

South Yorkshire and North East Derbyshire Area Ramblers AGM

2pm January 23, 2016, Methodist Hall, Tickhill, Doncaster, DN11 9HZ

Presidential address by Roly Smith

I want to start by saying what a great honour it is to be asked to be president of SYNED for what I understand is an unprecedented second time. Led by characters like Bert Ward and more recently Terry Howard and others, the South Yorkshire and North East Derbyshire area of the Ramblers has always been among the most active in the country. It was a leader in the long fight for access and the protection of public rights of way in our countryside.

One of the great sadnesses of the past year for me was the demise of the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers in September. Formed by Ward after a walk round Kinder in September 1900, it was claimed to be the first working class ramblers group in the country. At the end of that epic 20-mile ramble, Jack Jordan, one of the walkers, reflected: "...if our feet were on the heather, our hearts and hopes were with the stars."

Led by the imperious Ward, who almost single-handedly produced the marvellous *Clarion Handbooks* for half a century, the club was a pioneer in the fight for access to mountain and moorland, and the creation of our national parks. We should never forget their 115-year contribution, so I was pleased to hear that an annual walk is being planned to commemorate the Clarions.

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We live in a period of rapid social change, and the role of the Area Council is in need of redefinition. For the past five years, your Area Council has been asking Ramblers' national office to advise us on its role, and the Council's relationship with the many groups it serves.

But I understand Head Office's response has been less than helpful. It consisted of the suggestion of a number of measures which increased the interference of Area in the running of groups. This is not the way your Area Council sees its role.

The Council is concerned that National Office appears to be proposing measures to impose a much more inflexible, straitjacketed, approach. It appears to be telling us not only what to do, but how to do it.

We believe this is out of step with the thinking of the membership, who look upon the Ramblers as a bottom-up association of like-minded individuals, rather than a top-down autocracy.

A sub-committee headed by secretary David Gadd and former National Chair Cath MacKay was set up to formulate its view of the Area's role, and this will be put forward later to this meeting for approval. I hope members will feel able to support their common sense proposals.

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On the national front, undoubtedly the biggest news story of this winter has been the unprecedented flooding, especially in the north of England. The Don burst its banks just down the road at Sprotbrough only a couple of weeks ago, and much has been made of the need for greater flood protection. But I believe, as do a number of leading environmentalists, that the greater need now is for longer-term flood prevention.

In a time of obvious climate change, the management of land in the catchment areas upstream of the flooded towns and villages becomes vitally important. The creation of heavily Government-subsidised burned and drained grouse moors, such as those to the west of Sheffield, undoubtedly increases the risk of flooding further downstream.

But in 2014, as essential public services were being savagely cut back, the Government quietly raised the subsidies to moorland owners by a staggering 84 per cent.

The Guardian's George Monbiot has described the managers of our grouse moors as treating them as “giant chicken runs.” They drain the land, eradicate predators, and burn the heather to stimulate the young shoots on which the grouse feed, only to be later shot by an elite paying thousands of pounds a day for the privilege.

This is known in Euro-speak as keeping the land in “agricultural condition”, and in simple terms, it means that if the managers don’t keep the hills bare, they don’t get their money. It also means that “permanent ineligible features”, such as scrub, woodland, bogs, ponds and other features which harbour rare wildlife and hold back floodwater, have to be cleared.

To their credit, bodies such as Moors for the Future and the National Trust have realised the short-sighted folly of this policy, and are actively re-wilding and re-wetting moorlands such as those on Kinder Scout and Bleaklow.

But the Ramblers, which under leaders like Tom Stephenson, Chris Hall and Alan Mattingley would undoubtedly have stepped into this debate about our treasured uplands, has only been noticeable by its absence.

Maybe it’s time for the Ramblers, the largest walkers’ rights organisation in Britain, to make its voice heard on this matter of national importance, not only to walkers, but to everyone in this country?

Thank you.