



# The Disabled Rambler

The Newsletter of the Disabled Ramblers

April 2006

A charitable company : Registered Charity No. 1103508

## Opening up the Countryside: Consulting and Campaigning

The Disabled Ramblers is one of a very small number of organizations of disabled people in the United Kingdom which concentrate on Countryside matters. We are also unusual in that our Management Committee and Membership consist almost entirely of disabled people! We share in common an overwhelming love of the Countryside, which we like to explore mainly using off-road paths, trails and tracks, enabling us to get away from crowds and escape from the omni-present motor car! It's not that we dislike motor cars, after all we rely on them to provide personal mobility to get to the places we want to explore. But once there, we park our cars and set off away from them, journeying into mainly quiet and beautiful places. Over the last 14 years, we have discovered over 1,200 miles of accessible paths, and we aim to add around a further 150 or so extra miles per year as we constantly seek out new routes.

Finding these routes is no small achievement. This is because the vast majority of country paths and trails remain inaccessible to us, due often to poor going, but most often due to inaccessible and impenetrable man-made barriers. The worst are stiles – totally blocking our way. Next come 'kissing' gates, which are usually far too small to allow buggies to pass. Despite these obstacles, accessible routes do exist and we find them using every contact we can make.



A 'typical' kissing gate - found on many public rights of way in the countryside

Over the years, the Disabled Ramblers have gradually become known to many countryside bodies, and we have formed particularly good relationships with bodies such as the Countryside Agency (soon to be reconstructed and merged with English Nature as 'Natural England'), the Forestry Commission, the Environment Agency, the National Trust, Sustrans and many others. We are represented on a national body set up to promote disabled access in the outdoors, known as 'Countryside for All'.

Recently we have become involved in consulting and campaigning activities. Members of the Management Committee have been involved in consultation with several National Park organizations, including North York Moors, the Peak District, Pembroke Coast, Brecon Beacons and others. We have also worked with the National Trust, Forest Enterprise organizations, and AONB's like the Chiltern's Conservancy Board. We have worked with local authorities like East Sussex, and cross cutting bodies like the England/Wales cross border project.

However, the Disabled Ramblers is a small organization, and we find things happening and problems arising often due to a total ignorance by land managers, statutory organizations and partnerships of the needs and aspirations of disabled people. Often, the thinking of such bodies is far too small and restrictive. In most cases they have no knowledge either of our existence, or even of the work in widening access for disabled people by informed bodies such as the Countryside Agency. We encounter many examples of bad and unsatisfactory practice: this then calls us to campaigning tasks, trying to put right things that are wrong! This involves making contacts, writing letters and often visiting sites where bad practice is the order of the day.

Fortunately once proper contact is made, understanding of needs can be gained and better practice usually follows. People who are charged with managing the Countryside in general or at specific sites, often stereotype disabled people, who are then seen as unadventurous, rather timid and probably content just

with short lengths of path at a site, which must be totally level smooth and free from any camber. In reality, of course, disabled people are as diverse in interest and ambition as able bodied people, and must not be underestimated.



Two impassable barriers on a forestry track - a locked gate AND a stile !

Two years ago we persuaded a land owner to open access to a lakeside meadow. This had previously been denied following advice from a Local Authority that such access would be hazardous due to the absence of a formal hard surfaced trail. Currently we are questioning a newly constructed cycle trail which is being set up littered with stiles: the justification given is that the trail is rather remote and unlikely to appeal to disabled visitors: in any case there are hills on the route, thus making it unsuitable for disabled visitors !

So, we are moving forward with the twin thrust of consulting and campaigning – luckily today’s political climate is quite encouraging to us and we can reasonably hope for progress now and in the future!

Mike Bruton

NOTE: Dear readers, do please tell us of your local scene – good practice? Or bad practice? We want to know!

---

### **Letter from Mike Bruton, Chairman of the Disabled Ramblers**

Dear Friends,

I don’t know how you, our readers, are feeling as we come to the end of a particularly cold and long drawn out winter. I know I have a yearning to get out and about again without feeling freezing cold. A few weeks ago I ventured out on a visit to Windsor Great Park to view a new disabled friendly trail just being completed. Despite

layers of heavy coat, heavy gloves and a blanket across my knees I became aware of the piercing cold (0 degrees Celsius) all too quickly, and after an hour outside I was glad to get in to the conveniently placed café for a warming drink and refreshments. O summer, do come on – we need you!

Our summer rambles programme for 2006 is now finalised and issued to members with the renewal letters. Members will see in this pack of information our new buggy hire service. This venture has been made possible through sponsorship by Beamer Ltd, a 50% grant from the Countryside Agency and very generous donations from many members and friends. We thank you all most sincerely! Supply of loan buggies is restricted and sadly members may be disappointed in some cases, depending upon demand. Robin Helby has written an article for this Newsletter issue about the new mobility support unit which is now fully operational and which provides the way to carry the buggies to events, while also offering a travelling ‘loo’ service. If you want to book a buggy, it is best to apply early. You will note we are asking for a donation from users each time a buggy is borrowed. £10 is suggested, but in case of genuine difficulty we are asking the borrower to give an amount that can be afforded!

In terms of our events programme, members will notice our involvement in two special celebration days: the first on May 20<sup>th</sup> (moved back from May 13<sup>th</sup>) on the North York Moors, when the project to cater specially for disabled visitors is due to come to a formal end, and the second on July 13<sup>th</sup> when we hope to celebrate the opening of an improved bridge making possible a circuit of Upper Derwent and Howden reservoirs in the Peak District. I hope to see you on a ramble or two this coming summer.

Signed

Mike Bruton  
Chairman,

Web-site: [www.disabledramblers.co.uk](http://www.disabledramblers.co.uk)

Please email to: [mike@thebrute.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:mike@thebrute.freeserve.co.uk), or write to: The Disabled Ramblers, 14 Belmont Park Road,

Maidenhead, Berks SL6 6HT

You can also phone Mike Bruton on: 01628 621414

---



## Alpine Adventure - Part 2

We set off from Les Fontanettes at 7:30 in the morning and, to start with, the track was wide with a very good surface of compacted crushed stone. However, after about a kilometre, we met our first potential obstacle - a fast flowing stream with a footbridge far too narrow to take my Tramper. Fortunately, there had been no significant rain for months, and the water level from glacier meltwater was relatively low - allowing us safe passage !



Crossing the 'Torrent du Dard'

After a further kilometre, the track steepened considerably, with a gradient of 1:3 for about half a kilometre - but the surface remained firm, providing very good traction for the tyres. About an hour and a quarter after setting out, we arrived at the refuge at Les Barmettes where, by prior arrangement, I was able to 'top up' my batteries while we stopped for a coffee and a bite to eat. The proprietors were most helpful, making us feel 'at home', and taking a great interest in the capabilities of the Tramper.



The track leading up from the refuge at Les Barmettes

With the batteries now in a healthier state than when we arrived at the refuge, we said our goodbyes and continued on our uphill journey. From Les Barmettes, the track narrowed between two stone walls, with the surface being made up of large stones - providing a very uneven surface.

As we slowly gained altitude, the track became narrower and more uneven - and with the sun now high in the sky, we stopped regularly wherever we could find a spot of shade. This also gave us the opportunity to chat with the many walkers who were making faster uphill progress than we were.



An umbrella provides some welcome relief from the sun

After a while, there came a time when it was necessary to assess our progress, and to consider the odds of safely reaching our overnight destination at the refuge in the Col de la Vanoise. Although we were over half way there, there were a number of factors that had to be taken into account. With bright sunshine and clear blue skies, everything seemed to be in our favour, but there were signs that were starting to cause concern.

Firstly, with the high current drain on my batteries, there would only just be enough charge to enable us to reach our overnight destination - with very little in reserve to cope with any unforeseen circumstances. Also, there would be no power available for re-charging between 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 a.m. because the electricity at this particular refuge was produced from solar power. To complicate things still further, the weather forecast for the following day was very uncertain !

The condition of the track was steadily deteriorating as we gained altitude and, although the Tramper is extremely robust, there was an increased possibility of mechanical breakage - with lessening options for repair or recovery as we continued on upwards .

My French friends went ahead to check the condition of the track beyond the Lac des Vaches, and soon reported back that 'it did not improve'. Interestingly, they were also able to see that one potential obstacle no longer existed as the lake had completely dried up and there would be no need to use the narrow stone-built path that crosses this normally shallow lake.



The dried up lake bed of the 'Lac des Vaches'

Mountains are potentially dangerous areas to venture into, and are unforgiving to those who do not take heed of their ever changing environment. Taking all of these factors into account, it was decided that it would be prudent to turn around and head back to Pralognan.



The return journey - on a 'good' section of track

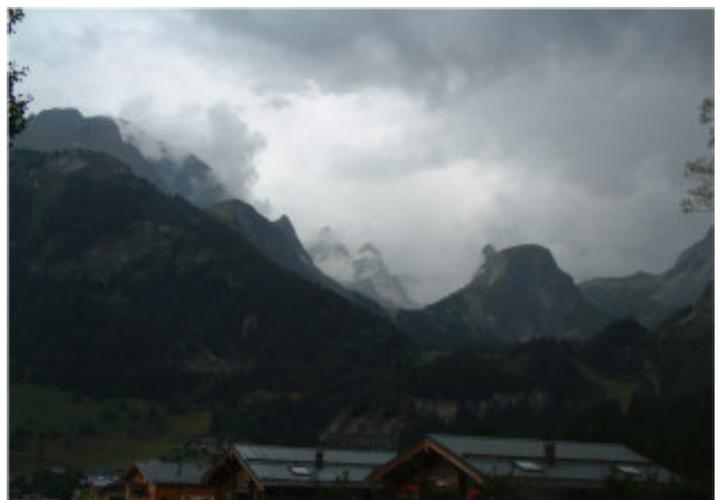
Obviously, after months of planning, this was a great disappointment - but it turned out to be absolutely the right decision !

The return journey was taken very steadily because we were now being assisted by gravity ! Total concentration was required to keep control - particularly on the sections of track that combined a steep gradient with a steep cross-slope and where the surface was made up of loose rock !

We arrived safely back at the refuge at Les Barmettes by mid-afternoon, and stopped for a beer and a chat with the proprietors. They were very interested to hear how we had got on because they had never seen a Trampler before, and were fascinated to hear about how far we had managed to get. They also confirmed that, despite the bright sunshine, there was a change for the worse in the weather forecast.

We finally arrived back at our B&B in Pralognon at 5 o'clock in the afternoon - interestingly, with 2% more power in the batteries than we had at the point where we turned around at an altitude of 7,500 feet ! After a welcome shower and change of clothes, I was able to check on the progress of the replacement of the rear shock absorbers on my car. The report from the garage was far from straightforward - but it was now time to forget about such things, and take my wife and our friends out for a meal in a local restaurant as a way of thanking them all for their unstinting help in making this 'Alpine Adventure' a possibility for me.

We had a great night out, and in the morning we woke to rain and heavy cloud. Over breakfast, other guests told us that the rain was falling as snow at the refuge in the Col de la Vanoise. The decision to turn back had definitely been the right one !!



The view of the Alps from Pralognan on the day after our 'Alpine Adventure'

After a late breakfast the following day, we decided to make the most of our stay in the Alps and took a lower level route into the adjoining Prioux Valley. We phoned ahead to the refuge at Prioux to make sure that we could 'top up' our batteries on our way to another refuge further up the valley.

We set off in steady rain and overcast skies, but the scenery made up for any discomfort that we may have felt. We arrived at the refuge at Prioux at lunchtime, but were surprised to find that we could not 'top up' my batteries because the owners had decided not to put the generators on - even though we had already checked in advance !



The refuge at Prioux

However, this being France, we had no option but to accept the situation and we settled in the dining room for a candle-lit lunch. The food and the company were excellent, and we were soon 'the best of friends' with the proprietors - who also made the famous 'Beaufort' cheese - a local speciality.

Without the necessary 'top up' of the batteries, there was no prospect of us continuing any further up the valley - so we slowly made our way back to Pralognan in improving weather conditions.

The following day, the AA European breakdown service arranged transport for all of us - together with my trailer and Tramper - to the garage where my car had been taken for repairs. Finally reunited with our own transport, we made our way down the winding alpine roads to join the autoroutes for the journey back to our friends' home near St. Etienne.

Alan Edwards

## Accessible Information

The Sensory Trust has received an award from the Big Lottery for a project that will help improve access to the natural environment and open spaces. The new project is about improving access through the development and dissemination of accessible information.

One of the biggest barriers preventing use of public open spaces is a lack of appropriate and accessible information. Lack of accessible information is a problem for millions of people in this country and this grant means we can do something positive about it. Good information design is engaging, useful and accessible and we look forward to showing how this balance can best be achieved.

The three year project will focus on both on-site and pre-visit information. Accessible and relevant pre-visit information will allow people who were previously excluded from decision making to plan visits to open spaces. Accessible on-site information will allow a wider range of visitors to experience open spaces more independently.

The project will have three strands:

1. Provide guidelines, fact sheets and tools to demonstrate the value of accessible information and give practical instructions on how to produce it. This will give service providers (e.g. greenspace managers) better understanding of the importance of accessible information.
2. Involve disabled people in focus groups to identify information needs and to evaluate pilot materials. This will give people the chance to influence design and planning decisions, and therefore the guidelines and products will be based on the real, not assumed, needs of disabled people.
3. Develop new materials such as tactile maps and models to provide examples of good practice for designers and managers to follow. As a result, carers, support workers, families and friends of disabled people will be better able to plan outings, activities and learning support.

The work will involve collaboration with the Eden Project, Westonbirt Arboretum and Sheffield City Council. For more information please visit our website at [www.sensorytrust.org.uk](http://www.sensorytrust.org.uk)

## THE MOBILE SUPPORT UNIT

Much as rambling has been enjoyable to me, meeting other disabled ramblers has meant much more. Though they may not have always appreciated it, their friendliness and support has enormously helped me to live with my disability, especially through the long winter months. I know I have also been very fortunate to have the means so far to be able to go rambling, so it has been a pleasure when I been able to lend my spare scooter to other members.

As a charity we have been very conscious that not all our members have either a suitable scooter or a vehicle to go rambling. And there are potential members who would like find out what rambling is like. The obvious answer was to have our own loan scooters. In 2003 pressure was added due to the generous sponsorship for Sue Watson and myself after completing 100 miles along the South Downs Way.

Initially we had thought of starting with one scooter, but whatever we got, it would need to be moved. The only option was a trailer, but it would need to be enclosed to be left parked, when we had rambles over several days. We realised we should buy a trailer big enough for two scooters from the start. But when we started researching possible grants, we found that we wanted too little for the national lottery and similar funds, but did not qualify for smaller regional funds.

Mike Bruton, who does such a magnificent job co-ordinating our programme, was finding it difficult to find accessible toilets close to the start of rambles. This was especially so with the more remote and interesting locations. He even investigated hiring a portable toilet, only to find it could cost over £10 per flush!

Time for some lateral thinking. What if we had our own mobile loo? And a mobile loo that would also transport at least two scooters? It would mean we could have our rambles almost anywhere, no longer restricted to the popular, even overcrowded venues. We would just need a suitable carpark.

To our great gratitude, this concept found support from the Countryside Agency, who approved a 50% grant in early December 2004. And Beamer Ltd, who make the Trampler, came up with £2,000 of support, a large sum for a small company. Portapotti gave us a water-flushing toilet, plus a gift from gate makers Centrewire.

The grant was conditional on everything being completed by the end of March 2005 and with a two month delivery on the trailer, it started to look very tight. The trailer needed tie-downs in the floor, hand rails, drop-down support handles, raised base to the toilet, modesty curtain, loo roll holder - the list seemed endless.

Then the electric's had to be installed for two chargers for the two scooters. We were rescued by Beamer who got the fitting-out work finished in time.



Members of the Disabled Ramblers pose in front of the Support Unit on the day of its launch

We spent a lot of time and energy over the washing facilities. How could we fit in a basin at the right height for hand washing which would swing away for loading the scooters? Where would the waste go? Should we have cloth or paper towels? Where to put a soap dispenser? The answer was very simple - use baby wipes!

The last question was what to call this new facility. The ruder suggestions were quickly discarded! We did not want anything with toilet associations. After much thought, we decided on the Mobile Support Unit. It does exactly what it says.

The formal launch was at the Wilmington Long Man Ramble, on the Sussex coast. John Ridgewell from the Countryside Agency made the formal presentation. Modesty forbids us from naming the first user! But the unit was in much demand as the start of the ramble was in a remote location, well away from any facilities.

Very much part of the Unit are the two loan scooters. These are both Trampers, equipped with stick/crutch holders and geared for a maximum speed of 4mph. One Trampler has both right and left hand controls. At Wilmington it gave us great pleasure to see then ridden by founder members, Don and Doreen Smith, who had driven down from the Peak District.

We were very cautious about the first year, wanting to ease ourselves in so we could learn about any problems. Happily there was strong demand for both scooters whenever the Unit supported a ramble. We decided to give preference to new members, so they could experience the pleasures of rambling. And they did! Again and again.

If there is a downside, it is that it has cost more than expected to operate. There is insurance, for the trailer and both scooters. And towing a large trailer takes lots more fuel. It also takes a lot longer, not least because trailers are limited to 60mph, or 50mph on single carriageways. And we need a member with a suitable vehicle with a towbar for each ramble.



Inside view of the very spacious  
Mobile Support Unit

Great care also has to be taken finding B&Bs with suitable access and a large enough car park to turn round in. Twin axled trailer are very stable to tow but real pigs to manoeuvre manually, assuming you are strong enough to pull a ton around.

At the moment I have done most of the towing, but hopefully this can be shared in time. Driving could be described as stately, as least my driving is. The trailer is no wider than my mirrors so I only start worrying when the lanes get narrow and I meet traffic. Not that I will be reversing! At the moment it is mostly parked at the end of my garden, where I have created a space, not that this has met with complete approval at home! It has to be parked nose first, so I have made up a bracket with a towball to fit onto my Trumper. It copes fine but I recognise this is beyond anything the maker intended! But after 6 years it might be just out of warranty.

So on to 2006! Your management committee has decided that we should support all this year's rambles. So there should be two scooters available to loan on every ramble. The new ramble programme will include all that is needed to book a scooter and we hope demand will be strong. And the mobile Support Unit will hope to bring comfort to all that use it!

Robin Helby

## Alternative Summer Activities for Disabled People

In the January 2006 newsletter, Jim Robinson wrote a most interesting article about 'Winter Activities for Disabled People'. For the July 2006 newsletter, Jim has kindly written another article about his experiences of canoeing in the Lake District, para-gliding in France and rafting down the Grand Canyon in America.

---

### Invitation to ALL members to write an article for future issues of the newsletter.

As members of the Disabled Ramblers, most of us use a wide range of vehicles to get around - these range from manual wheelchairs to all-terrain 'buggies', with almost every conceivable type of powered scooter in between. Whatever type of vehicle we use, they enable us to get out and about - sometimes just into the towns and villages where we live - but, for most of us, also into the wider countryside.

Some powered scooters are only suitable for use to get us around the pavements of our local shopping centre, while others can transport us to the summit of a mountain. Whatever type of vehicle we have, they are an essential part of our lives, and - for many of us - they have given us a totally new perspective on life.

Some members have commented that many recent newsletter articles feature the use of the Trumper all-terrain 'buggy', and that not all members can afford such a machine. Well, that may be true - but every member is free to submit an article for publication - whatever type of vehicle they use. However, articles do not have to be about where we are able to get to in our wheelchairs or powered scooters.

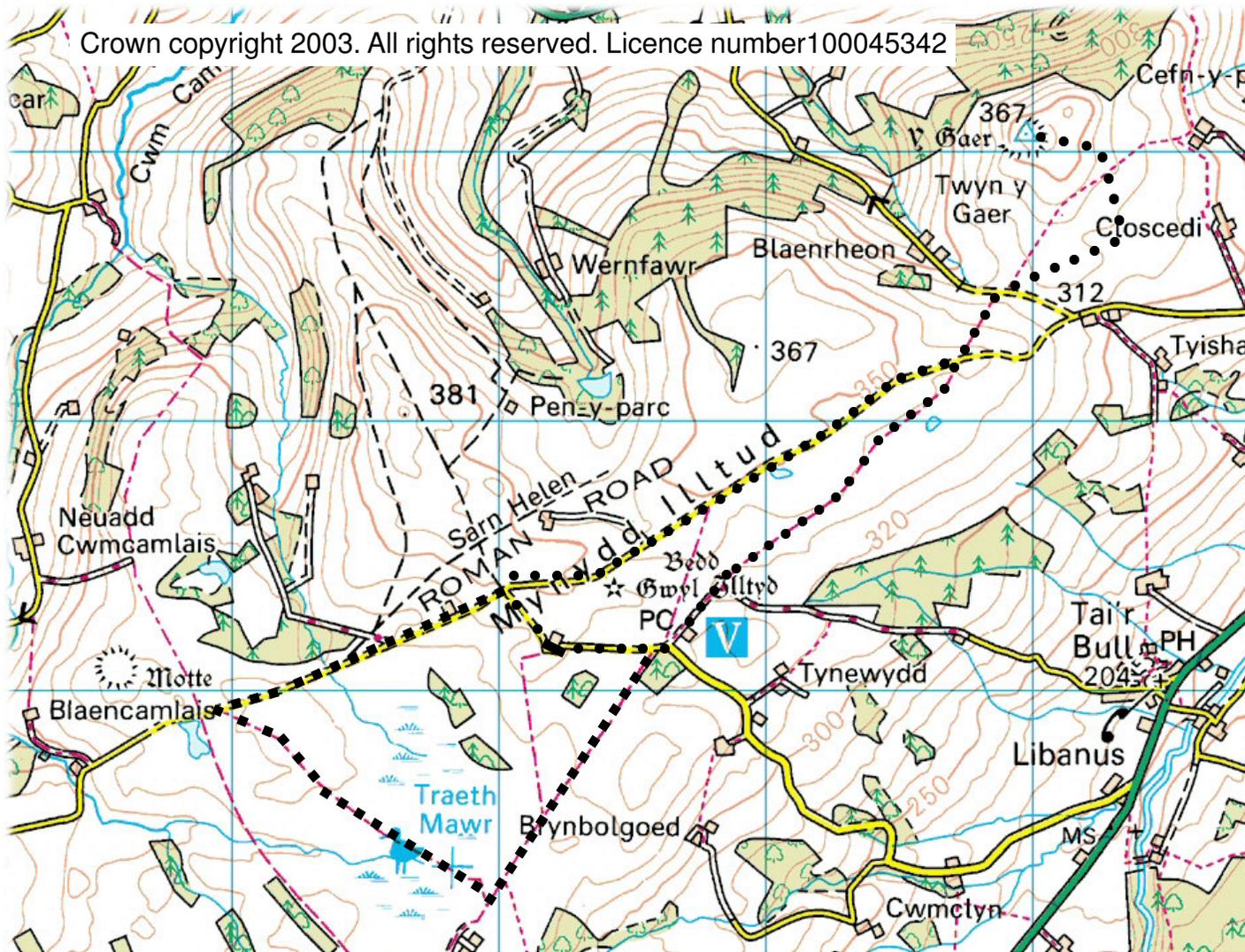
In the January 2006 newsletter, there were articles from members about 'disabled boating' and 'disabled skiing' - so, whatever your interest - or means of transport - please consider telling other members by writing an article. Remember, it is your newsletter. Without your contributions, it cannot be produced.

Please contact the Newsletter Editor directly if you wish to submit an article (preferably with supporting photographs) for a future issue of the newsletter.

email to [editor@disabledramblers.co.uk](mailto:editor@disabledramblers.co.uk)  
or telephone: 01886 880145

---

## Brecon Beacons Ramble Thursday 22nd June 2006



Our starting point for today's ramble is the Brecon Beacons National Park Visitor Centre at Libanus, where there is good parking, disabled toilet facilities and a cafe/restuarant. If you are travelling from the south on the A470 from Merthyr Tydfil, just as you are approaching the village of Libanus, look out for signs for the Visitor Centre. Turning sharp left onto a narrower road, the centre is just over a mile.

If travelling from the east or the west; from the western end of the Brecon bypass, take the A470 signposted Merthyr Tydfil and Cardiff. Just after you pass through the village of Libanus, look out for signs for the Visitor Centre. Turning right onto a narrower road, the centre is just over a mile.

We assemble at 10:30 for an introduction and briefing about the route of the ramble. We will be joined today by a National Park warden, and a recovery vehicle will be available to us if the need arises. The route forms a 'figure of eight', which will allow us to return to the Visitor Centre for lunch and to make use of the toilet facilities if needed.

From the Visitor centre, we head north-east across a common using a track which rises gently to meet a minor road. Crossing the road, we continue in the same direction, going downhill for a short distance before we head uphill again to reach the summit of Twyn y Gaer - an ancient hill fort. The views from here are spectacular and, on a clear day, you will see Pen y Fan, the Black Mountains in the east and The Black Mountain in the west. Retracing our steps back to the minor road, we follow the road south westwards for about a mile, before turning left along another minor road which will bring us back to the Visitor Centre for our lunch break. Those who do not want to bring their own packed lunch can buy a range of hot and cold meals (and drinks) that are freshly prepared at the centre. There is a large picnic area where we can relax over lunch and enjoy the fine views of the Brecon Beacons. After lunch, we head south west along a track that takes us to the Site of Special Scientific Interest at Traeth Mawr. Crossing this area, we reach the same minor road that we used earlier in the day, and turn north east to make our way back to the Visitor Centre. ●●●●●● Indicates the route taken before lunch (7.25 Km - 4.5 miles) ■■■■■■ Indicates the route taken after lunch (4.25 Km - 2.75 miles)