

# The coast is clear!

After more than 50 years of campaigning, new legislation is finally giving the public access rights to almost the entire English coast. **David Foster** explores the intriguing background to this historic victory for walkers, while Defra minister **Huw Irranca-Davies** and BBC Coast presenter **Mark Horton** give their reactions to the news

Barely a month before the General Election in May 2005, the Labour Party pledged to make better coastal access an early priority for its third term. Yet this wasn't the first time that the party had turned its attention to Britain's love affair with the coast – way back in 1949, Clement Attlee's National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act was passed on a tide of public reaction to wartime austerity.

Attlee's legislation laid the foundations of our rights-of-way network and National Trails, as well as our nature reserves and National Parks. "But despite these successes," says Ramblers senior policy officer, Justin Cooke, "the complex arrangements for coast and countryside access in the Act simply didn't work. Even the National Parks gave up on them."

At the dawn of the new millennium, Parliament revisited the problem of access to open country. "When they got round to the Countryside & Rights of Way Act, the Government lifted the definition of open country straight out of the 1949 Act," says Justin Cooke. "It turned out to be easier to open up inland areas than the coastline, but the CRoW Act left the door open to include coastal land later on."

The Ramblers knocked on that door straight after the General Election, working closely with the Government's advisers and fellow members of Wildlife & Countryside Link (an umbrella body ▶

Bat's Head,  
Dorset



After 2012, coastal access can no longer be denied

of environmental organisations) on all aspects of the draft Marine & Coastal Access Bill. This massive new bill covered all aspects of marine development, biodiversity and environmental protection, as well as enhanced recreational access to the English coastline.

### A new National Trail

“Early in 2007, just before the draft Bill was published, Natural England invited us to a confidential briefing with landowners, farmers and other countryside users,” says Justin. “After two years of consultation and research, they’d concluded that simply extending open access to coastal land wouldn’t be the best way forward – and that was a big surprise to most people. But, after a couple of days of discussion, we began to understand why.”

Natural England argued that it would be impractical to show a thin strip of coastal access land on Ordnance Survey’s Explorer maps, as was done for more extensive inland areas of mountain, moor and downland. Instead, they suggested a tailor-made solution for the 21st century.

“Natural England proposed going right back to the 1949 Act to create a new National Trail around the English coast, together with additional CROW Act access land or ‘spreading room’ between the trail and the sea,” says Justin Cooke. “We could see the benefits of that approach – opening up the countryside after the CROW Act mainly benefited serious walkers, especially in areas such as the Yorkshire Dales, where access increased dramatically.”

“But the coastline is different. It attracts millions of holidaymakers every year, most of them not regular walkers. A new coastal trail will benefit many more people. They’ll have the certainty of knowing where they can walk – and the Trail will get them involved in walking after their holiday.”

### Groundbreaking legal powers

Natural England worked closely with Defra to design the new bill and ensure the legislation will be workable. “We expect the National Trail to be continuous around the open coast, and 95% of



### Ramblers on the case

With a background in the CROW Act, East Yorkshire & Derwent Ramblers’ access officer, Tom Halstead, began working on coastal access in spring 2006. “The Yorkshire coast divides into two sections,” he says. “There’s very little secure public access from Spurn Head to Bridlington – in many places, the coast is eroding very quickly, so any paths are continually lost to the sea. But things are much better between Bridlington and Ravenscar, where the Cleveland Way follows the coast north of Filey.” And he should know. Tom and a team of volunteers walked the entire coastline

to compile a record of its paths and access points. Check out their findings at [www.yorkramblers.org.uk](http://www.yorkramblers.org.uk)

Mike Jordan is an access officer on the Isle of Wight. “I noticed the Bill’s wording excludes Islands like ours that aren’t accessible on foot via a bridge or causeway,” says Mike. He contacted the Island’s MP, Andrew Turner, and received assurances from Defra Minister Jonathan Shaw that the island would be included in the official Order. The new legislation could help Mike’s case for better access to Queen Victoria’s former estate at Osborne, where the coastal path makes a 6km/4-mile diversion on busy roads.



Ravenscar, North Yorkshire

users will be on that trail,” says policy manager Paul Johnson. “It should be obvious on the ground, giving users the confidence and certainty to follow it, even without a map. If it isn’t, we’ll have failed!”

The agency will have radical new powers to accommodate coastal erosion in areas such as North Yorkshire, where the Cleveland Way has been one victim of a very mobile coastline. In these places, the new National Trail will move inland on a safe, rolling alignment as the coastline recedes. “This is groundbreaking stuff – in every sense,” says Paul.

### FAQs

**Will the legislation apply only in England?**  
Yes. Walkers in Scotland already enjoy access to most open countryside, including the coast.

The Wales Coast Path should be completed by 2012.  
**Who will be able to use England’s Coastal National Trail?**

The Bill creates access only for walkers, but Natural England will include horse-riders and cyclists where possible. Any existing

access rights will continue.  
**Will I be able to take my dog?**  
Dogs will have to be under close control at





“This is groundbreaking stuff – in every sense”  
*Paul Johnson, policy manager, Natural England*

East Cliff, Burton Bradstock, Dorset

**£284 million**  
 Estimated extra income for coastal economies from the new coastal path



Learning lessons from its work on the CRoW Act, Natural England has completed an office-based audit of existing access, including data from all 53 coastal local authorities. “There’s already secure and satisfactory access to about two-thirds of England’s coastline,” says Paul, “although the public may also find more limited opportunities in other areas.”

On the Cumbrian coast, Andrew Best is one of Natural England’s access advisors working with the county council, farmers, wildlife trusts and the Ramblers. One of several pilot projects around the coast, his team is testing techniques to open up access along a ‘typical’ coastline, away from nature reserves or National Trust land.

“Cumbria County Council and the local access ▶



**Huw Irranca-Davies MP,  
 Minister for Marine and Wildlife**

“The passing into law of the Marine and Coastal Access Act will be welcome news to all those who love walking around our coastline. It’s been a long, hard road to get here, but now we’ve arrived, I’m sure you’ll all agree it’s been worth it. A popular campaign became a manifesto commitment that became a Government priority. And now – together – we have made it a reality.

Our coastline offers some of the most beautiful scenery and breathtaking (sometimes literally!) walks, and it’s something that we should all enjoy and reap the benefits from. That’s why we’ve worked so hard on this new Act, so we can all access the coast and take those long walks, alone or with family and friends, shaking off the stress of the working week.

I have long been an enthusiastic walker myself, exploring my own backyard – the South Wales valleys, the Brecons and Gower – during my early years and, later, every corner of the UK and beyond. For all of us, the free physical exercise and wellbeing it brings is clear, as well as the multilayered enjoyment of the countryside. I hope the new coastal path will inspire many more to venture out, get fit and explore the best of our coast and country.

While getting the Act through Parliament has been a long process, this is only the beginning. Now we have to start mapping out the route. Natural England will be working on what route the path will follow, which will involve discussions with local groups, businesses and landowners. We’ve already said that the first section to be completed will be in Weymouth, where the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games sailing events will be held, in time for the lighting of the Olympic flame.

Your support during the passage of the Act has been hugely welcome. During my meetings with the Ramblers, your enthusiasm for better coastal access for walkers has been an inspiration. I would like to thank you all for your backing and continued support as we work to develop the route. And I know that, when it’s ready, you’ll be the first out there enjoying it.”



Flamborough Head, North Yorkshire

all times, and kept on a lead when near livestock. Existing summer restrictions on some beaches will continue.

**What happens at estuaries?**  
 Usually, walkers will cross at the first bridge or convenient ferry. But Natural England

may decide to continue the Trail right round an estuary.  
**What if I wander off the Trail?**  
 In most places you’ll be

able to walk, climb or picnic anywhere between the Trail and the sea. Access will be limited in areas such as ports and private

gardens, and some national restrictions will also apply.  
**When can I start walking?**  
 In sections, from 2012.



Coastal erosion at Birling Gap, East Sussex

forum have been really enthusiastic,” says Andrew. “Everyone we’ve met has been so co-operative – even our critics have been really constructive.” His team has already collected a mass of data about existing footpaths, designated landscapes, planning and wildlife issues, and is now ‘walking the course’ and listening to the views of farmers and landowners.

### The path ahead

Now the Marine & Coastal Access Act has come into force, similar projects will work towards a consensus on access right around the coast. The 1949 Act requires an official National Trail route map, and Ordnance Survey will probably show it on their Explorer maps, too. By default, the spreading room will include all the cliffs and beaches seaward of the Trail, so they’re unlikely to need mapping.

In places, the spreading room may run inland to a nearby wall or road. There will also be some sensible exclusions such as ports, power stations and military training areas, with diversions around them providing essential continuity. Natural England’s proposals include exclusions or restrictions, similar to those already used on some CRoW access land, to allow for the needs of farmers and wildlife.

Justin Cooke is delighted with the progress so far, but he’s still concerned about access to a handful of large parks and private estates such as Beaulieu, in the New Forest. In these cases, Natural England has the power to negotiate an agreed and permanent way through, and Government may take further measures when it reviews progress in five years’ time.

Local businesses might welcome that. The South West Coast Path already injects more than £300 million into the regional economy every year and research by the Ramblers suggests the English coastal path will generate life-changing sums to revitalise struggling coastal towns, retain vital services

## Forbidden shores

- 1** At Pilling Bank in Lancashire, the local authority has closed all rights of way along the flood defences.
- 2** Over a quarter of the Durham coast path, near Horden, follows ‘permissive’ paths that can be closed without notice.
- 3** After Yorkshire’s Cleveland Way ends at Filey, the way south is blocked by several private holiday villages.
- 4** There’s no legal pathway between King’s Lynn and Hunstanton in Norfolk, and no access to Snettisham Beach.
- 5** The Isle of Wight coastal path is forced inland around Osborne House, now owned by English Heritage.



“It’s been a really positive campaign, with members and volunteers pitching in”

*Justin Cooke, Ramblers’ senior policy officer*









Volunteers fly kites for the campaign

and boost local job markets.

It could happen very soon. The Government has already announced that the first stretch of new coastal path will open at Weymouth – home of the Olympic sailing events – in time for 2012. “As legislation goes, things have moved quickly,” says Justin. “With the CRoW Act experience behind us, we’ve avoided the previous scare stories about gates left

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY, CORBIS, GETTY IMAGES, ISTOCKPHOTO, BEBCOAST

### Countdown to coastal access

<p><b>1949</b> </p> <p>National Parks &amp; Access to the Countryside Act sets the ball rolling</p>	<p><b>1969</b> </p> <p>Cleveland Way National Trail opens up Yorkshire’s coastline</p>	<p><b>1970</b> </p> <p>Pembrokeshire Coast Path unlocks 186 miles of Welsh coastal walking</p>	<p><b>1978</b> </p> <p>The 630-mile South-West Coast Path becomes England’s longest National Trail</p>	<p><b>2000</b> </p> <p>Countryside &amp; Rights of Way Act revives the access agenda</p>	<p><b>2005</b> </p> <p>The Labour Party pledges better coastal access</p>
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**Protecting vistas under the sea**

As well as coastal access, the Marine & Coastal Access Act also makes provisions for the creation of England's first Marine Conservation Zones, providing National Park-style protection for landscapes beneath the waves. England's near-shore waters contain some of the most dramatic marine topography and wildlife in the world, with sea-grass meadows, kelp forests and maerl beds, all shimmering with colour.

To raise public awareness, Natural England has designed a series of maps showing the beauty and variety of England's under-sea landscapes. You'll find the national map free inside this edition of *walk*, and there are five other regional maps to download from [www.naturalengland.org.uk/undersea](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/undersea).



open and a countryside covered in litter. None of that happened with access land – and it won't happen on the coast, either.”

It has, he says, been a more gentle discussion, “debating with Natural England and Defra, talking to Ministers and MPs, keeping up the momentum. Natural England had taken two years to do their research. We didn't want all that work to just sit on a shelf – we wanted to push it forward.

“It's been a really positive campaign. Members and volunteers pitched in, studying draft legislation, highlighting improvements, writing to their MPs and joining in fun activities with kites [below left] or sticks of rock. And they've topped it all off by sending 20,000 postcards to the Secretary of State, thanking him for including coastal access in the Marine Bill.” ■

**For more detailed FAQs about the Marine & Coastal Access Act and the latest news on the coastal path's progress, visit [www.ramblers.org.uk/campaigns/claim+the+coast.htm](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/campaigns/claim+the+coast.htm)**

**2,923km/1,827 miles**

English coast satisfactory, legally secure path (66%)



**Mark Horton, presenter of the BBC's Coast**

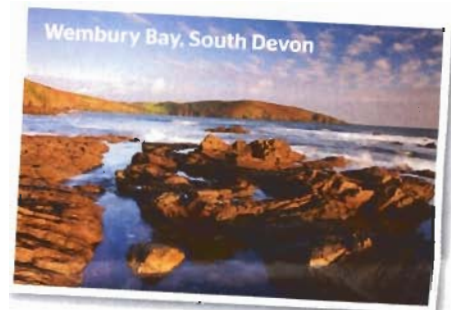
“We'd nearly completed filming the first series back in 2005, going right round the coast, to every nock and crag, seeing the most spectacular scenery on our way. Then, for the final episode, each of us, as expert presenters, was invited to get on our soap box and argue a cause. For me, it was quite simple: we needed

to ensure proper public access to our spectacular coastal landscapes.

Before filming *Coast*, I hadn't really thought about how little of England's coastline was accessible, and that soon we might expect the kind of fences found on many Mediterranean beaches. The extraordinary complexities of ownership mean the innocent activity of enjoying our coast more often than not involves some kind of trespass, whether intended or not.

In order to highlight this problem, we filmed at Wembury, on the spectacular south coast of Devon. Owned and used for decades by the MoD as a firing range, it is a

particular wildlife jewel, with beaches and rockpools that are a Special Area of Conservation. Until recently, the coastal footpath had to make a big diversion to avoid the area, but, in 2004, the MoD offered the site to the National Trust at the 'knock-down' price of £750,000. This substantial sum had to be raised by public



subscription and then even more was needed to clear the site of its military debris – a total of about £1.4 million.

Of course, such expensive solutions to access cannot be afforded for the whole of our coast. So, thankfully, at the same time our first series was airing on television, the Government became excited that coastal access could be created through primary legislation. Four years later, that legislation is a reality and, if all goes to plan, England will be the first country in the world with a continuous coastal path.

I'm absolutely thrilled that, at long last, we will soon have almost complete access to our coastline. It is due in no small measure to the hard lobbying of the Ramblers, and the vision of Natural England. I will be able to walk along my favourite bits of cliff and not have to turn around at notices declaring 'No public access beyond this point', or make long detours to avoid obstinate landowners or their tenants.

The coast belongs to all of us and we should celebrate it! ☺☺

**2009**  
Marine & Coastal Access Bill set to receive Royal Assent

**2010**  
Natural England begins implementing coastal access

**2012**  
Welsh coastal path scheduled for completion and first section of English path opens in Weymouth

**2014**  
Parliament reviews access through private coastal estates

**2014**  
First stages of the 'English Coastal National Trail' open for walkers

**2020**  
England's Coastal National Trail completed!