



Tracks to trails

Welsh Rail Rambles celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. **Dominic Bates** uncovers who and what is behind the walking programme's continued success

You can imagine what an impression the scene must have made on the marketing manager from Central Trains: there he was, enjoying the rural views of Dovey Valley from the window of the typically half-empty train carriage, when a flood of ruddy-cheeked people boarded at Machynlleth station, all dressed in walking gear and led by a man carrying an unfurled umbrella.

That man – the railway exec was soon to discover – was the passionate walker and future Ramblers chairman Alan Howard. And it was this chance meeting, while returning from a group walk in the mid-Wales countryside in 1989, that led to the creation of the Welsh Rail Rambles scheme – a programme of free, guided walks from railway stations in Wales and the Marches. A firm believer in using public transport for walks, Alan had already set up a similar scheme in

Lancashire in the mid-1970s. So when he moved to the railway town of Shrewsbury, he saw the perfect opportunity to repeat the feat in Shropshire and mid-Wales.

Twenty years later, while both the train operator and walks organiser have changed (Arriva Trains Wales took over the region's rail network in the late 1990s and, sadly, Alan died last year), the scheme has gone from strength to strength.

"When we took over from Alan 10 years ago, there was one walk every other week, with perhaps a dozen walkers on each," remembers Barbara Addyman, who together with husband Richard compiled the Rail Rambles walks until handing over the reins earlier this year. "But as more walking routes were devised, we attracted more walks leaders, so walks became weekly, then twice a week. We have over 200 walks a year now of different lengths, either at weekends or mid-week. Our



Above: Alan Howard, the man behind Welsh Rail Rambles. Right: Walkers at Machynlleth station

longer walks get up to 35 people."

Each annual programme runs from January to June (the last walk this year is on 4th July), and most walks are themed. "We get bigger numbers when we go to the coast," says Barbara. "And, of course, the scenery on the train journey is a really important factor. There's so much variation now, and with better rail connections with local bus routes, it's becoming easier to go further afield."



“We’re looking at connections to more rural communities in mid-Wales and encouraging more scenic walks”

Ben Davies, Arriva Trains Wales

Rail revival

The revival in rail travel since it was privatised out of British Rail’s hands in the late 1980s has certainly helped expand the scope of the programme over the years. But the enthusiastic involvement of Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) has also been key.

“We run 970 services and 249 local stations, and things are definitely improving year on year,” says Ben Davies, stakeholder liaison manager at ATW. “We’re looking at connections to more rural communities in mid-Wales and encouraging more scenic walks from trains on the Cambrian Coast Line in particular.”

As well as providing £1,000 towards Rail Ramblers’ annual costs, ATW also subsidises the walks leaders’ train travel. It’s a welcome concession for the volunteers, all of whom hail from local Ramblers groups. Every year, as many as 45 individuals lead around six walks each. One of these leaders is Bernard Williams, of Telford & East Shropshire Ramblers, who has been leading Rail Rambles for over 15 years.

“The first one I led was from Llandudno to Knighton with Alan Howard in 1994,”

recalls Bernard. “Alan was extremely precise and would measure walks by the minute. So when I made the mistake of chatting to people as I walked and missed a turning, I thought, ‘that will be the last walk I’ll ever lead!’”

As he’s got older, Bernard has started leading shorter walks in more urban areas like Birmingham and Chester. Traditionally, rail rambles have been about getting walkers out of the smoke and into the country, but it seems the reverse is now proving just as popular. “We had nearly 50 people in Birmingham last time,” says Bernard. “We walked through Netherton Tunnel – one of the longest walkable canal tunnels in the UK – and ate lunch under Spaghetti Junction.”

Urban tracks

Alan Howard’s notes for various town tours, including Shrewsbury and Ludlow, have recently been acquired by Rail Ramblers, and it hopes to include more urban routes in the future. It’s a growing niche that Ben at AWT would like to exploit: “The canal systems in Birmingham and Wolverhampton would make perfect

rail rambles – it doesn’t have to be mountains, hills and valleys. Local heritage is just as important and interesting. There’s a hell of a lot more to do, it’s just finding the time and resources to develop it.”

Whatever the future plans of the train operator, the Ramblers continues to expand the Welsh Rail Rambles every year. “More Welsh Ramblers groups are adding their rail rambles to the programme, as well as bus rambles too,” says Anwen Parker, Ramblers Cymru’s promoting walking officer. “Many more are also thinking about how their walks could be adapted to make them more public transport-friendly.”

Fortunately, the Ramblers’ enthusiasm for growing the programme is matched by the walks leaders’ enthusiasm to deliver it. “I’ve just bought a new pair of walking boots, and I always think they will be my last!” quips Bernard, who will be leading a walk on his 78th birthday. “But I’ve put my name down for the next six months, so I’ll keep going.”

Download the latest Welsh Rail Rambles programme at www.ramblers.org.uk/wales/our+work/railrambles.htm