

Founding member of the Yorkshire Dales Society, Colin Speakman, reflects on the humble beginnings of the charity.

“Local people with a love of the special qualities of the National Park, and who believed in the protection of this special landscape, felt they did not have a voice. They felt there was a negative perception that that somehow the National Park was a “bad thing” preventing economic growth by draconian planning laws. We knew this was not an accurate picture, and that the Yorkshire Dales National Park was in fact subject to the identical planning laws as in other parts of Britain.

At the same time we also felt that there needed to be a bridge between people who loved and cared for the Dales who lived outside the National Park boundary, and those who lived within. We wanted to support the ideals of conservation of the area as a nationally important asset, whilst recognising that the only way such a special landscape of the Yorkshire Dales can be protected is through a vibrant local economy. Essentially the Yorkshire Dales is a cultural, not a purely natural landscape. A phrase we coined at that time is as true today as it was in 1980 – “A Landscape is a People”.

As a result of these early meetings it was decided to establish a Dales-based organisation to promote exactly that kind of understanding and to support Dales communities and efforts for conservation whilst at the same time creating dialogue between urban and rural communities. So in April 1981, the Yorkshire Dales Society was born.

A small committee was established, with its first Chairman, Grassington based dentist, Councillor and former Chairman of the National Park Committee, Keith Lockyer. Colin and Fleur Speakman were its first Secretaries and with help from solicitor Jerry Pearlman the Society was successfully established as a registered charity and later as a company limited by guarantee.

Among our Founding members were Dr Arthur Raistrick, the great Dales historian. A limestone bench has been placed by the Society in the meadowland picnic area at Grassington National Park Centre, carved with geological and lead-mining motifs to celebrate his life and work, and commemorating him as the Yorkshire Dales Society’s Dalesman of the Millennium.

Other notable founding members were scholar, Arthur Dower, brother of John Dower who wrote the influential Dower Report which helped set up National Parks in Britain, Mrs Pauline Dower, John’s widow, the Dales author and photographer, Geoffrey Wright, and Marie Hartley and Joan Ingilby, the celebrated Dales historians and writers.

Since those early days the Society has grown to around 1,000 members, many living within the Yorkshire Dales or Nidderdale AONB, others in nearby towns and cities, many from other parts of the UK, and some worldwide. The charity now plays a leading role within the Dales in campaigning for a prosperous, sustainable and accessible Yorkshire Dales.

The charity also works to support other Dales-based organisations. We had a key role in establishing the Yorkshire Dales Green Lanes Alliance, the Yorkshire Dales Public Transport

Users Group and more recently the highly successful Dales & Bowland Community Interest Company.”