

President's Address: 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, Stephen Morton and more recently Terry Howard,

Jack Burling 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 recently was the demise of the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers in September 2015. But I hope members will be pleased to learn that the spirit of the Clarions lives on with the publication of *Clarion Call*, a book of photographs of early Clarion rambles which also celebrates Sheffield and South Yorkshire's key role in the fight for access to the countryside. The book has been written by Dave Sissons, Terry Howard and myself, and will be launched at the Spirit of Kinder Day at Edale Village Hall on April 22. Among speakers at the event will be Vanessa Griffiths, the new Chief Executive of The Ramblers; Dame Helen Ghosh, Director General of the National Trust and Stephen Trotter, Director of the Wildlife Trusts, England.

We are very grateful to the branch for the grant from Ivy Cowen Legacy which funded the project. The backdrop to my talk today is a selection of some of the slides which will appear in the book...

For over a century, the city of Sheffield has played a leading role in the fight for access to the moorlands of its so- called “Golden Frame,” and eventually to the rest of the country. Influential figures in the movement have included John Ruskin, Edward Carpenter, John Derry, Ebenezer Elliot, ‘Carolus Paulus’ (Charles Paul) and of course the so- called King of the Clarion Ramblers, GHB “Bert” Ward.

It was the Victorian social reformer, artist and critic **John Ruskin** who first described Sheffield as a “dirty picture in a golden frame”, centred on its grim steel foundries and back-to-back slums. Like Rome, it is encircled by seven hills, with the majesty of the Peak District's eastern

moors on its very doorstep to the west.

Ruskin founded the St George's Museum for the working men of Sheffield, particularly the steel workers he much admired, in 1875. His aim was to take them away from the town's industrial grime, refreshing their minds with the delights of nature and art.

Edward Carpenter, the pioneering socialist and aesthete, started his lifelong association with Sheffield during his days as a lecturer in the University Extension movement. Following the death of his parents, Carpenter used his inheritance to buy a seven-acre smallholding at Millthorpe, in the Cordwell Valley west of Sheffield, moving to a house there in 1883.

Millthorpe became home for Carpenter, his many friends and lovers, and eventually a place of pilgrimage for the large number of admirers he attracted during the following four decades. It also became a symbol for the "simplification of life" that Carpenter propounded, which included naturism, working on the land, vegetarianism and the breaking down of class distinctions.

Rotherham-born **Ebenezer Elliott** was known as the Poet of the Poor and the Corn Law Rhymer for his leading role in the fight against the pernicious Corn Laws of the 19th century. There is a statue honouring him in Weston Park.

He also penned many epic topographic poems on South Yorkshire and the Peak, including *Footpaths*, in which he gave his opinion of the Enclosure Commissioners and how their actions had directly affected the lives of ordinary people:

Wolves with the hearts of devils! They steal our footpaths too! The poor man's walk they take away, Where now, unseen, the flowers are blowing, And all unheard, the stream is flowing: What worse could devils do?

John Derry, editor of the *Sheffield Daily Independent*, wrote *Across the Derbyshire Moors* in 1904 and it was later revised and updated several times by GHB Ward. It includes one of the best descriptions ever penned of the peat morass which then constituted the summit of Kinder Scout "... the most featureless, disconsolate, bog-quaking, ink-oozing moor you

ever saw...”

Three years later, “**Carolus Paulus**” (**Charles Paul**) published *Some Forgotten Facts in the History of Sheffield and District: Being an Account of the Attercliffe-Cum-Darnal Inclosure Act*, which outlined the effects of the Enclosure Movement on the parishes surrounding Sheffield:

It may be imagined that before these Acts were passed the freedom to roam over the moors would be well nigh unlimited, and that the same were used for various beneficial purposes by the inhabitants at large, without fear of trespass.

And in his *Old English Village*, published in 1912, he added:

May the time not be too far distant when the wide moorlands shall once more be appropriated for common use, that instead of ministering solely to the pleasures of the rich, they may become the treasure house of the poor and the barren but picturesque remnants as the breathing spaces for many.

All these and others had a profound influence on **Bert Ward**, who founded the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers Club, which he claimed was the first working class ramblers group in the country, after a 20-mile walk round Kinder Scout in September 1900. This year (2017) marks the 60th anniversary of Ward’s death, and our book shows many of the earliest Clarion rambles, with a commentary by Dave Sissons.

So where do we go from here? The long-cherished access to mountains and moorland was achieved with the CROW Act of 2000, but many changes are still taking place on the moorland: some good and some bad.

In November, despite a determined campaign and a petition signed by more than 123,000 people, the government dismissed calls by leading environmentalists for a ban on driven grouse shooting. Landowners were accused of killing protected predators such as hen harriers which threaten grouse populations. Heather burning to improve grouse habitat undoubtedly also contributes to a monoculture of heather at the cost of other vegetation and wildlife.

Other questionable recent developments have included paths and bridleways being surfaced for vehicle access, supposedly to carry out moorland restoration, and plastic matting laid for vehicle access, such as that on the Cut Gate track described by Les in his emergency motion. The question is: are they temporary or permanent?

It's not all bad news though. The good news is that bodies such as Moors for the Future and the National Trust are now actively "re-wilding" large areas of Peak District moorland. For example, over the last five years, the National Trust has installed over 6,000 dams on its 15-square-mile Kinder estate.

These hand-built dams slow down the water which would normally race down the grips, groughs and gullies and into the rivers below. They have raised the water table on the moor, allowing the water to gradually trickle off the land, thus increasing the capacity of water the moor can absorb in Kinder's frequent heavy rains, and alleviating the risk of flooding further downstream.

And aided by a massive £14 million EU LIFE Programme grant, the Moors for the Future partnership will protect and transform 36 square miles of active blanket bog through re-vegetating bare peat, improving hydrology and diversifying existing vegetation in the Peak District and South Pennines.

I'll leave the last word to Bert Ward, taken from the 1914-15 Clarion Handbook:-

Were I a God I would make a new race of men and women – and I would make them free. There would be none rich and none poor, and the earth, and the beauty of the earth, would belong to all and all would know how to enjoy it.

And from the 1911-12 Handbook:-

And how would the new race of men and women enjoy it if they lived in or around Sheffield? There are fifty square miles of hill and moor in which to wander free – and who shall say me nay? And ever beyond those prison factory walls I hear that call of Heather Land of mine; Little boy, come again, and be thou free.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.”