



WALKING FROM MY PERSPECTIVE

It was a driver on the wrong side of the road that changed Robin Helby's life. The serious car accident left him unable to walk, yet it hasn't stopped him enjoying the countryside. Paul Miles joins him and other people with disabilities on the path to walking inclusion.

GET IN ON THE ACT

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) means that, since 1 October 2004, service providers, such as councils and the National Trust, have to make 'reasonable adjustments' to 'physical features' so that people with disabilities can enjoy goods and services equally. This doesn't mean that we will see the countryside covered in tarmac paths. As it says in a report, *By all reasonable means*, produced by the Sensory Trust and commissioned by the Countryside Agency: "Most visitors do not want to see the loss of the special qualities of a place and sometimes this will limit the amount of access that is possible. The aim is to provide a realistic, practical and effective approach to access improvements, creating more access in more places for more people."

The Disability Discrimination Act will go further in December this year, when a new amendment sees it become law that disabled people are involved in shaping action plans and schemes.

Robin Helby is vice chairman of the Disabled Ramblers, an organisation representing over 100 members that meets several times a year for 'walks' of varying difficulty.

Members have strained their scooter motors ascending mountains, including Snowdon, Cairn Gorm and Pen y Fan. They have buzzed along long-distance paths such as Bath to Maidenhead (161km/100 miles) and Oxford to Marlow. Nothing daunts them and, thankfully, there have been few mishaps. One man fell in a canal; another broke some ribs when he (rather recklessly) decided to freewheel his wheelchair down a hill; and some scooter motors nearly gave up on those mountainous ascents, but there have been no serious incidents.

The group is always accompanied by able-bodied volunteers to offer assistance where needed. Stiles and kissing gates pose problems. Some new paths have an alternative gate with a special key

for disabled access, but if it is known that there are stiles or kissing gates on a route, a small collapsible bridge is transported on a trailer behind one of the scooters. Able-bodied helpers erect the bridge over any obstructions and pull the scooters (minus drivers) across. The drivers then clamber to the other side.

"It's a pretty humbling experience," says able-bodied helper Joan Haslam-Fox on the walk in Windsor. "I can hardly say 'my legs ache' at the end of the day." Indeed, on a disabled ramble, the able-bodied can find they are sometimes the disadvantaged. "The tables are turned," says Helby. "Helpers get hot and tired, but we just keep going at a steady four miles an hour."

The best scooters for rambling are heavy-duty, with high clearance such as the all-terrain Trampler. Helby came up with the design for his custom-made scooter. It includes a lockable storage compartment "big enough for six bottles of whisky" he says, with a grin.

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Of an estimated half a million kilometres of paths and trails in the UK, very little of it is fully accessible to scooter and wheelchair users. "The perception of disabled people is that we're very frail and our ambition to walk is nil," says Dr Mike Bruton, founder of the Disabled Ramblers. "People don't think we want to do long walks."

Of accessible trails, the New Forest in Hampshire is one that wins Bruton's praise.

"There are 120 miles of accessible trails, all in good order." In Wales, the Castlemartin military range gets Bruton's approval, at least when the army's not firing. In Scotland, a favourite walk of guidebook author, Eva McCracken, who has been a scooter user for five years, is a seven-mile jaunt along the banks of Loch Katrine. "There are mountains, forests, the loch and dramatic west coast views," she says. McCracken's book *Walking on Wheels* (as reviewed in *autumn*, p70) details 50 walks

around Scotland that are suitable for scooter and wheelchair users.

Less than 0.4 per cent of Britain's footpaths and bridleways are fully accessible. The Fieldfare Trust, an organisation that campaigns for disabled access to the countryside, launched a Millennium campaign to encourage the creation of 2,000km of accessible paths in the UK. The project has now run out of funding.

"We didn't get anywhere near 2,000km," says Chief Executive Ian Newman. "There are thousands of miles that able-bodied people can use. Disabled people aren't asking for the world." He bemoans the lack of a comprehensive grading scheme of accessibility. "There's not enough accurate information from service providers so people can decide if a walk's suitable."



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The diversity of disabilities compounds this problem. Not all disabled people are scooter or wheelchair users. In fact, they are the minority. Of the estimated 20 per cent of the UK's population with disabilities, most have sight or hearing-impairment, coordination problems, little strength or learning disabilities. All have different needs.

For those with sight impairment, there are groups such as London Blind Ramblers which organises about 30 walks a year.

"Most blind people can enjoy the countryside just the same as sighted people, as long as they have a guide," says David Clark, walks organiser, who has been blind for 15 years. "It's a way of getting away from the busy noise of London: to hear the birds and the peace of the countryside."

The group meets up with a different (sighted) Ramblers Group for each walk. The sighted Ramblers act as guides. The group also organises

weekend and longer trips away to visit other Ramblers Groups.

As well as disabled people forming their own groups, some able-bodied Ramblers Groups have been proactive in welcoming people with disabilities. Maidstone Ramblers has formed a sub-committee, 'Branching Out', that invites disabled people on walks. Twenty-five people with their carers went on the first ramble in Shoreham Wood.

As the population ages, an increasing number will face mobility problems. Although much more needs to be done, there are organisations and people providing information and support. As Disabled Ramblers' member, Philip Harris, a 41-year-old with multiple sclerosis says: "Get out there and enjoy the countryside. It can be done. It's much better than staring at four walls."

NEED HELP?

RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION

General advice for walkers with disabilities can be found in our *Walking For You* booklet: contact Ramblers main office or see www.ramblers.org.uk/firststeps. For practical advice on organising led walks for people with disabilities, ask the office for our *Let's Get Going* factsheets. For local walks for visually impaired walkers led by Ramblers volunteers, see under Walking Projects: England at www.ramblers.org.uk/walking.

DISABILITY RIGHTS COMMISSION

A government-appointed body working towards the goal of "a society where all disabled people can participate fully as equal citizens".
DRC Helpline, FREEPOST MID02164,
Stratford-upon-Avon CV37 9BR
☎ 08457 622 633 **Textphone:** 08457 622 644
Web: www.drc-gb.org

FIELDFARE TRUST

"Promoting countryside access for disabled people".
Volunteer House, 69 Crossgate, Cupar, Fife KY15 5AS
☎ 01334 657708 **Email:** info@fieldfare.org.uk
Web: www.fieldfare.org.uk

SENSORY TRUST

Promotes and implements an inclusive approach to design and management of outdoor space. The report *By All Reasonable Means* is available as a pdf online.
Watering Lane Nursery, Pentewan, St. Austell,
Cornwall PL26 6BE
Web: www.sensorytrust.org.uk
Email: enquiries@sensorytrust.org.uk

DISABLED RAMBLERS

Orchard Cottage, Uplands, Ashtead, Surrey KT21 2TN
Web: www.disabledramblers.co.uk
Email: secretary@disabledramblers.co.uk

Disabled Ramblers tow a 'mobility support unit' to the start of their walks. The trailer has room for three scooters (which can be hired) and a chemical toilet. Disabled Ramblers are looking for volunteers with suitable vehicles to tow the trailer and to accompany them on walks, sometimes for a weekend or a week away. Mileage and expenses will be paid. Contact Mike Bruton on ☎ 01628 621414.

FORTH AND TAY DISABLED RAMBLERS

16 Woodlands Road, Lundin Links, Fife KY8 6HG
☎ 01333 320 864 **Web:** www.ftdr.com
Email: heather@ftdr.com

LONDON BLIND RAMBLERS

22 Waverley Road, Rayners Lane HA2 9RD
☎ 020 8868 0096

READ

Walking on Wheels by Eva McCracken.
Published by Cualann Press
(www.cualann.com) £10.99

