE WARPATH (NORTH)



*An unlikely crucible for revolution: the Bottoms path, Flixton, Greater Manchester*

‘We’re just bolshie buggers. Especially when you see your boss swanning around on the moors, moors that you can’t even get on to, poncing around with his mates and a twelve-bore, shooting grouse.’ It’s 1931, and a determined Lancashire voice pierces through the excited chatter bouncing off the roof of Manchester’s Victoria station, as flat-capped hordes swarm forward on to the train that will take them out of the city, into the hills for an afternoon’s fresh air and freedom.

Actually, I lie. It’s 2010 in a suburban semi in Stockport, the offices of the Peak & Northern Footpaths Society (PNFS), Britain’s most venerable rights of way campaigning group, and the words are those of Clarke Rogerson, their chairman. He’s answering a simple question that has ricocheted around my head for weeks: just what is it with Lancastrians and their precious footpaths?

Almost every battle and campaign of any significance about access or rights of way has taken place in north-western England, with a few contemporaneous flare-ups across the Pennines in the smoke-and-eckythump bits of Yorkshire. The names of Kinder Scout, Winter Hill, Bleaklow and Winnats Pass roll around the mouth of a northern folk singer like a religious incantation. And in a way, that’s exactly what they have become: totemic names of battles hard fought and even harder won, their status growing with every re-telling. Each story has the full roster of Victorian melodrama heroes and villains: moustache-twirling landowners cackling with evil glee as they clout a couple of peasants round the ear and shoot a few more defenceless grouse, pitted against salt-of-the-earth workers who just want five minutes gasping fresh air on’t moors before they drop dead from a lifetime of eating and breathing nobbut soot.

Being bolshie buggers is hardwired into north-westerners, and they take enormous pride in the fact. They also take momentous pride in their landscape, the tussocky moors and rain-lashed hills that loom large as the backdrop to almost all of the region's towns and cities. Put the two together, and you get a swank that threatens to burst, it's that bloated with decades of padding. How did anyone ever think that they were going to keep these people off their hills? You might as well try and stop them shouting, or shitting.

To understand the place of the path in our national make-up, a visit to the north-west is essential. It is not just a casual visit, however, some light Sunday afternoon stroll, topped off with a cup of tea you could trot a mouse across. To go to the northwest seeking answers to the many questions about our relationship with paths and landscape is to embark upon nothing short of a pilgrimage, a search for some kind of holy grail that can only possibly be found here. This is where paths become no less than stairways to heaven, and I was genuinely excited by the prospect of seeing the paths soaked in the blood and sweat of those who'd fought for the right to walk them.

The starting point of my north-west pilgrimage had to be the very right of way that's generally accepted as the birthplace of the modern footpath preservation movement. I'd like to report that, as would befit its historical stature, it's a glorious hilltop track clambering up to a panorama of eight counties, or, failing that, at least a stony path inching its way up through the mist alongside a peaty burn. It's neither. In fact, it's a gentle trot across a golf course, sandwiched between two other golf courses, in one of those outer parts of Greater Manchester that would far prefer to call itself Cheshire. The story, as is the case with nearly all tales of footpath derring-do in this part of the world, is indeed a tale of class war, but not the brawny, horny-handed version of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* – it's much more *Keeping Up Appearances*.

For this is Flixton, in the true-blue borough of Trafford, a gin'n'Jag suburb of smart semis, Tudorbethan piles, tanning salons and the languid air of somewhere that doesn't have to fret itself overly much, except perhaps about a broken nail extension. Slap in the heart of this leafiest of suburbs are the 218 acres of Flixton Park, once common land threaded by numerous well-walked paths and tracks. Today it's a golf course and public park, its primroses and pansies mathematically spaced and much enjoyed by strolling families and smiling couples. Even the gangs of hoodies are polite and quiet. Yet between these two incarnations as public property, Flixton Park closed in on itself, shut itself away and inadvertently created the hydra-headed monster of the rights of way protest movement.

The Flixton Footpath Battle hissed and spat for three years, from 1824 to 1827. Ralph 'Vegetable' Wright provoked it, after making big money in agriculture and ploughing it into the creation of a small stately home, Flixton House, in the first few years of the nineteenth century. This flat, fertile plain southwest of Manchester, a world away from the mills and smokestacks, was already dotted with medieval mansions: Flixton House, and Wright himself were the Johnny-come-lately neighbours to Shaw Hall (dating from 1305), Davyhulme Hall (c.1150), Newcroft Hall (c.1270) and Urmston Hall (c.1350). Flush with his fine new house and bulging bank balance, Wright fully expected to be welcomed into their drawing rooms, but it was not to be. Old money, as ever, peered imperiously down on new money, and Wright grew increasingly bellicose as their doors continued to remain shut to him. Every Sunday, the big house families would sweep past him stuck in his pew at the back of Flixton

twelfth-century parish church, as they made their stately progress up to their ancient family boxes at the front. 'Vegetable' Wright sat and stewed in the cheap seats, dreaming up ways of getting his revenge.

The parish church, in whose graveyard Wright lies buried within the most massive mausoleum of all, had already acted as the cauldron for Flixton's petit bourgeois tensions. In 1804, a public appeal was launched to recast the church's four bells, but such was the urge amongst the local gentry to outdo – and, more importantly, to be seen to outdo – each other the appeal raised way more than was needed, and it was decided to have eight brand new bells cast for the church instead, at a cost of over £750 (around £60,000 at today's prices). 'Vegetable' Wright ostentatiously paid for the biggest bell of the lot, setting him back £101 12/6. No-one had thought to check that the fabric of the church could take such weighty munificence and, seven years later, the walls fell in. Less than a decade after they were rebuilt, the tower threatened to collapse. It was partially rebuilt, and then declared unsafe again in 1863. This time, it was obvious that the overly heavy bells were the culprit, and they were silenced until 1888, by which time a new and reinforced tower had been built from scratch.

After the first rebuilding of 1814, a row erupted about a stove that had been placed in the church's chancel for 'the accommodation of the congregation generally, and the scholars attending Sunday school in particular'. One prominent parishioner, a Mr Norris, objected, but nothing was done, so he persuaded a friend, Conyers Bale, to attempt to prove legal ownership of the chancel by dint of the fact that he was a parish lay rector. This was ignored, so Norris and Bale employed a gang to rip the stove out. The churchwardens sued at the Police Court for trespass and 'wilful spoil', and won. Norris and Bale appealed to the Sessions who overturned the decision, which was then subject to an appeal by the other side and finally settled, nine expensive years later, at the Lancaster Assizes, Bale having turned the charge of trespass back on to the churchwarden for installing the stove in the first place. The great Church Stove Battle, chased through every court and getting a lot of people in a fierce palaver about – quite literally – a lot of hot air, was a prescient pointer to the footpath struggle ahead, for it was evidently the Flixton way of doing things. Looking at the place today, I suspect that little has changed.

When Flixton House was finished in 1806, 'Vegetable' Wright acquired, in various parcels, some 15 or 16 acres to go with it. Flushed with the notion that he needed to hone it into a parkland befitting his newly acquired status of gentleman, he sealed his land piece by piece, despite the fact that it was crisscrossed by a network of old paths. Some were little missed, but one in particular, known as the Bottoms, was the only dry path to church for people of all classes on the regular occasions that the nearby River Mersey flooded. The Highways Act of 1815 ruled that a path could only be extinguished by the signed order of two magistrates, but this proved no problem for Wright, who was also on the bench. The odd dinner for fellow JP (church-stove battler and inveterate litigant Mr Norris being a regular) was held in Flixton House's gaudy dining room, before some fine port and a footpath closure order slipped in to follow. Oftentimes, he barely even bothered with that perfunctory process, shutting up the paths, even ploughing and planting them with oats, before any official decision had been made.

This was just the opportunity that Wright's many enemies needed, and when the

Manchester Society for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths was founded in 1826 in direct response to the Flixton case, virtually every local bigwig queued up to join. Although a similar organisation had been founded for comparable reasons two years earlier in York, the Manchester one continues to this day. Its considerable funds were used as the basis for the foundation of the Peak & Northern Footpaths Society in 1894, making it by far the oldest extant footpath campaigning group in the world.

The newly formed Society eagerly took on 'Vegetable' Wright. Court cases galore ensued, many of Wright's witnesses being bribed or plied with drink to get them to attend. He tried to raise the spectre that enemies of footpaths always fall back on, namely that the Bottoms path was a hotbed of immorality. To that end he persuaded the governor of Flixton workhouse, William Eccles, to give evidence, which proved perhaps less than helpful to his cause. 'I think use of the Bottoms encourages vice,' simpered Eccles in court. 'I only see disorderly ones going that way.' He paused, and continued: 'I once saw Mr Stephenson the clergyman going that way to church.'

After huge legal costs had been racked up on both sides, the ultimate result was defeat for Wright. A delighted party broke into his parkland and walked the paths that had been off-limits for two years. Archibald Prentice, proprietor of the *Manchester Gazette* and a committed member of the Society, arrived to witness the end of the celebrations. Although he wrote that he had been sad to miss the moment when the fences were smashed through and the paths walked once again, he was moved to say that 'I experienced a higher pleasure in observing the fresh marks of the saw, the little two-feet wide opening, and the newly made track through the tall grass, than such sights might be thought capable of giving.' So intoxicated was Prentice by the result that he published a 60-page victory pamphlet on the Flixton Footpath Battle, and gave it away with copies of the *Gazette*.

Wright had reaped a tailwind of trouble, but perhaps not quite all of it of his own making. The industrial towns of the north-west had ballooned in size in recent decades (Manchester's population had risen sevenfold to 150,000 in just 50 years), but the endless boom and expansion had hit its first set of buffers, and times were fearsomely tough. The Napoleonic Wars were fresh in every mind, especially those of the nervous authorities. Manchester was still simmering from the brutal attack of August 1819 that became known as the Peterloo Massacre. A massive crowd, estimated to be around 70,000 people, had gathered in St Peter's Field in the city centre to hear radical firebrand Henry Hunt speak in favour of sweeping political reform. A jittery set of city magistrates – Ralph Wright amongst them – unleashed the militia on the unarmed demonstrators, whom they scythed through mercilessly. Between ten and twenty people were slain, and hundreds injured. It was a defining moment in British history and, overlain with the lacy snobbery of Flixton society, made for a toxic cocktail.

Despite being blessed with an advanced sense of the melodramatic, even I couldn't whip up much emotion from the Flixton footpaths as they stand today, however historic their significance. In my head, I imagined a Soviet-style monument to the victory of common access, but instead there's a very modest little plaque, placed by the PNFS, half-way up a lamp-post, halfway along the Bottoms path. This is the track that caused the kerfuffle in the first place, although the building of the railway from Manchester to Warrington in the early 1870s necessitated its slight straightening. The railway, and the golf course on the other side have hemmed the path right in. Each side is policed by a massive fence, with the footpath



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