



Volunteer Report Winter 2017

'As we all know, our core work as 'Lengthsmen' is upland path maintenance in the form of drain runs and attending supervised work parties. Maybe these days we should be referred to as 'Groundwork Installation Technicians', but be careful of the acronym.

Due to the willingness and humour of an increasing band of volunteers, the amount of work being carried out continues to increase. Hence the beast of the Unsupervised Work Party was born and skilled professional Rangers trust us to carry out quite complex path repairs. Not totally of course, as I'm sure our efforts are checked and scrutinised to make sure we don't make things any worse.

Before we are let loose on the glorious Lakeland fells, the potential work has to be assessed and authorised by a Ranger before being documented on the infamous 'Specification Sheet' or 'spec'

Grains Gill update

Such a process was commenced on a warm summer's day in August 2016 when three intrepid Volunteers accompanied a Ranger along the popular Grains Gill path at Seathwaite in Borrowdale, a path regularly used by walkers heading for the summit of England's highest peak. After quite a strenuous day, 23 separate work sites were identified; these sites covered at least 200 metres of worn path. A lot of stone would be required to build drains, rebuild and stabilise existing pitching. But that is what we enjoy. Can anyone recommend a good chiropractor?

The authorisation came through. Winter came and winter went. Manpower or I should say person power was mobilised and tools were made ready and an enthusiastic team trudged up the path on the 7th March 2017. Did anyone tell us that Seathwaite was the wettest place in the UK holding the record for annual rainfall of 22 feet? We know now!



The first job on the 'spec' had the common request: 'define path line and landscape-out the side paths'. Day one, Job 1 of 23 and we were trying to be on our best behaviour, except the path line became a stream. The side path then became the main path and already we were working 'off-spec' but with the best intentions. The new path has settled in very well.

Pictured left, happy volunteers on our Grains Gill project, remarkably one of the dry days.

The good work continued and a total of 18 separate working days have now been put into

Grains Gill averaging 7.33 Volunteers per working day which is an excellent turn out, giving a total of 141 Volunteer days so far. Thank you very much to all those that have contributed. It is a path we can be proud of.

To date some 80% of the work has been completed. Helicopter lifts have now taken place and there are a further 12 bags of stone to build into the path. We have had good days and not so good days but we can certainly verify the status of the rainfall. The walk in and out has progressively increased and we have often referred to Grains Gill by the title of its near neighbour, 'Ruddy Gill', and sometimes been even less polite.



However we are proud of what we have achieved on this and other similar projects around the National Park, and we are grateful to be able to assist the National Trust Rangers with their never-ending workload on the Lakeland fells.

Left - a volunteer-built drain on Grains Gill.

Following some particularly bad weather during Storm Ophelia it was found to be working very well keeping water off the path. Yes, we were up there clearing the drains in bad weather! Not as mad as it sounds as we could see where the water was going.

We can almost hear the rustle of paper as other 'job specifications' are being pushed through the stages of authorisation to land in the rucksack of another willing volunteer. We live in hope.

North face of Ben Nevis

As lengthsmen, we are an adventurous bunch and don't mind spreading our wings away from Cumbria. As a result of a chance meeting between a most senior and decorated Fell Fixer Barry and a Ranger Dougie Sinclair from the Nevis Landscape Partnership on the slopes of Ben Nevis (the one that's higher than Scafell Pike) an Entente Cordiale developed which resulted in a gang of Cumbrian Fell Fixers, in a Lake District National Park Van, heading north over the border to Fort William. This was on a cold, wet and windy day in October. Our accommodation was to be the Charles Inglis Clark (CIC) Memorial hut on the north face of Ben Nevis. The climb to achieve the CIC would be 680m, the same height as Loft Crag in Langdale.

The arrangements required military precision. Subsequently seven stalwarts of a certain age and mental capacity wandered around the huge corridors of a famous supermarket in Fort William acting out a scene from 'Last of the Summer Wine'. The objective was food and provisions for three days on the mountain, which of course we would then have to carry to 680m. Travelling light was not a concern and we didn't consider two carrier bags of shopping per person a problem, as all the tools were up at the work site, weren't they? We were not totally flippant towards the overall weight, so we substituted beer for wine and whisky.

The following day, we met our hosts Dougie Sinclair and Susan Nicol of the Ben Nevis Partnership and after the statutory briefing we all signed the ICE details and the inevitable disclaimer. Then off we went to the start of the trek with packs on back and shopping in hand. "We have to carry the tools up guys", declared Dougie in his Glaswegian lilt (pronounced Doogey, by the way). It was a hard, heavy walk but the scenery was stunning.

Right - the Ben Nevis crew with a now traditional look after a wet and muddy day.



The weather threw wind and rain at us but it was a magical location. The hut was surprisingly well equipped with everything an unwashed Fell Fixer required. It was warm, cosy and snug. The sleeping arrangements were alpine style and the two toilets were of the composting variety. Did we buy any toilet paper in that famous supermarket? Oooooops!!

Dougie soon got to know us and what our capabilities were. He was genuinely surprised by the standards we worked to and in the three days, we achieved a lot more than he imagined. We gave a good impression and enhanced the reputation of the Fix the Fells Project. Repeat and reciprocal invitations have been offered and future outings to Ben Nevis look certain. These may well run alongside our annual visits to work with our NTS colleagues on Ben Lomond.

In case you were wondering, a message was telegraphed to Sue Nicol who, with another colleague, made the climb up to the hut the following day with an ample supply of Andrex. (Other brands are available.)

The work was challenging but rewarding, the evenings were fun and enjoyable. The company was brilliant. The food was actually very good and cooked to camping perfection and the alcohol was alcoholic. We would all like to thank Dougie and Susan for providing us with such a good experience. The entire trip was cost neutral to Fix the Fells, the volunteers paying their own way. We're looking forward to returning next year.

Another record breaking year

For the first time this year the lengthsman were involved with the NT working holidays organised and run from the NT Basecamp at High Wray. After spending four days building the mountain paths, the holiday groups were taken on a path maintenance run by the lengthsman. This consisted of walking up one or more mountains, clearing drains and stone off the steps and finishing with tea, coffee and bowls of chips. All the groups taken out reported back that they had thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Typically basecamp volunteers and working holiday groups contribute in the order of 250 to 300 days a year towards the Fix the Fells programme.



Left - Fix the Fells and National Trust working holiday volunteers descend Stickle Gill Langdale heading for the National Trust owned and run Sticklebarn Inn.

In addition to the working holiday groups the lengthsman also worked with one actual and one potential Fix the Fells donor companies doing both path building and path maintenance. Both companies said they fully enjoyed the experience and would like to repeat it next year.

As is now sort of expected of us, our Fix the Fells volunteers have so far gifted over 1,936 upland days this year with over 493 drain runs. What does this mean? Well those are 2016`s record breaking numbers. So with two months of our season still to go we're aiming for a new record of fell fixing volunteering in 2017, looking after the fells we love and have the privilege of caring for.'

Phil Kramer
Volunteer Lengthsman
November 2017