

Open Country is a charitable organisation (1107331) which enables anyone with a disability to access and enjoy the countryside, through the provision of outdoor activities and information.

Last year, I had the pleasure of walking the lovely 'South Downs Way' in southern England. The people in charge of it have obviously got their heads screwed on the right way and, despite there being an abundance of livestock at every turn, clever planning meant that there were only about half a dozen stiles along the whole 100-mile length. Three of those stiles if I remember rightly were guarding fields of turnips. Unless they have a problem with hordes of mangold-wurzels running amok through the villages of rural Sussex, those few stiles could probably have gone too!

That's the thing about many barriers at the end of the day - lots of them are just there because people haven't quite thought things through enough.



This gap used to be a gate!

Open Country has always had a thing about bringing down barriers and this year, joined by our many networking partners, that mission holds truer than ever. Inspiring people at *Groundwork Trust, Yorkshire Water, North Yorkshire Council* and *Burley-in-Wharfedale Walkers are Welcome* (pictured left) have all done great things in removing stiles and generally taking down unnecessary barriers wherever they can.

At this time of year, many of us look for ways to de-clutter our desks, our houses and our lives. In 2026, let's all work together to 'bin the barriers' and try and de-clutter the outdoors wherever we can. Above all, the next time someone says that you are lacking in *stile*, take it as a compliment!

David Shaftoe, Chief Officer



This gate used to be a stile!

Fundraising News

We're thrilled to announce that **Bettys York** has chosen us to be their Charity of the Year! The fantastic team at Bettys York has already kicked off their fundraising efforts in the most festive way, hosting a wonderful Christmas dinner followed by a lively pub quiz led by the Lord Mayor of York, Councillor Martin Rowley.



Happy Quizmas!

We're incredibly grateful to Bettys for their enthusiasm, generosity, and early support. A special thanks to Zoe, our York Tandems volunteer, for helping us be part of the Charity of the Year journey with Bettys York.

We can't wait to see what the year ahead brings, with lots of fundraising events planned in support of Open Country in 2026. Watch this space!

While we're looking forward to our exciting partnership with Bettys York, we also want to take a moment to say a big old thank-you to **HOPs Musical Theatre Company**, who announced us as their Charity of the Year in 2025 and raised £756 for Open Country.

We're incredibly grateful to everyone at HOPs for their generosity and hard work - this wonderful donation will directly support our projects and help us make a real difference in the communities we serve.



Lucy Thackwray presenting Open Country with a big cheque

If you have any fundraising ideas, please contact our fundraising team on 01423 507227 or email them at community@opencountry.org.uk.

It's Easy Fundraising!

If you ever shop online, your purchases can raise funds for Open Country! Sign up to easyfundraising - it won't cost you a penny, but with a couple of clicks, you could be helping people with disabilities to get out into the countryside.

There are over 7,000 brands on board ready to make a donation to Open Country while you shop - including eBay, Argos, John Lewis, ASOS, Booking.com and M&S. Visit the link on our website - www.opencountry.org.uk/fundraising-donations/donate-while-you-shop/ Thank you!



Festive Auction

Thank you to everyone who took part in our festive online auction - we raised over £700!

We are very grateful to the local businesses who supported this project with wonderful gifts for people to bid on, including: Pannal Golf Club, York Football Club, Rudding Park Hotel & Spa, Black Sheep Brewery (Keystone

Brewing Group), Yorkshire Photo Walks, Harrogate Flower Show, MP Tom Gordon, Wills & Parker Hair & Beauty Salon, Ocado, Pool Bridge Farm, The Wakeman's House, and Off Peak Luxury.

The auction was such a success that we're thrilled to announce it will be back next year!

Time to have your say

It's the most wonderful time of the year... no, not Christmas, but our annual members' survey! As usual, we really appreciate you completing it. It helps us to ensure we are doing everything we can to make coming out with Open Country the best experience possible for members.

The results also give us valuable information to attract much-needed funds to run our services. Staff and volunteers can help you to fill it in, if you need some support. Thank you in advance for taking part - it's important you have your say!

We would like all completed surveys to be returned by the end of January and as always, we'll be drawing one lucky name out of the hat to win a special goody bag.

THANK
YOU!

Trustee News

Farewell to both Tracey Jackson and Jayne Eyre, who retired at our recent AGM. Thank you to them for their sterling contribution over the years.



Our Board of Trustees at our recent AGM

Our audio walks - talk the walk!

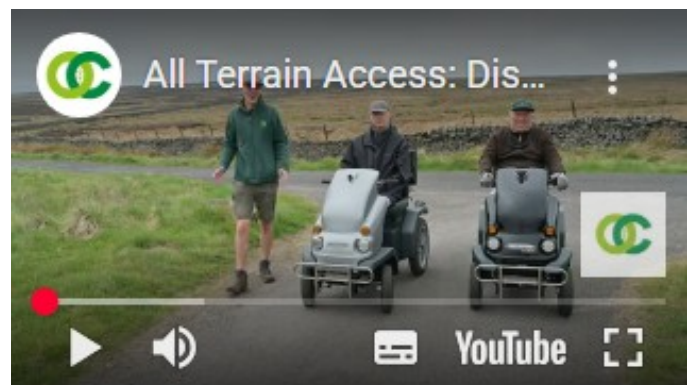
Tom has recently added to our range of audio walks with a brand new walk around Walton Colliery, Anglers and Barnsley Canal. Why not check this and our other audio walks out on:

www.opencountry.org.uk/audio-walks



Our access films

You might also be interested in our growing selection of five access videos. You can watch our members using Trampers to tackle the rugged conditions of Fountains Earth Moor, or see our Ripon Tandem Club enjoying an evening ride through Studley Royal Deer Park. They are all currently on the 'Nidderdale' page of the 'Access projects' section of our website, or you can find them on the Open Country Youtube channel. We'll be adding to our video library as the year goes on.



Nidderdale News

Work will start on the ground in the new year on our ambitious inclusive access projects at Beecroft Plantation, Druid's Temple and Toft Gate Lime Kiln. Funded by DEFRA, all work has to be done by March 17th, so we'll bring you updates in the next newsletter!



Nidderdale
National
Landscape

With Open Country, life's a GAS!

Our 2025 Good Access Scheme Conference was a resounding success. Almost thirty delegates attended, including people from Yorkshire Water, Peak District National Park and the Howardian Hills National Landscape. Held at the Yorkshire Arboretum, guests explored the grounds using the site's all-terrain Trampers.

We shared best practice ideas and enjoyed talks from the *Alzheimer's Society* on 'Dementia Friends' and *Natural England* on the 'Centre for Outdoor Accessibility Training'.

We loved hearing about recent access "wins" from attendees, but the highlight was presenting the 2025 Good Access Scheme Award to the amazing volunteers of *Burley-in-Wharfedale Walkers are Welcome*. They're incredibly active in making their beautiful surroundings more inclusive for all. Recent activities have included:

- Creating a new circular route.
- Installing benches along paths.
- Encouraging the installation of wider gates to replace stiles.
- Working with us to create our new Burley-in-Wharfedale Breakfree pack with 12 accessible routes.

The award was richly deserved, and even more impressive as the work is entirely volunteer-led. Their hard graft has made a real difference to local access in Burley-in-Wharfedale.



David and Anne pick up their coveted 2025 GAS award

It was also great to finally give last year's winner, Debbie North from *Access The Dales*, their 2024 award.

A huge thank you to everyone who attended and to *North Yorkshire Council's* 'Inspire Fund' for sponsoring this event. Next year's Conference will be held at Burley-in-Wharfedale on **Friday 13th November 2026**.



Well done also to Access the Dales!

Harrogate Hub News

The Deaf Café

Recently we had the pleasure of visiting the Deaf Café at Harrogate Library where we were welcomed by some friendly regulars. We shared a short talk about Open Country and the many activities we offer, from countryside outings to our walking groups and nature-themed adventures. Our visit sparked real interest and we're hopeful we'll be seeing some new faces on future trips! Building connections with local communities is an important part of our work and it was inspiring to meet people keen to explore the outdoors with us.

If any of our volunteers use British Sign Language (BSL), we'd love to hear from you as these skills could be incredibly valuable in helping us make our activities even more accessible.

Harrogate Advisory Group

Our next meeting will be held on **Tuesday 3rd March 2026**, 6.30 - 8.30pm. All regular members are welcome. We are still looking for a Walking Group club rep - please tell us if you are interested.

Volunteer News

Welcome Aboard!

A warm welcome to new volunteers Angela Brewin, Caroline Gallagher and Caroline Midwood who are helping out with our weekday 'Wanderers' and 'Explorers' groups, and James Warburton who joined the Harrogate Tandems - we are really delighted you have all joined us!

Happy Andyversary!

Congratulations to Andy Darby, who recently celebrated 20 years of volunteering with Open Country. Over the past two decades Andy has been involved in both the Harrogate and Wakefield hubs, helping out on many activities, including tandem cycling, weekend outings and walks. With his patience, loyalty, experience, and most importantly, his robust sense of humour, Andy is a fantastic supporter of Open Country. Thank you for your invaluable contribution, Andy!

Thank You Andy!
for 20 years of volunteering
with Open Country



Thank you to all our fantastic volunteers across our three hubs. We really appreciate your support and the time you give to help our activities run smoothly - we wish you all the best for Christmas and look forward to more adventures in the new year!



Wakefield Hub News

Hello, Goodbye!

Welcome to our new Countryside Activities Officer, Gemma. She will run our Nature Force and Wild Things groups and will be driving the minibus on our weekend outings from the middle of February. Gemma's previous roles include community gardening and we're gearing up to get growing in the polytunnel this Spring. She is also a willow weaver and has been making wreaths and lanterns with Wild Things and will be working on more crafty creations through 2026.

Farewell to Sophie, who has been a key volunteer with Trailblazers and is leaving to work at a school in Lupsett. A big thanks to Sophie for all the energy and enthusiasm she brought to our activities.



Gemma & Sophie brew up at Ferryboat Fields

Our next Wakefield Advisory Group meeting is on **Monday 12th January from 5.30 - 7.00pm** in the classroom at Thornes Park Nursery. The Advisory Group is your opportunity to share your ideas and suggestions with the

Wakefield Team and helps shape the design of our activities and improve the way we work. If you would like to join the group, please contact Simon at wakefield@opencountry.org.uk and put 'Advisory Group' in the subject line.

Wild about Woodlands

"Every creation begins with a walk in the woods" Matt Tommey, basketry artist.

Our Wild about Woodlands project comes to an end in January. Thanks to all the creative people who've delivered workshops and shared their skills with Wild Things and our Volunteers, including printing, weaving, sketching and photography. We hope to develop these activities and introduce them to our other groups in the year ahead. Supported by Wakefield Council Culture Grant.

Harry Birthday to you!

Harry Birdsall, Open Country's oldest current member, turns 100 years young in February. An amazing individual and a veteran of the WWII Normandy Landings, we owe Harry and his generation a great deal. Many happy returns of the day, Harry!

Right - Harley on his Harry Davidson



Want to explore accessible places in West Yorkshire?

At Open Country, we understand how difficult it can be for people with disabilities and their carers to find reliable information about visiting the countryside. That's why we produce a series of 'Countryside Directories for People with Disabilities' to help you discover accessible places!

Our newest directory covers West Yorkshire and is full of inspiration for ideas and opportunities to get stuck into the great outdoors.

You'll find information on:

- Walking clubs
- Wheelchair-friendly walks and outings
- Wildlife clubs and organisations
- Sports and outdoor pursuits

It's now available online to read or download at www.opencountry.org.uk (along with our other directories). Hard copies are being printed now and will be available soon. Order your copy today!

We'd love any feedback you may have on this or any of our access resources. A huge thank you to *West Yorkshire Combined Authority* and *CityConnect* for funding the production and printing!



Please email info@opencountry.org.uk if you would prefer to receive our newsletter electronically or if you want to be taken off our mailing list.

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