

# ANNUAL REPORT 2015

## STAFFORDSHIRE AREA RAMBLERS



*Picture – Under threat from Council cuts?*

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## **Editorial**

This is an important time for us. As you know the County Council is seeking to make cutbacks and part of this is the way they are looking at their countryside estates. They own 6000 acres in the form of 6 Country Parks, 9 picnic areas and 3 disused railway lines and all of these are subject to the review. There are a number of options ranging from leaving things as they are to a full sell. In between are a number of other options, all of which would have varying effects on these areas.

Area is in consultation with the Council as we have concerns regarding the ranger service, access, footpaths and any commercial development. Other bodies are also expressing their concern and there is an online petition involving general members of the public. Some of the actions are reflected in the articles in Stepout, hence the longer than usual edition prior to the annual reports for this year's AGM.

## **Country Parks under Threat.**

Although not organised by the RA, many members have shown their concern over the proposal to privatise some of Staffordshire's Country parks, and signed the petition and possibly joined the walk on 16<sup>th</sup> August. I have reproduced the organiser's report as many of you will not have seen it. It is encouraging to know that there is such a strength of feeling from Ramblers and non ramblers alike.

*SUCCESSFUL WALK TO SUPPORT THE CAMPAIGN TO SAVE STAFFORDSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE*



It has been an absolutely fantastic day walking the Cannock Chase Heritage Trail in fine weather in great company to highlight a vitally important issue to stop the privatisation of our Countryside

Cannock Chase Green Party was joined by friends and supporters from around Staffordshire and beyond as well as across the political divide to walk the Cannock Chase Heritage Trail on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August to celebrate our fantastic countryside and raise awareness of the 38 degrees petition to “Save our Countryside and AONB” which is now supported by over 10,000 signatories.

The invitation was accepted from a large group of over sixty campaigners to walk the Heritage Trail from Cannock to Rugeley and demonstrate against the Council plans which could see the countryside sold or privatised and our heritage put at risk through planned austerity measures in the County.

Staffordshire County Council are considering options to change the management or ownership of up to 6000 acres of our Countryside across 18 locations in the County including beloved areas including Cannock Chase, Chasewater including Norton Bog and Apedale Community Country Park. Options include the private sale and private management as well as industrial or commercial development or transfer to local community/third sector groups. When this is considered along with the SCC Local Mineral Plan 2015 – 2030, the governmental U-Turn to legal protections of country parks/AONB against fracking developments and the persistent agenda of the Council to privatise our public services. (Capita now deliver our school support services, Amey run our roads and Keir manage our buildings.) We are all collectively concerned for the future of our Countryside, Cuts have Consequences.

It was fantastic to walk through our beautiful countryside in the company of great group of people from diverse backgrounds across the County and beyond to demonstrate our opposition to County plans which could see our Countryside privatised. Passing the 10,000 signature milestone and the great turnout for the walk shows the strength of opposition to Council plans and strengthens our resolve to draw a line that shall not be passed – here and no further!

We continue to highlight the plight of our countryside from the effects of austerity with plans from the local authority to consider private management or ownership of up to 6000 acres of Staffordshire countryside and this is attack on our heritage. The next stage of the



process is the County Scrutiny Committee Meeting on Friday 4<sup>th</sup>September.

As a result of the campaigning **No councillor on the committee supported the sale or private management of our Countryside Estate** and despite the cabinet member trying to re-introduce this at the end of the meeting these options were roundly rejected for every site.

### **More News on Cannock Chase**

Rambler's volunteers continue to support all heathland management projects on Cannock Chase. The Tolkien Trail walk leaflets were introduced with guided walks in February and are available at Marquis Drive and the Hut on Milford Common.

#### *Heritage Environmental Assessment*

Steve Dene, the Staffordshire County Council archaeologist gave an interesting report about this subject. For a number of years

Staffs C.C has been surveying sites and landscapes in the county when development opportunities arose. In the AONB area no development has taken place, so little archaeological investigation has been undertaken so the assessment will help bridge the gap between what is known and not known. A LiDAR survey will take place giving x-ray images of the area including the WW 1 training camps and associated trench system. LiDAR works by peppering the ground with lasers at ground level; it will penetrate heather and has shown up features in woodland areas.

### ***Forestry commission***

Forestry Commission England is working with Sport England on pilot sites for “Active Forest”; this is a legacy from the 2012 Olympic games, they aim to demonstrate that they are supporting 500,000 people nationally in sports in forests. Some new activities may become available at the Chase site including table tennis and volleyball nets, the site will be a test bed of what is reasonable and practical in the context of capacity.

95,000 trees have been planted as part of the re-stocking programme with alternative tree species such as Douglas Fir and Coastal Firs. Tree felling has taken place in Abrahams Valley and Fair oak - this is part of the ongoing management of the forest. Any concerns about the management of the woodland should be directed to the Forester at the Birches Valley Forest Centre.

### ***Rugeley quarry***

CEMEX, who own the quarry, are proposing to set aside some of their unused land to create a wildlife haven and bird sanctuary. If the proposal is approved the site will be managed by the R.S.P.B.

### ***Friends of Cannock Chase***

The group have been successful in applying for lottery funding to further their project “Reaching out – The story of WW1 on Cannock Chase” they have been awarded £9,500 to fund research about activities on Cannock Chase during WW1, this will also include training for volunteers so that the WW1 hut on Marquis Drive can be open to the public more often, and led walks can be organised for members of the public.

### ***Staffordshire c.c countryside estate review***

Following articles in the local press very few people can fail to be aware of this process, some issues of concern to all ramblers have been raised by the proposals, issues of which the area committee are fully aware. Members of the committee have already met with the Chief

Executive of Staffs C.C to discuss these matters and it remains very much unfinished business.

*Bryan Phillips*

### **Greetings from Halesowen.**

"Where's Halesowen?" I hear some of you say, or "What's Halesowen got to do with us?" Well, Halesowen is on the southern edge of The Black Country and by a strange quirk of geography or administration, as a member of Ramblers, I come under the umbrella of Staffordshire. This is probably because my local group is Stourbridge and both Halesowen and Stourbridge are part of Dudley Borough and at some point it was decided that The Stourbridge group should be associated with Staffordshire rather than Worcestershire.

I am not complaining, it is just that the main part of Staffordshire is a long way from here. I do have some connection with Staffordshire. Back in 1957 I joined Staffordshire Police as a cadet and in 1960 became a PC in Smethwick, only three miles from the centre of Birmingham. In 1966 the boundaries changed and Staffordshire ran away to the north, leaving me down here.

I have no time to be involved with a local group but I take it upon myself to keep my local footpaths clear between Halesowen and the Worcestershire border. We have an excellent network of paths and if you have Explorer map 219 just look to the west of the M5 and south of the A456. I have been running along all of these paths for years.

If you have cause to visit Birmingham or The Black Country why not try a walk between Halesowen and Romsley. You may be pleasantly surprised.

*Tony Pritchard.*

### **Maize Maze: was the Rights of Way Act 1990 worth the effort?**

On a recent Sunday morning as I toiled through shoulder high oats still dripping from Saturday's showers, feeling the moisture working through to my underwear and soaking down my socks, I remembered that it was 25 years ago that the Rights of Way Act 1990 inserted Section 137A into the Highways Act 1980. And what was that all about? Section 137A made it an offence, after ploughing, to fail "to ensure that the line on the ground of any relevant highway is so indicated as to be apparent to members of the public".....and "to prevent the crop from so encroaching.....as to render it inconvenient

for the exercise of the public right of way". So much for my wet knickers!

There was a double irony in my plight. Earlier in my walk, I had passed over the land of another landowner, specifically to check on the condition of a path which had been cropped without restoration in a previous season. I had walked freely in a two metre wide corridor through cereals and then through rape, enjoying the wild flowers and the view, dry shod and dry clothed. Now on the obstructed path, I reflected that, back in 2007, The Ramblers had not objected to the diversion of the route out of the farm buildings, because we had accepted that the diverted route, which at that time crossed grassland, was a better alternative than cattle enclosures, at least as convenient and certainly more pleasant, with open views of field and woodland. Now it was an un-restored route through monoculture. How naïve were we? The path in question is on the East Staffordshire/Stafford Borough border: a ramblers work party put in several stiles on the Kingstone end of the path some years ago, making it a valuable link in the network.

So how has the "ploughing and cropping" amendment to Highways Act 1980 served path users? The answer has got to be "not very well". Staffordshire County Council went so far as to prosecute a landowner for an infringement in 1992 and following a campaign by The Ramblers, instituted several prosecutions in 2003, one of which sparked off a lively correspondence in the Stafford Newsletter. The offending farmer was defended in the prints by a local resident (they chose to remain anonymous) who passionately spoke out for the farmer who was feeding the country despite the vindictive Ramblers and "their bully boys, the County Council". We should be so lucky! Several members of The Ramblers responded.

Following the prosecutions and, give them their due, repeated persuasive reminders from the CLA and NFU, matters improved for a while, although the majority of recorded complaints both nationally and locally still cited crops as the main cause of obstruction. So what is the situation in 2015? Several factors seem to be coming together to contribute to a decline in the number of paths free from cropping problems. Earlier this summer, Mark Winington, Cabinet Member for Economy, Environment and Transport warned user groups that reduced resources meant that the efforts of the County Council would be devoted to prioritising work involving safety issues and promoted routes. The trend to "big agriculture" means that field sizes are



increasing and the management of bigger units is becoming more remote, so that restoration does not appear to be a business imperative. Crop choices such as maize and rape are seen as more profitable, but of their nature can present problems at maturity even if earlier efforts have been made to clear minimum widths.

It seems to me that there are three approaches by landowners with regard to their obligations under Section 137A. There are those who take it on board and maintain clear routes year by year. We should be doing what we can to show our appreciation to them. There are those who are a bit feckless and either pretend ignorance or do the minimum and then forget about it. Then there are those who willingly and with malice aforethought set out to ignore the law. We should go on reporting their failings and pressing the Highway Authority to pursue persistent offenders through the courts, even in these days of austerity. The softly, softly approach to which our County Council has reverted takes more resources than a hard line approach in the end- and it doesn't work!

And what of the legislation itself? There seem to be so many laws these days which sections of the community can choose to obey or ignore as they fancy, because there is neither the will nor the resources to ensure enforcement. Tailgaters in the fast lane, cyclists riding on footways, litter louts and fly-tippers everywhere. Was the insertion of Section 137A really meant to give path users a guarantee of free passage through crops or was it just a hollow gesture to those uppity ramblers? On balance, I think we have gained from it. Yes, the results have been patchy, but it has heightened awareness of the threat to headland and cross-field paths in arable areas and given us a means of attempting to protect them. So keep up the complaints and in some far off Utopia, when austerity is no more and statutory public service is again something that public servants are allowed to do, you may be able to walk the fields untrammelled. Failing that, it will be the country park run for profit by big business. As Joni Mitchell put it in "Big Yellow Taxi":

"Took all the trees and put 'em in a tree museum,  
Charged the people a dollar and a half just to see 'ern  
Don't it always seem the same

You don't know what you've got till it's gone-

Pay paradise put up a parking lot"

*David Hewett*

## **ANNUAL REPORTS**

### **Chairman's Report**

As in my previous reports I wish to thank the members of the RA in the Staffordshire Area who individually, in their groups or on the Area Council do so much to protect and maintain our rights of way.

Lee Fawcett, Harry Scott, Graham Evans and I attended General Council in March in Cambridge. I have reported on General Council to the Area Council and have sent copies of that report to groups.

The General Council did not run as smoothly as in previous years due, I believe, to the absence through illness of the retiring chairman, Jonathon Kipling. Many delegates had expected the governance review to be a starting point for a debate on a range of proposals for improving 'democracy' in the election of Trustees and were not happy to see a motion, which was eventually withdrawn, for 'one member one vote' on the agenda. So far there has been little information about this issue from Central Office.

It came to our notice just before the July meeting of Area Council that Staffordshire County Council were conducting a review of the management of the Countryside Sites and Greenways in the County. The Area Council had not received any information about this review. Graham Evans wrote to the Chief Executive on our behalf asking for clarification. In a very short space of time profuse apologies were received from the Chief Executive and from Ian Wykes, the Commissioner for the Rural County. A meeting to discuss the ideas put forward in the review for the management of the 'County Estate' was arranged. Harry Scott, Graham Evans and I met Ian Wykes. I have circulated a brief report of that meeting to groups. The Area Council will continue to monitor the progress of this review and do its utmost to influence the outcomes in the best interests of the walking community.

Footpath problems are always with us and continue to be dealt with by groups and by Area. The local government cuts are having an impact on the time it takes the officers of the Council to respond to the more difficult cases. My thanks go to Harry Scott who deals with these more difficult problems and to the group footpath officers for their

sterling work in maintaining our access to the footpaths of Staffordshire.

Once again thank you to all of the members of the Ramblers Association in the Staffordshire Area for the work you do on behalf of the Association. Most of what the RA achieves is achieved by local and regional volunteers.

*George Greensides, Area Chairman.*

### **Area secretary's Report**

In the 80<sup>th</sup> year of Ramblers the question was recently asked why should walkers join us? Firstly in 1935 the major walking clubs in England joined forces because six people went to jail because they wanted to go for a walk on Kinder Scout in 1932. Since 1935 the Ramblers Association (now the Ramblers) has campaigned for highway authorities throughout the UK to record all footpaths on their official map known as the Definitive Map. Ramblers went on to get the Ordnance Survey to show these recorded paths on their maps as Right of Way which all walkers now use. It is Ramblers volunteers that campaigned for the creation of the national parks and for access land. Currently Ramblers are campaigning for the completion of the UK Coastal Path.

The first national trail was, of course, the Pennine Way from Edale onto Kinder Scout and on along the Pennines to Kirk Yetholm in Scotland - yes it was Ramblers who campaigned for that too. Nothing is perfect and that is why Ramblers has a national team of local volunteers who monitor planning applications so as to assess the impact of developments on the Rights of Way network and also separate team of volunteers who assess the impact on the environment through which the footpath passes. This not only applies to the rural areas of the UK but also through the urban regions of our towns and cities.

With regards to the Rights of Way footpath network many local Ramblers Groups carry out voluntary footpath clearance and maintenance work in conjunction with the highway authorities. Without these volunteers the footpath network throughout England and Wales would be in a far worse state than it already is. While the local highway authorities have a statutory duty to maintain the footpath network it really is the responsibility of landowners to maintain to footpath in a useable condition. As far as I am concerned all walkers - members of Ramblers or independent walks - owe a huge

debt of thanks to all these invisible volunteer workers. Very few, if any, independent walking groups carry out footpath maintenance and monitoring work, members just assume that this work will be carried out by the local highway authority.

The job of professional staff in London is to co-ordinate national campaigns, lobby our MPs and to assist with advise and finance so as to fight legal cases when required. As we all know legal action of any kind tends to be expensive. A very recent example of this work has been the Andrews case which has been in and out of court for approximately 20 years and finally Ramblers has won the case. It is doubtful if any local walking group would have the legal skills or the financial resources to fight such cases.

Increasingly the general health of the general population is being commented on and it is generally recognised that walking provides a means of maintaining good levels of general health at a minimal cost. Ramblers also have a network of local groups, again organised by volunteers, who organise walks to suit most people. Equally Ramblers members are involved with local Walking for Health Groups so as to encourage people to become fitter as so healthier. All the above activities promote the Ramblers, who, for the general public become the first port of call when there is a problem on the footpath network, if we did not exist who would they turn to?

For some the question becomes why should I join Ramblers, what's in it for me? Well firstly there are the local groups- it's not all walking there is a social side too. These can be holiday, day trips, pub nights, the list is only limited by having a volunteer to organise a social event. Currently in Staffordshire there approximately 2500 miles of footpaths to walk and explore and that's before you venture into the neighbouring counties. Ramblers achieve all this for an annual subscription that is a fraction of the cost of regularly attending the local gym.

*Graham Evans: Area Secretary.*

### **Area Treasurer's Report**

Despite the cuts and difficulties facing footpath work, our expenditure is only slightly higher this year than last. The bulk of our expenditure is Stepout and Casework, the latter being slightly higher than in 2014, owing to increased caseload.

We started the year with over £4000 in the bank and at the end of this year we will have a little over £3000 giving our reserves an acceptable level.

The accounts are with the Auditor so are not yet available for the annual report but copies will be available at the AGM or if anyone would like a copy before the AGM I can e mail them a copy beforehand.

*Peter Matthews*

### **Membership Report**

No dramatic change overall but one Group continues to decrease significantly. It is good to see the younger persons Groups continuing to thrive.

		AGM2014		Sep 1 2015	
		Total	Debtors	Total	Debtors
NS01	East Staffs	246	11	248	4
NS02	Stone	219	7	228	2
NS03	StokeNewcastle	369	23	345	7
NS04	Lichfield	136	8	128	6
NS05	Mid Staffs	197	9	181	7
NS06	Stourbrdge	215	2	212	4
NS07	Wolverhpton	264	6	265	4
NS08	Walsall	150	4	158	1
NS09	Sandwell	138	3	130	8
NS10	Chase	114	5	105	6
NS11	Leek	125	1	123	2
NS12	Biddulph	128	2	123	-
NS50	BlackCtry	38	2	45	2
NS14	Bilston	38	4	41	1
NS51	StaffsWG	66	2	73	4
<b>NS Area</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2461</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>2457</b>	<b>60</b>

*Gerald Gittens*

### **Access Report**

I was given a book recently on the struggle to obtain access to uncultivated land over the past century called 'Freedom To Roam' written by Howard Hill. It explains the struggle by educated groups and the 'working class' to restore the right of access to the open land they were evicted from when the enclosure act was introduced. The promises made after the two world wars from successive governments when men had fought for the country's freedom, to be allowed to roam without 'let or hinderence', a land for hero's, etc. And still we are refused entry to many, many square miles. But, cheers, the coastal path is still ongoing.

The OS have not yet to marked the open access points but there are now numerous books published on 'Open Access Walks' to follow.

And still to campaign for, access to all forestry and open water. In the meantime, walk the most of what we've got!

*Eddie Dawson.*

### **Area Footpath Secretary's Report**

It has been a busy year, but not a lot has been achieved, but more of that later. We have been successful in recruiting more footpath volunteers, volunteers who walk our footpaths and report problems to Staffordshire County Council. We still need more footpath volunteers if you can help please give me a call 01543 274805 or email [harrywscott@btinternet.com](mailto:harrywscott@btinternet.com). This report gives me an opportunity to thank our network of footpath volunteers, particularly our District Footpath secretaries, who monitor planning applications affecting our footpath network and reply to footpath diversions. My thanks also goes to Graham Evans for his help with Stoke on Trent, his local knowledge has been of great value to me. We urgently need a representative for the Dudley area, if you can help or would like more information give me a call on 01543 274805 or email [harrywscott@btinternet.com](mailto:harrywscott@btinternet.com) . Unfortunately due to ongoing health problems I reluctantly notify members that I will no longer support Dudley in 2016, we need someone living in the Dudley to take control.

Good news is that we agreed with Rights of Way Officer for Stoke on Trent to survey the definitive network of footpaths during 2015, which we completed in around six weeks. My thanks to Peter Matthews, David Wright, Graham Evans and David Hewett for their help with the surveying. During 2016 we will be surveying the non-

definitive footpaths with view to getting them on to the definitive map, the 2026 cut off gets closer, and I should point out we are working with the full cooperation of the Rights of Way Officer who has requested the surveys.

Now for the bad news. Staffordshire County Council Rights of Way Office are taking longer to resolve footpath problems, some well over a year and we have problems outstanding for over two years. This is due to the cuts that have taken place in the Ranger service, the fact that two members of Staff in the Rights of Way Office have been on long term sick leave, also budget cuts. At one point this year we notified Staffordshire County Council legal department that we would serve a notice on them to remove an obstruction on footpath 49 Abbots Bromley, in the event the obstruction was removed. This problem had been outstanding for well over a year and the path was un-walkable.

Some three years on we are still waiting for the public inquiry into the closure of footpath 10 and the diversion of footpath 7 Sheen Parish in the Staffordshire Moorlands. We have objected to the order for the above, as agreed at Area Council. If we lose Sheen 10 it will be a great loss to the footpath network.

We received 14 diversion consultations from Staffordshire County Council and the District Councils, only one was objected to and that has been withdrawn. We received 78 planning applications, all were investigated and replied to if they affected a footpath by our District Footpath Secretaries. Without this monitoring of planning application footpaths would be built on and would be lost forever.

*Harry W Scott*

### **Webmasters Report**

Since taking over as webmaster, I have made a number of changes to the website namely the way it is managed.

Firstly I was Horrified to find that the RA were using Joomla to edit the site at the time it was a well known fact in the industry that Joomla had serious vulnerability issues because to use it one had to log on to the RA system and work online, Joomla's problem was that this put my computer at risk for the duration of the time online. Secondly Joomla uses the PHP language to produce the web pages and PHP also has vulnerability issues making the site and my computer vulnerable.

These two things led me to use a system named Serif Web Plus to author the site, a system I had been using for a number of years without any issues.

A big difference here is that Serif Webplus is installed on my PC and I do any development work without going on line. So my personal Antivirus and malware protection do not get stresses by this process

Also Page Plus allows me to do things that many other web development systems will not allow so I am able to produce better Web sites and I am more secure.

Having sorted this out with the RA technical people I was able to use the Secure Built in [FTP](#) (File Transfer Protocol) to Securely upload the site to our domain

I originally copied all pages from the existing site and converted them into HTML5 (Better Security) as used by WebPlus.

I then set about updating the user interface producing the web site as it is now. Before uploading the design I arranged a preview of the site for the Staffordshire Ramblers Council for approval the result was approval of the site and it being uploaded to the domain.

Since that time I have added a map of Staffordshire with all groups geographically located for a better indication of where these groups were located. The original contacts list page was retained as is

Since that time the RA Have released a digital version of the Walk Magazine so I added a link to the menu system to allow access to it, but it does require on to log in establishing their membership before opening the document

The RA Also recently released a new Walks Finder So I also put in a link to that so access to RA Walks is there for all to access, very useful for those holidaying in the UK for finding walks, run by RA Groups, in the area they are visiting.

There are Regular updates to the Combined Walk Program which Peter Matthews sends me on a regular basis, These are usually up on the Web site within a few hours of receiving them thanks to my newly installed Very fast BT Fibre Broadband ( about 10 times faster than Copper Broadband)

If any member has any suggestions for added content on the site please contact me on [glen@gscs.co.uk](mailto:glen@gscs.co.uk) or on 01902 790059. All new ideas will be put before the council prior to implementation.

If any of the Webmasters for any of our groups are in need of any assistance in producing a website please contact me and I will provide any assistance I can.



*Glen Sibley, Webmaster*

## **GROUP REPORTS**

### **Biddulph Annual Report**

Was that really a year? It certainly has been a very enjoyable and busy one. Our thanks go to everyone who has taken part, in whatever capacity, in making it so successful. Well done! We continue to provide walks for all abilities and our traditional basic walking programme of alternating Wednesday medium and short walks with fortnightly Sunday long ones, enables us to do that. Most popular are the short, medium and monthly pub walks which frequently attract up to 35 walkers. Some years ago, in response to members' requests, we introduced an additional monthly weekend medium walk which is well supported.

Once again we have invited the local community to join us for a number of summer evening walks as part of the Biddulph festival. Always popular, this year has been exceptional with 30+ walkers. One evening out of 35 walkers 22 were non-members. Last year we instigated a monthly social activity, usually walk related. These have been varied and so enthusiastically received that we plan to extend this into 2016. There have been themed walks including two guided city walks, a tasting trail and a canal walk followed by a cruise and lunch. Several excellent speakers have shared their outdoor experiences with us at evening supper socials. There has also been a coach ramble and theatre visit. Some of the profit made has been used to equip all leaders with a first aid kit.

Holidays are always well supported. This year 50 members enjoyed walking in the Isle of Wight and there have been long weekends in Bath and the Lake District. Next May will see us in Cyprus and plans are being made for Cornwall in 2017. We recently asked members to make suggestions for future events. These we incorporated into a survey and the social sub-committee is currently analysing the results which will form the basis of the 2016 plan. Their suggestions were both imaginative and varied so it promises to be an exciting year.

From a membership high of 123 in 2011 there were several years where there was a slight fall. This appears now to have been

arrested and we are pleased that membership has risen back to the 2011 level. We hope that the enthusiasm of the group, on walks and during social activities, will support and continue the growth.

We are proud of our website which is constantly monitored, reviewed and improved. It is a valuable resource for both our members and those beyond the area looking for walks. Maps/walk details of past and present walks, photographs, social activities, newsletters, navigation theory and alerts are included. 10% of our members, those without navigational skills, took part in a successful 3 part course comprising of theory and practical application. This was organised by our webmaster and supported by more experience leaders with map reading skills. There has been a noticeable increase in members using maps since and we are optimistic that growing confidence will eventually encourage more people to become leaders in the future. All in all Biddulph Ramblers are a great little group.

*Linda Drakeford*

### **Chase and District Group Report**

I am pleased to report another successful year on behalf of Chase & District Group.

Although our overall membership has fallen slightly this is mainly due to non-active members not renewing. Our active walkers base is positive, but unfortunately illness and injury has affected the numbers out walking with us in recent weeks. Recoveries are well underway and we wish those individuals a speedy return to the ranks. Meanwhile, the group continues to attract new members thanks to various entries in the local press plus adverts in community booklets.

With some of our regular walk leaders amongst the above mentioned "walking wounded" Chase & District have nevertheless maintained a diverse walk programme and it is encouraging to see new people taking the plunge and contributing towards this bringing more variety to the programme in the process, as well as helping to spread the load. Of course, we could always do with more leaders but I accept that not everyone is comfortable in the role and fully respect that. However, for those that fancy having a go support is always available from our current walk leader pool and the group library has a good selection of maps etc if required.

This years programme included two enjoyable long weekends visiting Whitby in April and Windermere in October, plus our annual coach ramble during September provided linear walks between Chirk,

Pontcysyllte, and Llangollen to cater for all abilities. Social events outside of walking will include a return visit to Marsh Farm, Abbots Bromley, for our Christmas meal towards the end of the year. Congratulations to Neil & Glenda who tied the knot this year after meeting each other within the group a little while ago. With regard to notable individual performances Chase and District's Far Flung Walks Award must go to Gary F who completed a weeks trekking in central Nepal earlier this summer and did so without the usual gastro-trauma so common to travellers in that part of the world!

In closing I would like to thank all of our committee officers and walk leaders for their valued efforts throughout 2015.

*Barry Collis, Chair, Chase & District Group*

### **East Staffordshire Ramblers Group Report**

Group membership has remained static at around 250 members to whom we have offered 243 different walks during the year. Our social events programme has provided members with the opportunity to participate in a range of experiences including "A Night in the Trenches" at Whittington Barracks, a coach ramble to Malvern and at least six food related events from a Picnic to a Cottage Pie and Claret Supper.

The group has also enjoyed holidays together; a long weekend in Derbyshire High Peak; five days walking in the Ribble Valley; a week in Jersey where many of the participants managed to complete the tour of the island via the coastal footpath.

Special walking events during the year included our group Winter Walking Festival. A walk with the local Member of Parliament, which provided members an opportunity to raise walking issues with him. We also arranged a Family walk to encourage younger people to enjoy the pleasure of walking. The group also staged a 16 mile challenge walk through the National Forest where in May many of our members participated in the National Forest Walking Festival.

The Footpath Working Party has replaced 12 stiles, repaired a foot bridge and installed a kissing gate.

*Len Smith*

### **Leek Group Report**

I am pleased to report on another successful year for the Leek group.

The annual spring weekend walking break in April saw over twenty members enjoy a return to Llangollen. This year we all stayed together in the Hand Hotel which also hosted our Saturday evening meal - the highlight of the weekend. As usual, a choice of long or short walks were provided and we were all given the opportunity of experiencing walking over the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (those of us with a head for heights that is!)

Our summer evening walks proved ever popular with a good turnout - circular walks of 3 miles starting and ending at a local pub. Although this year was not the best of summers weatherwise, we were fortunate to avoid any evening rain.

As previously reported, we have now introduced a short walk of around five miles to our programme - at the present time these walks take place on Wednesday once a month in liaison with the local Walking for Health Group at Cheddleton.

Several members of the group are now volunteering to work with our newly formed footpaths squad, working in conjunction with PROW at Staffordshire CC, repairing stiles, bridges and clearing overgrown paths. So far we have been out twice, the first time near Rushton Spencer the second at Greenway Bank. It is hard work but satisfying, whether it will continue to be quite so satisfying when the fine, sunny weather gives way to the rain, sleet and snow of wintertime remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it is good to be able to give a little back.

As ever thanks go out to all our walks leaders and committee members for their continued help and support.

*Kevin Andrew*

### **Sandwell Group Report**

This has been a year of change for us. We have been trying to make ourselves more contemporary, inclusive and flexible. In particular, our members continue to contribute where they can, which is how the *Ramblers* has always tried to work.

Two enjoyable recent events have been an 80th Anniversary walk with other Black Country groups and our sixth Six Towns Challenge. This includes a number of different events, including a Stride Jamboree walk through the Sandwell Valley, and attracts

increasing numbers each year from near and far.

Our bread and butter activity, of course, is our led walks, either on our own or in co-operation with other groups. We like to think that we value our walk leaders in the same way as Google value their engineers, though we cannot afford to pay them quite as much! I would also like to put in a word for those who turn out on walks week-in and week-out. Walk leaders need walkers, just as artists need viewers.

Thank you to everyone who is helping out in our group and sharing ideas and walks with us from other groups.

*Andrew Budden*

### **South Staffs District Report**

The Rights of Way network in South Staffs has changed only slightly during the last year. This is due to the fact that four Diversions were awaiting Confirmation at the end of 2014 and these have now been confirmed unopposed. They are minor Diversions and benefit the public as they make the walking experience easier. The first is the diversion of the Bridleway no. 0.918/FP 61 in Brewood Parish which now follows the vehicle track from Park Lane Cottage towards Hunter's Bridge by the canal. Second is a diversion of FP4 in Bilbrook Parish which now follows the vehicle track from the River Penk to Lower Pendeford Farm. The Staffordshire Way is now diverted along the vehicle track from Mitton to Bickford Meadows; also it is now diverted around the field edge between Longnor Mill Farm and Lapley.

David and I have been carrying out clearance work around stiles, gates and bridges in various local parishes for the last year. Many paths have become overgrown with the warmth and heavy rain, plus the fact that they are not walked regularly. According to Walk magazine the Big Pathwatch is a big success, but I have received only a few complaints from the public which, when investigated, were not problems at all.

I have examined 15 Planning Applications for their adverse effect on footpaths and have objected to two of them; one a chicken rearing unit at Hatherton and the other a wind turbine in Penkridge Parish which was refused permission but has since gone to Appeal. I have reported a large number of path problems, mainly broken stiles, steps, and fingerposts. Many have been repaired within three months by the County Council.

*Marjorie Cashmore, South Staffs District Footpath Secretary*

### **Stoke/Newcastle Group Report**

I feel the need to pay tribute to past Group members who for many years contributed to making the successful Group we are today but are no longer able to continue walking with us. Due to their efforts, we maintain a good thriving walks programme. The medium length rambles are particularly popular but the fortnightly summer evening rambles' support has declined, whilst midweek and Sunday walks are very well supported. A weekend in Grange-over-Sands was the last rambling weekend put on by Doreen & Tony Adair after many years of varied walking weekends enjoyed by the Group. Many thanks to them for their efforts enabling us to enjoy and visit the very best areas for rambling in our great British countryside. Coach rambles to Ruthin, Knighton and Horton in Ribblesdale have been well supported though more support from our 'armchair' members would be appreciated by the walks organisers. What better value can be had from a coach ramble? To be picked up and transported to an area carefully recce'd by our dedicated walks leaders, enjoy a guided walk and brought back, surely deserves to be eagerly supported? Excellent value and many thanks to the organisers, I say.

Our Xmas lunch/ramble at the Sheet Anchor was well attended, though marred by our walks leader, Howard, being unable to lead the excellent walk provided. Fortunately, thanks to Maggie and Howard, both walk and lunch were enjoyed by all, as was both the Advent Walk and the Boxing Day +2 walk, which ended with lunch at the Red Bull pub, Church Lawton, organised by Susan & Stephen Merry. Brian Wood continues to organise social gatherings, open to all at various pubs in and around the city.

Our footpath work team, led by Alan Bell, continues to work closely with Staffordshire County Council. Alan would welcome anyone willing to join his team in their work improving local paths.

It is with great sadness that I report the death of George Shufflebotham who passed away in August after suffering from problems sustained during his career in the coal industry. George became the powerhouse for our Group although many of you were unaware of his constant and energetic work, along with his wife, Pauline, in creating a number of books of walks, including areas both in the Peak District and in and around the Potteries. George was best known to everyone as George Shuff. This is not an obituary on him but a celebration of his full and eventful life. A life that touched all

who knew him, as a man who got things done. And how he got things done!! His legacy is celebrated in the walking books he put together with his friend, Phil Rushton, but more than that his ability to communicate with people at all levels, whether they were in an official capacity or just 'people'. Those who knew him were privileged to rub shoulders with someone who could cut through the red tape in order to reach his chosen goal manifested many times in Rambler discussions with the hierarchy in London. George's enthusiasm was infectious. His persuasive manner carried many along when striving to win an argument in footpath problems. George is a hard act to follow. He believed in the Ramblers' creed and the constant fight to keep footpaths open to all who loved the great outdoors. We all owe him our heartfelt thanks. Thank you, George. RIP.

*Richard Clamp, Secretary*

### **Stone Group Report**

This year has passed by so quickly, they say time flies when you're enjoying yourself and Stone Ramblers certainly seem to enjoy their walking, the holidays and social events that the members put into the programme. Membership figures remain fairly stable and attendance at walks and events is very good. We have linked in with the group from Sandwell and offered several joint walks during the winter programme.

A new chairman took over at the AGM in November and a full committee was re-elected. They give their time freely to deal with the day to day running of the group. A special thank you goes to those involved with the website management and the programme co-ordination. Our group hosted the area AGM later that month. After a short walk in the Fulford area Dominic Bates, Editor of Walk Magazine, gave his views on the future of the Ramblers Association which celebrated 80 years this year. The meeting was well attended and he answered questions freely. Tea and cake were in plentiful supply, thanks to all who contributed.

Walk leaders have continued to provide 2 walks for the Thursday and Sunday meetings. Well done to all of them, they constantly try to offer interesting and varied walks. Staffordshire, Shropshire and the Peak District feature regularly in the programme with walks of all grades and distances. A variety of mountain walks in Wales and the Lake District have also been undertaken. A buddy system with support to raise confidence, and training in planning and

leading walks has been offered to encourage new leaders to come forward. Visits to Beaudesert Park Farm, Norton Bridge and the JCB factory were all well attended and great enjoyment was had by all.

A 3 day winter walking break at Biggin Hall Hotel started the holiday season. This was closely followed by an HF holiday to Whitby and a Ramblers holiday to Wild Crete in May. In June the group visited Yorkshire for the 3 peak challenge (covered in 3 days, rather than 1 day!!) The holidays remain popular, they give members opportunity to explore new areas over several days and walk with friends. These leaders put in a lot of effort to co-ordinate the holiday or plan the walks themselves. The last holiday takes place in September a visit to Pelion and Sporades with Ramblers Holidays.

The 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ramblers Association was celebrated in true 'Stone Style' by a walk from Maer Village Hall followed by a celebratory lunch.

Members of the group continue to assist with Walking for Health and the working party. They give time and effort to help both the local community to regain fitness and they assist the council to maintain stiles, gates and footpaths in the area to aid access. Also during the year members of the committee have manned stalls at Stone Farmers Market and the Stafford County Show to promote the group and showcase the work undertaken by the working party.

Stone group will be 20 years old and its members remain as committed as ever. Hope to see as many of you at the celebration as possible, details are in the programme. Here's to the next 20!!

*Carol Skelton Publicity Officer*

### **Walsall Group Report**

This has been a year of building on our previous experiences and developing our activities to suit the membership as a whole.

Our priority remains the provision of complete and satisfying walking programmes that our members will want to participate in and enjoy undertaking. To this end we have tried to offer as wide a range of walks as our noble band of walk leaders can accommodate without overdoing things.

There will always be something of a gamble when it comes to changing the structure of something like a walks programme, especially when it's largely doing it's job already. However, we can never afford to be even slightly complacent since bitter experience has



told us how quickly situations can change and the effort that is needed to reverse this process.

I had concerns on occasions that we were attracting too many people on our Sunday walks in that a large group of over thirty can result in quite long delays at stiles and other obstructions whilst also putting additional strain on walks leaders and their back markers. Therefore the Spring /Summer programme contained options wherever possible so that more than one walk was quite often available to members and they could choose which most attracted them. Accepted that this means further walk leaders are needed to undertake these on behalf of the group, but some use of walks along national trails has been helpful here. We've even tried our hand at mid-week walks and that remains an area to be developed next year. We have endeavoured to work on the assumption that it's always worth at least one try and if it's not what members want then we won't repeat it next time.

One additional range of walks that has proved particularly successful in recent times has been our Short Saturday walks that take place every fortnight. These visit places in and close to the Walsall borough and range from about 4-5.5 miles generally. They're designed to attract new members who might want something easier to start with, but have also proved to be hit with existing members who either find even our Leisurely Sunday walks a little too much, or with members who may find from time to time that the Sunday walk is inconvenient. We've introduced a nice number of new faces to our ranks through these walks, and as they're shorter and closer to home a good range of our walk leaders have come forward to support them.

Outside of walking and recruiting new members whenever we can, we've sought to keep our public profile as high as possible and staged a couple of events along with others that have helped widen our coverage in the local press, (walking with our new MP, and the Black Country 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Walk in conjunction with the Sandwell and Wolverhampton groups).

That said it hasn't just been a year of walking and worrying, as fortunately for us we have a very creative Social Secretary who has ensured that there has been something to engage us at least once a month throughout the year, including Film nights, meals out, canal trips, holidays and parties. This has helped to keep our group members involved even if they couldn't make the walks for a variety of reasons.

Our volunteering activities continue in conjunction with Walsall Council where our projects are gradually becoming more ambitious as we gain experience, and also with Cannock Chase AONB where we continue to learn about the environment there, along with the challenges it faces now and in the future.

We remain committed to following the key requirements of the Ramblers organisation, even if occasionally we may feel communications from them leaves something to be desired. We have a lot to thank our members for in terms of the help and support they have shown this year and previously, and if we are to continue then our dependence on receiving clear and definitive information from those making the big decisions remains a paramount requirement.

*Dick Turton.*

### **Wolverhampton Group Report**

Situated in an area formerly known for factories and industry, Wolverhampton doesn't enjoy a reputation for beautiful countryside. But now ramblers can see a different side of the city, with the creation of a 29 mile walk around Wolverhampton that reveals its many picturesque areas. ***The Wolverhampton Ring*** is a walk devised by Wolverhampton Group members John and Janice Wallbridge who were inspired by the Capital Ring walk which is a 78 mile route around London. The route has been split into separate walks linked to bus routes. It provides views of the city centre and its superb surrounding countryside. There are many cafes and pubs along the route. To find out more and download a guide to the walk visit [www.wolverhamptonring.info](http://www.wolverhamptonring.info) or follow the link from [wton-ra.atspace.com](http://wton-ra.atspace.com)

It was 'up with the larks' when Theresa Dorrance led a group of early bird ramblers on a morning walk for National Dawn Chorus Day (03 May). The route started at Wildside Activity Centre and the group listened to the dawn chorus before enjoying a well-deserved breakfast. It was well attended despite the rain which did dampen the experience. Let's hope for better weather next time.

In early May our Group leaders led walks on most days during Wolverhampton's one-week Walking Festival. There was a variety of walks at venues both within and away from the City. All walks were well attended, even on rainy days, and resulted in a number of new enquiries about the Ramblers.

We have continued to have a number of joint Group walks,

including coach rambles, on our programme in collaboration with neighbouring groups such as Mid-Staffs, Sandwell and Walsall. The walk from Barr Beacon to celebrate the Ramblers' 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was the best attended joint event so far.

Thanks to all volunteer walk leaders for helping so much with all these ventures.

*Judith Rose, Wolverhampton Group*



A winter's scene, Rocester

## Ramblers Association Staffordshire Area Annual Report 2015

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### **Next Issue**

Will be published mid April. Contributions please by 15<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

### *And Finally*

If you do change your address please let Head Office and/or our Membership Secretary know, not the Editor as he does not have the membership list.