

Rambler Extraordinaire

George Herbert Bridges ('Bert') Ward was born in 1876 not far from Sheffield City Centre. His father, a mechanic by trade, introduced his young son to a love of the outdoors. By 1900 Bert had established the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers which, he later claimed, was the first active club to be formed in Britain. In September of that year he led the first club outing, over what was to become a great "battlefield" – Kinder Scout.

It was Bert's desire that land should be free for all to enjoy lawfully. Making one of his annual pilgrimages to a cairn on Kinder Scout, where a fellow Rambler had perished, Bert was served with a writ of trespass and forbidden to enter the moor without permission.

In 1910 he produced the first Clarion Ramblers' Handbook which developed into a pocket-sized mine of rambling information, local history and folklore. The Handbook is still much sought after and constantly used as a rich source of information.

Concerned that public rights of way were being eroded, Bert formed the Hallamshire Footpath Preservation Society in 1912 and was instrumental in gaining access to huge tracts of land in the Peak District. He was also a prime mover in the formation of what we now know as the Ramblers' Association and in 1926 founded its Sheffield and District Federation. He also found time to play a part in the creation of the Youth Hostel Association (YHA) locally and assisted in the purchase of the Longshaw Estate (now owned by the National Trust).

Having started his working life in engineering, Bert later joined the Ministry of Labour before retiring in 1941. He was then able, along with his wife Fanny, to devote even more time to his outdoor interests. He lived for many years on Moorwoods Lane at Owlbar, a few hundred yards from his beloved Big Moor.

In 1949 the Access to the Countryside Act came into force. Bert Ward's contribution towards "access for all" was well recognised. Four years earlier, on 8 April 1945, he had received a well-earned tribute. Some 2,000 rambles had gathered on Lose Hill, just outside Castleton, to witness Bert receiving the deeds to 54.5 acres of the summit. The land, still known as "Ward's Piece", was then presented to the National Trust. A plaque there records that the Sheffield and District Federation of the Ramblers' Association had purchased the land "in appreciation of the life's work of

George Herbert Bridges Ward FRGS". An inscription repeats one of his favourite slogans:

"A rambler made is a man improved".

On 6 July 1957, Sheffield University conferred an honorary degree of Master of Arts on G.H.B. Ward but sadly, because of ill-health, he was unable to attend. The Public Orator said: "No man could have worked more tirelessly for the preservation and accessibility of our countryside heritage and especially of the incomparable Peakland. No man in the last half-century could have done more, by precept and example, to foster the true spirit of rambling".

Bert Ward died on 14 October 1957, leaving behind a rich heritage for all walkers and visitors to our countryside.