

Editor's note: Society member Rick Toyer is a volunteer for Fix the Fells, the Society's main beneficiary in 2017. Funds raised that year were earmarked to repair the badly-eroded path at Long Stile, High Street. That work is due to be completed later this year and Rick will write about that project after its completion. Meanwhile, I asked if he would write about a typical day when he volunteers as a lengthsman, spending many hours in all weathers to repair and maintain footpaths on the fells. Lengthsman is a centuries-old name for a person who was responsible for maintaining a length of road.

A Day in the Life of a Fix the Fells Lengthsman



Rick on another (and sunny) day

Another Saturday morning, the 6am alarm sounds and it's my 41st volunteering day on a Fix the Fells project this year [2018]. After packing my bait for the day and having breakfast, I am on my way to the rendezvous point for my lift. Volunteers are encouraged to car-share due to the limited parking we encounter during our days out on the fells.

Today's task is to complete a drain run started previously, on a single path from Levers Water to Levers Hause, north of Brim Fell – known to Fix the Fells as path S251. All 332 paths that are maintained by Fix the Fells are individually numbered and are colour-coded to identify the frequency that the path must be maintained. Today's path is an amber path, which denotes it must be run every four months, but we do have paths that are more heavily used that are coloured double red, which denotes a drain run has to be performed every two months. A drain run is simply the process of sweeping the pitching and cleaning out the drains and culverts.

On arrival at the Walna Scar car park, it is obvious that today is going to be a typical Lakeland day with the cloud down and persistent rain, which warrants the donning of full waterproofs. There are just two lengthsman on today's run, but we have nearly an hour's walk carrying our trusty tools, a shovel, mini-mattock and a churn brush, to reach the start of the path. A churn brush is a heavy-duty brush, originally shaped to clean the insides of milk churns, which we use to brush loose stones from the pitched paths.

The path we are on today is not one of the most popular and we see very few people until we cross the lower path on Conistone Old Man where there are a number of walkers making their way to the top of that fell. We then head into Boulder Valley, and the Pudding Stone soon comes into view. Soon after passing it, we are at the foot of the path we are running.



Work in progress



A typical section of the pitched path, with a cross-drain in the foreground

We start on the path, first being greeted by pitching that needs cleaning of loose material off the surfaces to allow easier passage over the steps. As we progress up the path, we come across our first drain of the day. Although not overly filled by debris, water passage will be still impeded so we get to work on clearing the drain.

The majority of drains can be cleared out with just the use of a shovel, but we do get some where the debris has become so compacted since the last drain run that more than just a shovel is needed. In these instances, a mini-mattock becomes invaluable, easily breaking up the debris so that it can be removed using a shovel. The carrying of these tools often attracts attention from walkers who then stop to ask us questions, some of them rather facetious along the lines of 'Are you digging for gold?' or 'Are you going to bury someone?' After chatting with them, the feedback always tends to be positive and concludes with a thank you, which is always nice to hear as we are all volunteers donating our services to look after the paths.

After reaching the top of the path at Levers Hause, we take the decision to retrace our steps back down the path to get off the fell. Exiting via the Old Man would be more difficult in the current conditions, with the fells shrouded in cloud. On the way down, we check the drains again to make sure they are taking the water off the path as desired. Only then, with our job done, do we stop by the path to eat our bait before pushing off for the final walk through the boulder field to arrive back at the car, thoroughly wet through. Today was one of those days when, whatever we had worn, we knew we were going to get soaked to the skin.



Gloomy conditions, looking down into the Coppermines Valley

But, that aside, it had been another great and thoroughly enjoyable volunteering day on the fells. We finally leave the car park five hours after we had arrived and, like on all great days on the fells, we end with a pint of ale in front of a nice roaring fire, in one of Lakeland's many fine hostleries.

Rick Toyer – Bowness on Windermere
Membership No: 1426

The answers to the North Western Fells quiz were: 1. High Spy. 2. Causey Pike. 3. Outerside. 4. Ard Crag. 5. Robinson. 6. Eel Crag. 7. Castle Crag. 8. Graystones. 9. Lord's Seat. 10. Scar Crag. 11. Broom Fell. 12. Hopegill Head. 13. Whinlatter. 14. Rannerdale Knotts. 15. Barf. 16. Whiteless Pike. 17. Dale Head. 18. Hindscarth. 19. Knott Rigg. 20. Whiteside. 21. Barrow. 22. Sail. 23. Wandope. 24. Sale Fell. 25. Grasmoor. 26. Ling Fell. 27. Grisedale Pike. 28. Catbells. 29. Maiden Moor.