



Fix the Fells is part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund

SUNNY SIDE UP FOR STORM BATTERED FELL FIXERS

'Anita and I are just home from a drain run and we're dripping in the hall. We'd been in two minds about going at all and I'm soaked to the skin. Even my long-johns are sopping wet. But we're smiling.

"I'm glad we went," said Anita. "Me too," I say, hopping unsteadily from one foot to another in an awkward effort to peel off my waterlogged 'waterproof' trousers.

Maybe it's the sense of achievement at getting out of the house at all on such a foul day. Maybe it's because we're putting something back after so many years tramping the paths as visitors to the Lake District.

Or maybe it's the camaraderie of 131 like-minded souls who turned out in all weathers to make 2019 a record-breaking year for Fix the Fells (see below).

In truth, it's probably a combination of all three along with the knowledge that it's keeping us fit, in mind as well as body.

Today it was Wetherlam with the wind blowing a 50mph hoolie and the rain lashing horizontally.

But that was just one of 907 drain clearance runs and work parties completed last year by unpaid volunteers - an all-time high in the 13 year history of the Fix the Fells volunteer scheme.



In common with several other volunteers, Anita and I are Lake District incomers. We're now in our third year with Fix the Fells after moving to Cumbria from Brighton, Sussex, where we'd lived for 40 years.

Latterly, we'd been largely tied to desk jobs - Anita in local government and me a journalist - but we're both 'outdoors types' and longed for an 'escape to the country' from the clutches of our city life.

Circumstances finally coincided for us to make the move after Anita took early retirement and our daughter Alice and son-in-law Darryn got jobs with the National Trust at Sticklebarn in Great Langdale.

We realised it was now or never so took the plunge and rented the former butler's quarters at Graythwaite Hall near Hawkshead.

Letting out our house in Brighton on a one-year lease was the other side of the equation. It meant we could always return to our old life if things didn't work out but, deep down, we knew there would be no going back.

We'd only been at Graythwaite for a month when an isolated former farmhouse gifted to the National Trust by Beatrix Potter became available to rent.

It felt like the chance of a lifetime so we went to a viewing on a glorious sunny day and put in an application. Little did we know what a grilling we'd get about our suitability as new tenants of the 17th Century property in Little Langdale.

As it turned out, the NT property manager must have liked the cut of our gib. After all, we had a family connection with the area, Anita was already volunteering with the National Trust at High Close, near Elterwater, and we'd put our names down to join up with Fix the Fells. We were practically the earthly embodiment of National Trust incarnates.

So, with the country in the grip of Arctic weather - the 'Beast from the East' - we piled our belongings into a removal van for the second time in six months.

And here we still are, two years later.

In that time, Anita and I have clocked up scores of days on Fix the Fells duties with people from all walks of life, each sharing a common purpose to protect the landscape from the pincer attack of boots on the ground and water erosion.

We've cleared countless drains, frequently on routes we'd probably not have discovered on our own, learned to build stone paths capable of withstanding the harshest of onslaughts and even helped construct a sheep fleece path in line with an ancient method used by the Romans.

We've also planted trees and new hedges, rebuilt dry stone walls and helped out with the extensive clearance of larch plantations infected by the dreaded Phytophthora disease.

On top of that, there's been a handful of memorable gatherings on special occasions - birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas's - not to mention the preordained after work 'debrief' at a convivial cafe or bar for tea and cake or, perchance, a beer.

The weather may not have been kind on every occasion but, contrary to popular belief, it doesn't always rain in the Lake District. It just seems that way when the jet stream blows in wave upon wave of raging cyclones.

Indeed, the rain is still hammering horizontally outside in the wake of Storms Ciara and Dennis as I write and the landscape is waterlogged.

But Anita and I are cosy and dry inside our 350-year-old whitewashed home.

The Wetherlam 'drain run' may have been a day that ended in a soaking but we can look back on numerous work parties (and 'works outings') when the sun shone.

And we know there'll be times ahead when the sky is blue and the breeze gentle as we troop off, tools in hand, for more happy days fixing the fells.

Now that really is something to smile about...

Andrew Baxter
Fix the Fells volunteer
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