CROWDSOURCING BRITAIN'S LOST PATHS

Great Britain's leading walking charity, the Ramblers, is on a mission to protect the ability of people to enjoy the sense of freedom and benefits that come from being outdoors on foot.

Most of the charity's work is done by members who volunteer their time. Over the past 60 years, they have dramatically increased the ability of the public to access the countryside.

From January 2026, it will no longer be possible to record historical public rights over any paths that haven't been recorded on the definitive maps of England and Wales since 1949.

Project overview

The need

The Ramblers needed to find and map historic rights of way before they were lost forever.

The challenge

Due to the scale of the project, it was impossible for the charity to gather the information required without help. The Ramblers needed a crowd sourcing platform that would inspire and enable a keen army of volunteers to find and map as many rights of way as possible.

Key requirements

The Don't Lose Your Way platform had to:

- Be intuitive to use
- Be capable of handling high user volumes
- Allow users to compare historic maps to current Ordnance Survey (OS) maps
- Enable users to annotate the maps
- Ready for launch at the same time as a press campaign

Our solution

We recommended a custom-built map which would allow volunteers or 'citizen geographers' to compare each of 154,000 one km square old maps with new and record any 'missing' footpaths, bridleways or public highways as a potential 'lost' right of way or road.

Each square was allocated and searched by two volunteers. Once complete, verifiers cross-checked the annotated maps and combined each square into a final definitive version. These were stitched together into a seamless dataset.

Technical overview

Our solution used open source geo technologies including OpenLayers, MapProxy, GDAL and PostGIS. These systems enabled our team to create a highly intuitive interface.
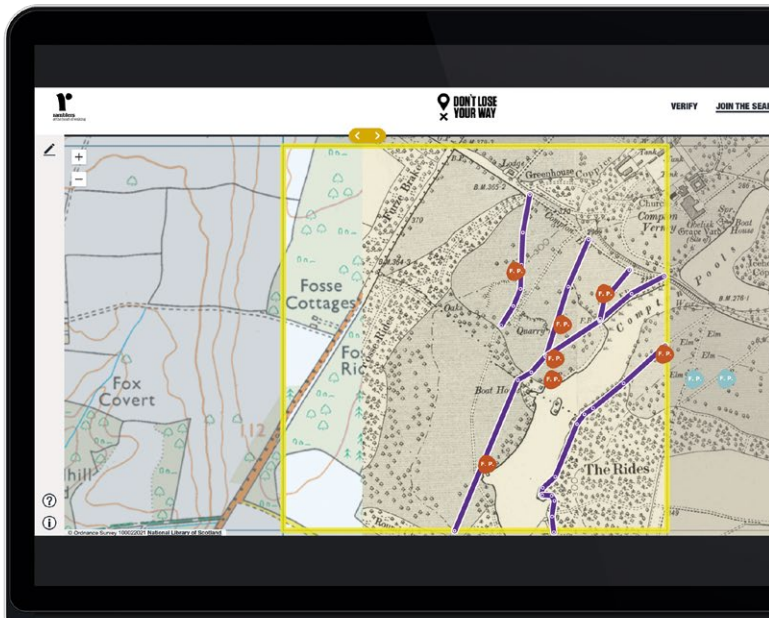
Digitizing tools were used to allow volunteers to trace paths and tracks that were apparent on historic Ordnance Survey maps but not detailed on current walking maps. APIs ensured that large amounts of information could be easily exchanged.

Map overview

A slider enabled volunteers to 'spot the difference' between historic mapping and current OS maps.

The datasets used were:
- Great Britain - OS Six Inch, 1888-1913
- Bartholomew Half Inch, 1897-1907
- Current OS maps at 1:25,000

> "Working with Astun has enabled us to produce, for the first time, a comprehensive map of lost paths across England and Wales. Having this easy to use tool attracted thousands of volunteers and we managed to search the whole country in just six weeks.
>
> Astun's problem-solving, flexible and expert approach to this project has been much appreciated."

Programme Manager
Don't Lose Your Way

Don't Lose Your Way in numbers

96,000 Square miles searched

3,200+ People joined the search

49,138 Miles of lost paths found across England and Wales

> "Few charities have their own GIS teams and The Ramblers is no exception. As a result, it needed to partner with an organisation that had the skills and technology to meet their needs and the discipline to ensure that the project would go live on time."

Dan Ormsby
Head of Operations, Astun Technology Ltd

Results

Our solution enabled The Ramblers to find over 49,000 miles of lost paths in England and Wales, almost five times the original estimate.

- Over 3,000 volunteers were able to participate with the top volunteer mapping a staggering 21,784 squares

- Our custom-built tool enabled The Ramblers to stitch the individual vectors into a final seamless path network

- If all the missing paths were re-established as public rights of way it would increase the path network in England and Wales by up to a third

Next steps

The Ramblers is now in a race against time to build the historic evidence base needed for path applications. Once legally recorded as rights of way, they will be protected in law for future generations.

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