

Footpath faeries

From the cliffs of Cornwall to Scotland's western isles, committed volunteers are giving their time to keep the nation's trails safe. **Connie Rout** meets the devoted teams saving our footpaths

Photos: Phil Sproson

Up through the dappled oak grove, across a tinkling stream and out into open fields. It's a lunchtime walk I do a lot, living here in West Yorkshire's lush Upper Calder Valley. Recently, I'd been skirting around a sad-looking boardwalk on the verge of collapse. This time, however, I was pleasantly surprised to find it had been replaced with a new one. Not only that, but two freshly painted waymarks had been reinstated along the ambling footpath.

But I hadn't seen anyone up there with tools and materials. In fact, other than the newly improved features, there was no trace of work having been done at all. No boot prints or scuffed earth. No trampled plants. It was as if by magic. So, if not faeries, who was looking after this much-loved path?

After a bit of digging, I came across a local group called Community Rights of Way Service – or CROWS for short.

As I discovered, they're one of the many volunteer armies secretly keeping the nation's trails in great condition. While they may not have wings or wands, what they do have is good sturdy boots, a shed-load of tools and the positive attitude needed for a team that heads into the hills rain or shine. Thanks to groups like CROWS, walkers and other path users can continue adventuring out on favourite or newly discovered routes. We all

benefit from their work, but how many of us are aware of the hours these volunteers put in behind the scenes?

“They have the tools and the attitude needed”

From the sea-blown cliffs of the South West Coast Path to the far-flung reaches of Scotland's western isles, people are giving their time to fight for our footpaths. Sometimes, these efforts are organised by well-known charities, such as the National Trust, which work with volunteers on targeted route-conservation projects. Other times, as in the case of CROWS, volunteers are



iPLAYER

Watch Matt Baker join the Mourne Heritage Trust to help rebuild essential pathways in *Countryfile's* 'Mourne Mountains' episode from February 2025.

Dedicated CROWS volunteer Jerry puts the finishing touches to a sturdy path repair in Rough Hey Wood in the Ryburn Valley, West Yorkshire



CROWS volunteer Eleanor clears a path of encroaching foliage

self-led, responding to reports from local councils or members of the public when a path is losing accessibility.

I meet some of the CROWS team at their depot. Lined with woodworking benches, job sheets pinned to the walls and all manner of tools, it's exactly what you'd want from a countryside maintenance HQ. Here, the volunteers do everything from cleaning tools after an excursion to preparing waymark posts from treated timber.

Richard, one of the founding members of CROWS back in 2013, used to volunteer for the local council to help look after public rights of way, but resources for footpath maintenance began to run dry. He and a handful of former colleagues set up CROWS on a voluntary basis to bridge the gap. "Our situation was really peculiar," Richard tells me. "We had the skills already. We knew how to do things and we knew the footpath network."

Now the group is around 40 members strong, and the volunteers I speak with come from all sorts of backgrounds. The youngest member is in their 30s and the eldest in their 80s.

“Every volunteer shares a love for the valleys, woodlands and moors of this corner of West Yorkshire”

Many are retired from their professions: a chemical engineer, teacher, acupuncturist, probation officer, even an owner of a 1950s-style diner. The group draws from a range of skills, but also enjoys the chance to pick up new ones. "You're always somewhere different and it's a variety of work," says CROWS member Paul, returning from a fingerpost-repair mission. "I've learnt so much." For fellow volunteer Ian, taking care of local footpaths has given him a new appreciation of the spiderweb of routes crisscrossing the valley: "I thought I knew all the paths round here, but I keep finding ones I didn't!"

What's clear is that no matter their different backgrounds, everyone in CROWS shares a love for the valleys, woodlands and moors of this green corner of West Yorkshire.

A sense of purpose is certainly helpful given the nature of footpath maintenance. It's tough, physical work, often in remote places with limited vehicle access. Across the UK, volunteers cut back unruly vegetation, build steps and bridges, fix rotting stiles, clear drainage and install waymarks to ensure walkers can find their way.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Volunteers with the Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland continuously survey 40 mountainous routes throughout the year to report back on their condition. Meanwhile, Valeways, a volunteer group in South Wales, maintains around 365 miles of footpaths, and the CROWS team heads out three times a week, year-round. Clearly, there's a lot of work to be done.



Carrying heavy materials is part of the job for these volunteers heading towards Rough Hey Wood



A path before it was worked on by CROWS



...and after

Carrying materials is one of the biggest challenges for CROWS. In their experience, it sometimes means calling on the wider community for help. Such an occasion saw the team on the moorland that cradles the Upper Calder Valley. Between whispering heather and coarse grasses lies deep, peaty bogland, which can be treacherous in wetter months. The group was replacing the boardwalks that straddle the moors, but it's high and it's steep – and around 400 parts of timber needed to be lugged up the hillside. After reaching out on social media, the group was delighted when scores of walkers and runners answered their request for help.

"One guy went up and down all day like it was a training exercise," Stella, a regular CROWS volunteer, remembers. "It really shows the relationship of local

people to this landscape, and their appreciation of volunteers who are trying to keep it usable."

CROWS works with the council and receives some financial support from it, but 40% of its funding comes from path-users themselves. Walkers make donations, community shops have collections and locals have organised events to raise money for CROWS. "People's generosity is astonishing," Richard nods. It's proof, once again, of the collective stewardship people feel towards a landscape that means so much to so many.

Having a dedicated group to look after public footpaths is beneficial for farmers, too, encouraging walkers to stick to designated routes. CROWS enjoys a good relationship with landowners in the valley. During one excursion, the team tells me, a local

PATH SAVERS

Five volunteer path-building organisations that are looking for more members



A CROWS crew takes a breather on the job

CROWS

Volunteers clock over a thousand days of work a year across the Upper Calder and Ryburn Valleys, which boast more than 600 miles of footpaths. crows-coop.co.uk

RAMBLERS

Britain's national walking charity supports around 150 volunteer groups up and down the country, led by communities. ramblers.org.uk

VALEWAYS

In 2025, Valeways volunteers celebrated 25 years of the Millennium Heritage Trail, having recently improved the 65-mile footpath. If you've walked the Wales Coast Path in the Vale of Glamorgan, you'll have benefited from their work. valeways.org.uk

KENT HIGH WEALD PARTNERSHIP

Volunteers manage footpaths winding across 150 hectares of the High Weald National Landscape in South-East England. One of their major achievements has been increasing access to nature from urban areas. khwp.org.uk

OUTDOOR ACCESS TRUST FOR SCOTLAND

A growing band of over 200 volunteers not only repairs paths across Scotland, but builds them, hopping on bicycles to reach remote upland routes. outdooraccesstrustforscotland.org.uk

farmer appeared in his tractor to help transport materials. For CROWS and many similar groups across the country, maintaining footpaths is a collaboration between volunteers, local authorities and landowners.

I ask Stella what would happen if groups such as CROWS didn't exist. "Some footpaths would disappear," she tells me. Unusable, difficult to access, or simply hidden from view by overgrown greenery, vanishing public rights of way are frequently saved by volunteers, helping to preserve a rich ecosystem of pathways.

BIODIVERSITY BOOST

As I learn, maintaining footpaths can encourage biodiversity in and of itself. Two volunteers from CROWS, Mo and Ginny, have been dedicated to clearing invasive Himalayan balsam from a popular wooded clough. Thanks to their efforts, they've created space for a variety of plants to flourish. Mo points out wood anemone, woundwort, pink purslane and herb-robert as she shows me her handiwork.

But it's not all about cutting back and pulling up. Richard says they strike a balance between functionality and keeping things wild when it comes to footpath maintenance. Higher priority paths may need more intervention to keep them accessible. "We do have a hierarchy," he explains. "The highest priority is functional paths people use to get to school or to the bus stop, for example. Whereas if it's a recreational path across a moor, we don't do any cutting back."

Within the backdrop of the climate emergency, it's never been more important to preserve access to wild spaces. Volunteers for Fix the Fells in the Lake District, for instance, are battling against upland path erosion exacerbated by increasingly severe weather. "Certainly, groundwater levels have dropped," notes Jerry, who volunteers with CROWS every week. "When I first started here, more often than not I'd dig a hole and hit water."

Meanwhile, the volunteers note the irony of a summer of drought, paired with the now annual threat of flooding in the valley, which made national news in 2015 and 2020. It's yet another



The CROWS 'footpath faeries' head home after a job well done

"Volunteers are also conserving our heritage"

reason why it's vital to encourage people to explore the public footpaths on their doorsteps. The more people care about the natural world, the more they'll want to protect it.

We can all start by looking after public rights of way. Richard explains that one simple act he'd encourage from footpath users is to stick to them so they don't become lost – "and carry a pair of secateurs!" another volunteer adds.

For CROWS, along with donations, reporting footpaths that need some TLC is much appreciated. On their website, there's a quick form path-users can fill in when they spot work that needs to be done. "Precision reporting is very helpful," Stella advises. "We need details of where the footpath is, because somebody will have to go out and survey it."

CROWS invites me to join them on an excursion in the valley one cloudy morning. We're off to uncover a causey-stone path, part of the 18th-

century packhorse network. It reminds me that footpath volunteers aren't just preserving rights of way for the future, they're also conserving our national heritage and the ancient routes that have connected communities for centuries. As we scrape and brush and sweep up and down the shady wooded slopes, walkers pass by (along the newly revealed stone path, rather than the crumbling muddy banks either side). They smile and say hello, sharing appreciation for the volunteers.

Stella strides down the causey stones armed with a large sweeping brush. "It's basically like outdoor housework," she laughs. And she's right. Because, to quote the celebrated naturalist John Muir, "going to the mountains is going home". These footpaths take us to the wild places across the UK that we all belong to. They're natural havens. Thanks to the hard – and often invisible – work of volunteer groups such as CROWS, they'll remain so for generations to come. Faeries or not, there's a certain magic to that. ☺



Connie Rout is a Yorkshire-based freelance writer who regularly contributes to *BBC History Magazine*. connieroutwriter.com