



■ Gentlemen
climbers
from the
early days
of the
Yorkshire
Ramblers.

Rambling back into history

The men of the Yorkshire Ramblers Club are reliving the past to celebrate their present. But rambling has nothing to do with it, as **David Overend** explains.

The Yorkshire Ramblers' Club is showing its age — all 100 years of it. But for a seemingly elitist, all-male society with a name conjuring up gentle strolls through green meadows, the YRC is definitely not sitting back, counting its wrinkles and waiting for a telegram from The Queen. It is reliving its past and preparing for a new century.

It is also determined to shake off the misleading image conjured up by its name. *Rambling*, says the modern dictionary, is the act of wandering here and there, taking a short stroll or brief excursion off the beaten track.

In Queen Victoria's time, rambling obviously meant something far different because a gentle stroll has always been far removed from the escapades of the YRC.

From the very first day of its birth, when four men met in a Leeds pub in July 1892, the club has indulged passionately in energetic pastimes such as caving, climbing and mountaineering.

And with the energy and commitment shown by the founding fathers, the present-day members aim to celebrate their centenary in true YRC style. "It's a bit like the question, 'Why do you climb mountains?' — because they are there." "Why are we celebrating our centenary? — because it's there," says Howard Papworth, climber and marathon runner who this month leaves in a team of 12 for Norway and the Norsk Project.

This involves 11 days of gruelling cross-country skiing which forms just one part of this year's birthday bash.

"What we are trying to do is reflect some of the things the club has done in those 100 years. The key events in the past have been what I describe as climbing down and climbing

up; pot holing and a lot of rock climbing, and mountaineering, both in this country and around the world.

"In the last year or two, rock climbing, having fallen in popularity so to speak, has come up again. But caving now needs a revival. At one time it was the strength of the club. It was *the thing*."

Just how much caving has dominated the first 100 years of the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club can be seen by delving into the records.

In 1895, when Frenchman Edouard Alfred Martel became the first man to intentionally set foot at the bottom of Caping Gill, the pothole which plunges more than 300ft into the limestone beneath the slopes of Ingleborough, he spurred the YRC into action.

Yorkshiresmen may have been robbed of the glory of being the first to conquer the county's greatest descent, but there was a wonderland of caves waiting to be discovered and explored, and the Frenchman's achievement got them going down into this grave, new world.

Hanging on hemp ropes and with candles stuck in their bowler hats, Yorkshire Ramblers opened up the likes of Rowten Pot and Boggart's Roaring Hole. The age of the caver had arrived. It has never really departed.

While all this was going on, other club members were gaining fame on rocks and mountains. Notable among them was William Cecil Slingsby, an early president, who was to join a list of honorary members which included the legendary Edward Whymper.

Slingsby climbed and conquered most of the peaks in Norway — a feat which today's members hope to emulate as



■ It was
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gone by.

part of their centenary celebrations.

In July and August this year, the YRC plans to tackle most, if not all of Slingsby's three dozen mountains.

"It doesn't mean to say we are out to climb them all. Not many people have done a lot of climbing in Norway; the weather can be very unpredictable," says Papworth, who, at 35, is one of the younger members of today's YRC.

"We have a fixed membership of 200 and we have about 190 members at present. It's not really practical to have more than 200. But we want a few younger people to join. Some might say the club is perhaps a bit top heavy in terms of age."

It is also exclusively male,

with most members following in their father's footsteps or being invited to join by friends and acquaintances. While wives and girlfriends are welcome at social events, the real work of the YRC is preserved for men.

But there is a growing rumbling of belief from deep within the club that women with the ability and credentials to tackle mountains and caves and all such other strenuous activities, ought to be allowed to pay their £25 a year and hold a membership card.

But while times certainly are changing, the Ramblers are out to make 1992 a year to remember — even if it is not the year the century-old door is prised open to allow women to enter.

Apart from the Norsk Project around Norway's Jotunheim Mountains, and the bid to emulate Slingsby's memorable mountaineering exploits, the club has its eyes set on a achieving a remarkable tour of all the Yorkshire peaks above 2,000ft.

"If one was to walk the whole thing, it is a round trip of almost 120 miles and with a total ascent of 17,000ft," says Papworth, who although he lives outside Yorkshire borders is a leading force in the centenary celebrations. "Some people will do the whole thing while others will walk just a few." The 26 tops will be tackled over the Easter weekend.

Three months later, history really will be recreated when a party of Ramblers

abandons the fells for the underground delights of Rowten Pot, the scene of some of their greatest exploits in the early years of cave exploration.

Authenticity being the name of this particular game, old hemp rope ladders with wooden rungs will replace modern lightweight metal, and expedition members will be expected to dress for the occasion in plus-fours.

Safety helmets will be in the form of bowler hats, and lighting will be provided by candles.

The original event is well chronicled in the club's journals, so knowing what to wear on the big day is a simple matter of reading up on history.

Over the century, the YRC — the second oldest mountaineering club in England — has kept scrupulous records of the achievements and activities of its members. These, together with numerous books, are now in Leeds Library.

There is no volume to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary — the Second World War put paid to that and claimed the lives of several club members — but there is a journal commemorating the seventieth year. It ends with the words: "The very reason for the club's existence is the comradeship engendered by the gathering together of kindred spirits and the fellowship of the outdoors."

The same testament applies today — even if the aura of exclusivity still lingers and the name Yorkshire Ramblers' Club belies the adventurous, explorative nature of members both past and present.

Back in 1892, in the Skyrack Inn, Headingley, the founding fathers had pondered long and hard before christening their fledgling club. They had no idea of the misconception they were creating.

"Rambling is the last thing we do," says Howard Papworth. "Cross-country skiing in minus 30 degrees is a far cry from what people associate with rambling. We are out to dispel that myth."

The centenary celebrations should go a long way to achieving that aim.