

Kinder Scout Mass Trespass

Joe Saunders

The mass trespass of Kinder Scout was undertaken by members of the Young Communist League, the youth branch of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) at Kinder Scout in the Peak District, Derbyshire on 24 April 1932. The aim was to highlight that walkers were denied access to areas of open country. It was organised by Benny Rothman, Secretary of the British Workers' Sports Federation.

The Trespass was a coordinated protest involving three groups of walkers who approached Kinder Scout from different directions at the same time. Accounts of the numbers involved vary widely: a *Times* article at the time reported that it was about 100, Rothman claimed it was between 600 and 800, and poet and folk singer Ewan MacColl, who participated in the walk and wrote a song sung by the walkers, remembered it as over 3,000.¹ The generally accepted figure is that reported by the *Manchester Guardian* at the time, of around 400 people.²

The trespassers began at Bowden Bridge quarry near Hayfield and proceeded via William Clough to the plateau of Kinder Scout, where there were violent scuffles with gamekeepers. The ramblers were able to reach their destination and meet with another group at Ashop Head. On their return, five ramblers were arrested, while another had already been detained. Trespass was not a criminal offence in England, but some received jail sentences of two to six months for offences relating to violence involving the gamekeepers.

The action was one of a number of protests at the time seeking greater access to the moors of the Peak District. It stood apart from the others however as a new and more radical approach and was not universally popular with rambling groups. The harshness of the sentences imposed on the leaders of the protest was headline news in local and national newspapers, resulting in the issue gaining public attention and sympathy.

¹ David Hey, 'Kinder Scout and the Legend of Mass Trespass', *Agricultural History Review* 59:2 (2011), 210; Ben Harker, "'The Manchester Rambler': Ewan MacColl and the 1932 Mass Trespass' *History Workshop Journal*. 59 (Spring 2005), 222.

² ['Mass trespass on Kinder Scout'](#), *Manchester Guardian* (Monday 25 April 1932)



John H Darch, *Prominent cairn above Ashop Head* ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

The legacy of the event has been disputed. Some believe this act of civil disobedience was one of the most successful in British history. The immediate impact of the Trespass was to ignite a wider struggle. Three weeks afterwards some 10,000 rambles held a protest at nearby Castleton. This growing tide arguably led to the passage of the National Parks legislation in 1949 and helped pave way for the establishment of the Pennine Way and other long-distance footpaths. However, it may be questioned how far the Trespass was 'a simple explanation of the triumph of the "right to roam" movement' which in fact may have done more harm than good.³ The Trespass was used by opponents of the access movement as an argument for denying access decades afterwards. It has also been questioned whether the trespassers even reached the summit of Kinder Scout.⁴

An unintended consequence of the mass trespass was greater interest being paid to rambles' behaviour and potential ways to regulate it. This resulted in a 'Code of Courtesy for the Countryside' being produced, which was a forerunner of the modern Countryside Code.⁵

³ David Hey, 'Kinder Scout and the Legend of Mass Trespass', *Agricultural History Review* 59:2 (2011), 210.

⁴ Tom Stephenson, *Forbidden Land: The Struggle for Access to Mountain and Moorland* (1989), 153.

⁵ Ben Anderson, '[The "Respectable" Reaction – The Manchester Ramblers' Federation and the Kinder Scout Mass Trespass, 1932](#)', *History at Keele University* (2015)

Undoubtedly though, the Trespass has had a significant impact on the subsequent history of the right to roam movement with a symbolic role in the access campaign over the rest of the century.⁶ Walkers' rights to travel through common land and uncultivated upland were eventually protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW Act) of 2000. Though controversial when it occurred, it has been interpreted as the embodiment of the right to roam versus the rights of the wealthy to have exclusive use of moorlands. The same cause taken up at Kinder Scout.



Kinder Scout commemorative plaque, Bowden Bridge Quarry

Today, the spirit of the Trespass lives on. There is a commemorative plaque at Bowden Bridge Quarry near Hayfield marking the start of the Trespass, which was unveiled in 1982 by Benny Rothman. Ewan MacColl, who participated in the events, wrote the song 'The Manchester Rambler'. The right to roam remains a debate to be won. Efforts to secure the English countryside for all continue to this day led by organisations like the [Ramblers](#).

References and Resources:

Rhiannon Davis, '[Kinder Scout Mass Trespass 1932](#)', *History Extra* (April 2022)

Eric Allison, '[The Kinder Scout trespass: 80 years on](#)', *The Guardian* (Tuesday 17 April 2012)

⁶ John K. Walton, 'The Northern Rambler: Recreational Walking and the Popular Politics of Industrial England, from Peterloo to the 1930s', *Labour History Review* 78: 3 (2013), 264.

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[Ramblers](#)