After its 80th anniversary, TGO’s Carey Davies wonders what would happen if the Kinder Scout Mass Trespass took place today.

On April 24 in 1932, around 400 determined, noisy and organised working class young people from inner city Manchester and Sheffield took part in an event which changed the face of Britain.

It was the famous 'mass trespass' of Kinder Scout. The story will be familiar to many readers of this magazine. Jim Perrin’s article in the May issue of TGO (‘Manchester Ramblers (and Sheffield ones too)’) contained an excellent description of what happened that day and in its aftermath – how, frustrated with the exclusion of ordinary people from the high and wild parts of the countryside, the trespassers ventured on to the forbidden heather-covered slopes of the Peak District’s highest hill and were confronted with stick-wielding gamekeepers; how their leaders were subsequently arrested; how a jury of two brigadier-generals, three colonels, two majors, three captains and two aldermen found the accused guilty of riotous assembly and sentenced them to between four and six months in prison; how, ironically, the severity of these sentences earned the trespassers widespread sympathy, and boosted support for their cause.

Their example became the focus of access campaigns in later years, and has been commemorated since as seminal moment in the struggle for the right to roam in this country.
attended the latest of these commemorations, this time to mark the eightieth anniversary of the trespass. Around 200 people gathered beneath a forgivingly benign Derbyshire sky outside the Moorland Centre in Edale to listen to a host of speakers talk about the trespass and its legacy.

It might be eight decades since the trespassers made their stand, but it's only been eight years since their key demand - the right to walk freely in upland areas - was realised with the roll-out of the CROW Act (passed in 2000 but not implemented in many areas until 2004.) As laws go, that's hardly even an infant.

And dark clouds may be gathering over the hills again. Outdoor campaigners fear the coalition government's planning laws imperil green spaces. As Wales unveils its new coastal path, the grand plan for coastal access in England is barely out of the blocks. National park authorities are selling off iconic parts of their property to save money on slashed budgets. The future of the public forest estate, which the government tried to sell off last year to a storm of protest, is still uncertain. Perhaps sensing the changed climate, landowners' bodies have weighed in, calling for the rights of way system to be changed in favour of propertied interests.

In this increasingly febrile atmosphere, the Kinder Trespass feels more contemporary than its age might suggest. This was a point made in a salutary speech by Kate Ashbrook, who pointed out that we live in a time where "finance comes before freedoms." Stuart Maconie reminded us the trespass was "about the right of working people to enjoy the countryside" and argued it should be taught in schools. Ramblers CEO Benedict Southworth, whose first few months in charge of the Ramblers has seen the charity take promising steps towards re-establishing its campaigning zeal, said "the spirit of bravery and ambition" displayed by the trespassers was the same spirit his organisation embodied.

This comment raised a few mild heckles, no doubt from people aware the Ramblers didn't actually support the trespassers at
the time. They were the 'official' access campaigners - the trespassers were irresponsible interlopers, taking things into their own hands and threatening to undo all their careful work. Of course, that was a long time ago. But it does raise an interesting question about what might happen if a similar thing occurred today.

The people who carried out the trespass came from the soot-choked inner cities during a time of economic depression – for them the moors were a place of refuge and escape. They were young, tough, working class, and many of them were unemployed. They were the sort of people who, in today's derogatory, insulting language, would probably be referred to as "chavs." Can you imagine what the reaction would be if several hundred hoodie-wearing young people took militant action of the same kind today?

It's not hard to imagine how the authorities would respond. Images of armour-clad riot police and baton charges have become familiar in protests of recent years. At least Benny Rothman and his comrades were arrested after their demonstration; it's doubtful whether the trespassers would even make it to Hayfield quarry today without being ‘kettled’ and pre-emptively bundled into the back of a police van. And given the Draconian sentences handed down in response to the inchoate outburst that was the London riots, it's not hard to imagine how the courts would deal with a deliberate, organised movement of young, radical people of the sort Benny Rothman led. He spent six months in jail – during last summer’s unrest in the capital, one person was imprisoned for that amount of time for stealing bottles of water worth £3.50 from Lidl.

Through the canonisation surrounding the Kinder Trespass, it’s easy to forget what a radical, provocative and, for many – including people on the pro-access side – unsettling thing it was. Even someone like David Milliband, a member of a government which showed contempt for civil liberties, can safely declare his support for it – despite the fact he (and his brother) would surely denounce it in seconds if it happened
But would groups like the Ramblers support it today? Or would they stress the need for ‘responsible’ forms of protest and patient lobbying again? What would you do? One thing's for sure: if those freedoms the trespassers helped to win do become threatened, without their energy, radicalism and determination, we won't stand a chance.

*TGO magazine has many other interesting articles. Carey sent SYNED the following message:*

“*TGO magazine has been the UK’s leading monthly hillwalking magazine for the past 30 years. Subscribe to TGO now and pick up a Vaude Triset 20 litre day pack free – call 01371 851867 and quote promo code GPJULY12.***

If you would like to respond to the article, why not contact us. We’ll put all your responses on the SYNED website.