

# Nearly 2,000 miles of Suffolk footpaths at risk

How can you help to save some of the county's walking routes? **Danielle Lett** reports

Rambling is a long-standing pastime for many across the UK. With thousands of miles of pathways and routes out there, they allow easy access to some of the country's most beautiful and scenic spots.

But with new legislation coming in meaning that any routes not already documented on the definitive map by 2026 will be lost forever, ramblers and volunteers are racing to get them marked down before it's too late with the help of the Don't Lose Your Way campaign.

Established by The Ramblers, Don't Lose Your Way aims to collate evidence needed to build and submit applications for any unmarked footpaths and bridleways, which will allow them to be added to the definitive map. Any routes not added by the January 1 2026 cut-off date will not be eligible for inclusion at a later date.

According to The Ramblers, an estimated 1,918 miles of path could be lost across Suffolk if not added to the definitive map before 2026.

"The definitive map is a legal document and the absolute conclusive proof that what is on there is public right of way. Prior to this, if you walked in the countryside on a footpath, you could be challenged," explains James Richards, area footpaths secretary for the Suffolk branch of The Ramblers'.

"The introduction of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 required county councils, with the help of parish councils, to draw up and maintain definitive maps, which outlined the rights of way within their jurisdiction. These maps were originally to be reviewed

every five years but now, the definitive map may be modified at any time if someone produces evidence proving a path should be added. The county council may make an order, but it may be objected to, in which case there will be a public inquiry and an inspector from the planning inspectorate would then decide if the order would be confirmed.

"With the Don't Lose Your Way campaign, people all over the country have been looking at old maps, side by side with modern-day ones to see which footpaths and bridleways are not currently shown as recorded rights of way. But this is only the first stage. If we want to claim any to have them added to the definitive map, we would need to produce as much historical and legal evidence as possible. This would include documents such as enclosure awards and tithe map records. It's a complicated subject, and not many people know about it."

However, one man has spent the best part of five decades documenting and immortalising hundreds of paths across Suffolk.

John Andrews is an avid Rambler, and has been mapping Suffolk's walking routes since 1974. "I joined the ramblers in 1970, as I wanted to walk around the countryside, but I couldn't find any public footpaths that were in a decent condition to walk. In addition, there were few

of them compared to other parts of the country."

Although he is currently based in Scotland, he is still working closely with the Suffolk arm of The Ramblers, spearheading the group's efforts to preserve and map some of the county's byways before it's too late.

"I'm still involved as I'm still pursuing a number of cases with the county council thanks to the internet. There's no pretending it's an easy task though – it's all a matter of evidence. It's not a question of saying 'there should be a path here', it must be proved, and there are two ways of doing this.

"One is the method I use, which is investigating old documents to prove the case. When looking for old documentary evidence, it's almost entirely from the public record offices in Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich. A lot of the routes I managed to get put on the definitive map arose from my discovery of documents that went all the way back to the 18th century, which were mapped and

formally recorded as such.

"The other way is to take evidence from local people who have been walking these paths themselves, and are witness to that fact. These people will have been using certain routes for generations."

Recently, John managed to get an eight-mile stretch of footpath near Bury St Edmunds added to the definitive map. Icknield Way is an ancient trackway that goes from Norfolk, all the way down to Wiltshire. John was able to claim eight miles of that route, therefore making it part of the public rights of way network and accessible to all.

Some of the evidence that helped cement its place on the map included a 1945 photograph from the RAF, an 18th century map and a book by poet Edward Thomas which referred to the Icknield Way.

While John and The Ramblers are happy with this success, along with many others previously, there's still a long way to go – and the group always welcomes

anyone who may wish to volunteer in the preservation of Suffolk's pathways.

"A lot of people will not know whether the paths they're using are on the rights of way map or not, but they can find this out via their parish or town council, as they will each have a website on which the complete mapping will be shown," explains John.

"If you live in a village and wish to help, start by talking to older people to see if they think the footpaths they've always used are not on the maps – there will likely be quite a lot of those.

"There's then a process where people sign evidence forms to say they've used certain routes for a number of years as a right of way without being stopped. The more of those there are, the stronger the case for preserving these paths."

**To find out more about the Don't Lose Your Way campaign, visit [www.ramblers.org.uk](http://www.ramblers.org.uk), or contact James Richards at [suffolkramblersafps@gmail.com](mailto:suffolkramblersafps@gmail.com)**



Ramblers have until 2026 to get any undocumented paths added to the definitive map

Picture: ARCHANT ARCHIVES

Nearly 2,000 miles worth of Suffolk routes are at risk of being lost if not added to the definitive map before the 2026 cut-off date. Inset, Ramblers enjoying the Suffolk countryside, prior to lockdown

Pictures: GETTY IMAGES/MAL HURRELL/ARCHANT ARCHIVES



Ickniel Way in Bury St Edmunds, one of the paths that rambler John Andrews has managed to get added to the definitive map  
Picture: LINDSAY WANT

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