

ANNUAL REPORT 2014

STAFFORDSHIRE AREA RAMBLERS



Picture –Four footpath volunteers on the Staffordshire Way, circa 1997

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Editorial

As we all do, from time to time, I had a massive clear out and amongst things I found the photograph on the front cover. I am sure that many of you will recognise some, if not all, of the volunteers. It's good to know that the work they were doing is still going on, with some new people carrying on the good work as well as some of the original members. Where the picture came from I do not know but suspect that it was part of the documentation I had when I first started editing Stepout all those years ago, all 17 of them. Things have moved on from then, A4 sheets to A5 booklets then colour.

If I remember rightly, in those days we had slightly fewer members then than now but at its peak there were a few hundred more than now. As you will see from the membership report this is due to falling renewals and fewer people replacing them. Some of this is down to age, we are all getting older and I know from other organisations that new people are often too busy or disinterested to become involved. Retirement is no longer what it was either. Nevertheless as walking seems to be becoming more popular it is a shame that more do not join our ranks, especially in this time of extensive cuts to the rights of way Officers in the local Authorities.

Fortunately, as you will see from the annual reports, we are still very active in our Area and long may it continue.

Area Website

If you haven't visited the Area website recently (or even before), do take a look. Navigating it is easy and it has a wealth of information as well as quick links to Group and the Ramblers websites. It can be found on <http://www.staffordshireramblers.org/>

Area Walks Programme

Why not find out more about the walks organised by other groups and walk with them for a change? The information you require can be found on the Area Walks' Programme and a copy can be yours by sending a stamped addressed envelope to Peter Matthews (address on rear of Stepout). When you send your envelope please make sure that it is large enough to accommodate from between two and six sheets of A4. The minimum size should really be C5.



Staffordshire's beautiful countryside. Above The Caldon Canal near Hazelhurst Locks – below The Church at Kingstone .

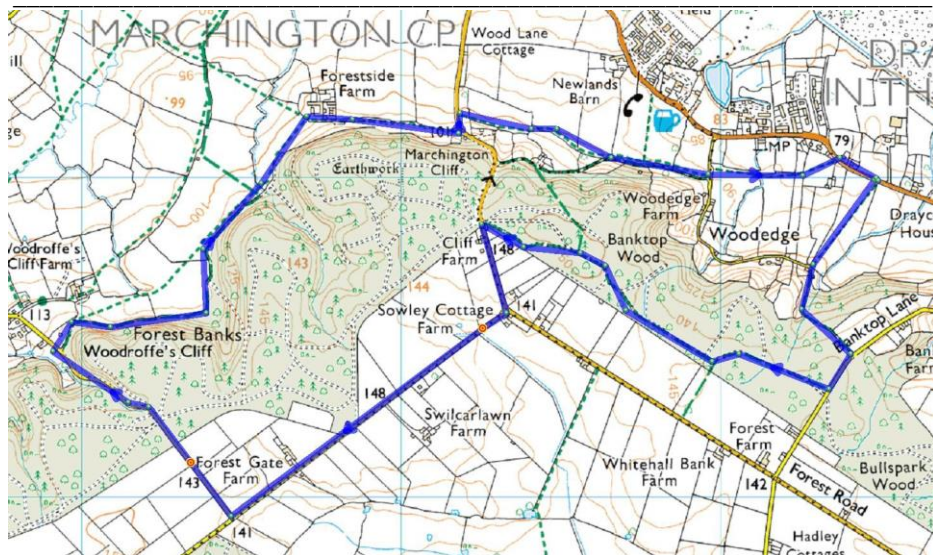


Marchington Cliff Walk.

A fine winters walk of 4.6 miles. There are two starts, depending on whether you wish to do the road walk first or last. The roads are quiet and scenic and parking is on the wide verge. Start 1 GR SK 132 285, start 2 SK 123 281

This is a straightforward walk, mainly along good paths and quiet roads. It has some extensive views. The woods are private as the frequent signs indicate. There is a gentle climb. (*Start 1*) From the car continue SW, gently uphill with the woodland on you right and after half a mile or so reach a road junction. Turn right along the road towards the woods (*start 2*) then descend steeply. At the end of the wood on the right, look for a bridleway sign on the right just before a driveway. Take this bridleway which passes some houses before entering the wood. Follow the bridleway for about a third of a mile until you reach a sign pointing to the left and a metal gate. Go through this to enter a field. Turn right to follow the edge of the wood and over a stile into the next field. As a farm comes into view aim for the left end of the fence surrounding it but on reaching the fence turn right, keeping it to our left to shortly reach a metal gate. Go through this to join the farm lane. Follow the lane to a road.

Turn right, uphill. As the road turns into a right hairpin bend, take the bridleway on the left at the crown of the bend. Follow this bridleway, past a building on the left and initially along the edge of the wood. Soon pass another house on the right and continue along the bridleway to reach a minor road. Turn left then almost immediately right at the footpath sign. Keep to the left edge of the field then over a stile and sleeper bridge into another field. Cross several more stiles, clearly marked to reach the road in Marchington. Turn right and follow the road gently uphill. Near the crown of the hill and a 40 sign, take a footpath on the right, leading up the centre of the field to a stile and then another field. Aim between the houses to join a lane. at a sharp bend. Continue ahead, up the hill and the lane becomes a bridleway, soon swinging left. Follow this to a road and turn right. Shortly reach a forest road on the right (and also on the left). There is a bridleway sign but it is obscured by trees. Take the bridleway and follow it for a good half mile before reaching a road. Turn left and at the next junction right, back to the start.



ANNUAL REPORT

Chairman's Report.

As the end of my third year as chairman approaches I continue to be thankful for the commitment of, and hard work done by, members in their groups and on Area Council. Without their efforts the opportunities to walk freely in our area would be significantly diminished.

Muriel and Ted Taylor, Graham Evans, and I attended General Council in March in Liverpool. Groups have received my detailed report. It was pleasing to see that the promises made by Benedict Southworth and Jonathon Kipling to involve the membership in the development of policy are being kept. The focus is firmly on the work of the RA to maintain and expand rights of way and access. A considerable effort has been made to heal the rift with the Ramblers Holidays Charitable Trust. It was also a relief to hear that membership, which had been in decline for some years, was showing a small increase.

Towards the end of 2013 Staffordshire County Council announced that it was considering including 'rights of way' and footpath maintenance in the tender for the Highways Maintenance

contract which was due for renewal in April 2014. Graham Evans and I were invited, along with representatives from other interested parties such as the National Trust, the Local Access Forum and Cannock Chase AONB, to a day-long meeting at County Hall at which the 3 bidding contractors each gave a presentation on what they believed they could offer. After each presentation we were able to ask questions and make comments. At this point I think that it is fair to say that the Rights of Way Officers and the Rangers have achieved a great deal with very limited resources, indeed much of what is done is done by a large and varied volunteer input supervised and managed by the officers and rangers. The scope for cost savings seemed to Graham and I to be very limited and the danger of the service worsening, if outsourced, very real. We had the opportunity to make these points. The planned inclusion of footpath work did not appear in the contract in April but the door appears to have been left ajar for inclusion at a later date.

Footpath problems are dealt with at group and Area level and are the most high profile aspect of the work of the RA. We are the only national organisation which has in its remit the protection of our rights of way and the public turn to the RA when their favourite walk is obstructed. My thanks go to all those members who deal with these issues in their groups and to Harry Scott, who deals with the more contentious problems at Area level.

Council members continue to maintain links with, the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, Rivers and Canals Trust, the National Forest and Cannock Chase AONB.

I wish to thank the officers and members of the Area Council and the group committees and volunteers for the time and effort they put into their work on behalf of the Ramblers Association. Without them the association would achieve very little.

George Greensides, Area Chairman.

Area Secretary's Report.

In November 2013 George Greensides (Area Chairman) and I were invited to attend a meeting that was organised by Staffordshire County Council regarding their proposal to contract out the maintenance of the Rights of Way footpath network to a private contractor. At that meeting there were representatives from other stakeholder groups and we listened to the presentations of the three preferred bidders that the county council had decided upon. At the time of writing this report I understand that contracts for the

maintenance of roads and other services have been allocated but not the maintenance of the county's footpath network. It seems that so far no agreement has been made regarding how this maintenance work should be organised which is not only an issue for us but also the county council's Rights of Way Department. We await the outcome with great interest.

In January I, along with Rambler representatives from other midlands areas, attended a meeting to discuss with Benedict Southworth (Rambles CEO) and Jonathan Kipling (Ramblers National Chairman) on how best we should organise ourselves so that we project a better image of Ramblers in the minds of the wider public. This discussion was wide range touching on what we wanted from the centre and what they expected from Areas and Groups. The main theme that came out of this was that we are all part of one organisation that is made up of a small cohort of professional staff in London and the rest of us out in the sticks who are volunteers.

In late March George Greensides and I attended General Council which this year was held in Liverpool. For my part I feel that this meeting was less contentious and more constructive than some that I have attended in the recent past, the workshops were informative and the debates on the motions were constructive.

Finally I need to remind you all of the importance of volunteers. As I mentioned earlier, volunteers at local level are vital and without people offering some of their time nothing happens either at Group or Area level. To those that do volunteer I offer my thanks and to everyone else I urge you to see what you can do to help in our collect cause to keep our footpaths open. At last year's Area AGM Geoff Loadwick, Janet and David Palmer all stood down after many years of service to us in Staffordshire once again I thank them on your behalf. At the same time Glen Sibley became our new Area Webmaster and he has been busy updating the Area Website. However we still have vacancies for an Area Countryside Officer, Area Publicity Officer and Area Members Representatives. Equally to those members who are also members of an affiliated walking group we have vacancies for three Affiliated Group Representatives. It is only by having a complete team at area council that we can hope to be successful in the defence of our Rights of Way in Staffordshire WE NEED YOU!

Graham Evans

Area Treasurers Report

Despite the financial cuts and difficulties facing footpath work, our expenditure was actually slightly lower this year than last. As we started the year with over £6000.00 in the bank, it has been necessary for us to reduce this balance as we had over a year's reserves (excluding Group payments) in the Bank and this is considered to be a too high figure. For this reason our funding request last year, as with this year, will be slightly below what we need to bring this figure to an acceptable level. At the end of this year we will have slightly less than one year's reserves. The bulk of our expenditure is Stepout and Casework.

The accounts are with the Auditor so aren't 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.

Area Footpath Secretary's Report

As I write this report in September 2014 the year has passed quickly and a great deal of work seems to have been achieved. I should start my report by thanking our network of footpath volunteers who monitor the footpath network and report footpath problems to the County Council, comment on planning applications and footpath diversions from the County Council and the District Councils. Particular thanks goes to Graham Evans our Area Secretary for his help with Stoke on Trent after my recent illness. Also my thanks to David Hewett for his help and assistance.

We need more footpath volunteers as the job of getting our footpath network open and usable is far from over. Do you have a few hours per week to walk the footpaths in a parish and report the problems to the County Council? We particularly require a representative for Burton on Trent and Dudley. In Stoke on Trent we need a volunteer to claim all the missing footpaths from the definitive map, this would suit someone who likes to research old maps and documents and is happy to work on their own. If you are able to volunteer or would like more information I can be contacted on 01543 274805 or alternatively email your contact details to harrywscott@btinternet.com and I will telephone you back.

Our volunteers monitored and replied to over 230 planning applications from the District Councils and County Council. Also we had a considerable number of planning applications from Stoke on Trent and the other Metropolitan Councils. We have during the year

also received a larger than normal quarry extension planning application which has resulted in proposed footpath diversions, some temporary and some permanent diversions. We have had meetings to resolve issues with the County Council and Quarry Owners, no objections have been made.

We only received 17 footpath diversion consultations during 2013/14 which is down on previous years, I put this down to County Council Staff time and the cost of diversions of around £2,000. Orders to divert and close footpaths from the County Council have also been slow there being a considerable backlog and delay. We have been waiting for some orders such as the diversion of footpaths 14 and 17 Fulford Parish Stafford Borough, which will see the opening up of the paths for public use. Also outstanding is the order to close part of footpath 10 Sheen Parish in the Staffordshire Moorlands, we will be objecting on behalf of the Ramblers as agreed and discussed at Area Council.

It is no surprise for readers to learn that there have been more cuts at that Staffordshire County Council. However reported footpath problems are being resolved even if it takes a little longer. Considering the staffing numbers at the County Council and the proposed privatisation, the contracting out of council services we receive a good service from the Rights of Way Office at the County Council. However it is certain that more cuts are on the way and there is no guarantee that the service we receive now from the County Council will continue.

Harry W Scott Area Footpath Secretary

Annual Access Report

The good news is that the Coastal Path campaign is gathering momentum with the inclusion, at last, of the Isle of Wight. Stretches of coastal pathway were opened earlier this year in Cumbria and Durham and acknowledgement that further stretches have since been accepted in Somerset and Norfolk. The bad news, it appears there will be no review or addition to the initial 'open access areas' in the foreseeable future. But we can get improvement if only members would raise their concerns on areas that fall short on accessibility. What we have is just that. Make the most of it.

Eddie Dawson, Area Footpath Secretary Report.

PS Nick Clegg has just announced that the Government is committed to completing the England Coast Path by 2020!

Membership Secretary's Report

As you can see although some variation between groups we have ended the year with less members than we started.

This reduction is fairly small but does leave a lot of room for improvement.

The cause is poor renewal rates which have not been replaced by recruitment.

This all despite many national based initiatives to improve our image and attention to renewal rates and despite us all living longer healthier active lives.

	2013	Debtors	2014	Debtors
1 East Staffs	263	13	246	11
2 Stone	215	14	219	7
3 Stoke/Newcastle	393	20	369	23
4 Lichfield	141	9	136	8
5 Mid Staffs	210	6	197	9
6 Stourbridge	197	10	215	2
7 Wolverhampton	279	9	264	6
8 Wasall	153	14	150	4
9 Sandwell	151	2	138	3
10 Chase	119	4	114	1
11 Leek	108	7	125	1
12 Biddulph	108	4	128	2
14 Bilston	39	4	38	4
50 Black Country	28		38	2
51 Staffs WG	67		66	2
Area	2485	121	2461	87

Gerald Gittens Membership Secretary

Cannock Chase AONB

There can be very few people who are not aware that this year is the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War, [WW 1] Many plans to commemorate this event have been prepared throughout the UK not least of all in and around Cannock Chase where many towns and villages have a programme of events planned

for the next four/five years. On Cannock Chase it is planned to erect sign boards telling of the significant events which occurred on the Chase.

Of particular interest to walkers is a walk prepared and published by local historian David Robbie from Great Haywood, the walk commemorates JRR Tolkien's involvement with Cannock Chase during the early part of the war, Tolkien was posted to one of the newly created army training camps set up on Cannock Chase, and as a commissioned officer was allowed to visit his new wife who had taken rented accommodation in Great Haywood, he stayed on Cannock Chase until 1916 when he was posted to the Somme battlefield.

David Robbie's walk is a linear walk of approx. nine miles starting from the visitor centre at Marquis Drive and finishing in Great Haywood, the walk passes the remains of one of the army camps and the author suggests aspects of the Cannock Chase landscape which may have influenced Tolkien in his writing of "Lord of The Rings" trilogy. Whilst the walk itself is recommended to the more serious walker we felt that a truncated version may be more attractive to the casual walker, so Dick Turton has compiled two circular walks starting from established car parks taking in the salient points of the original linear walk. These have been produced with the permission and encouragement of David Robbie and are to be printed and available as walk leaflets very soon.

There have been several very interesting presentations delivered to the AONB partnership committee so far this year, one, a disturbing one, is worthy of note it was given by Natalie Barron from Staffordshire County Council, she told us that certain wards of Cannock Chase Council have the lowest life expectancy of all Staffordshire districts, men in the deprived areas can expect to live six to seven years less than those in the least deprived. The usual suspects were given as the reason obesity in adults and children, alcohol abuse, and a high level of smoking. We suggested that walking would be a good way to tackle some of these issues but were told that despite living on the doorstep very few affected residents ever visit the Chase, this is due to lack of transport and organised walks.

Staffordshire Police gave an interesting presentation concerning thefts of cars and bikes on Cannock Chase. I know that mountain bike riding can be a contentious issue among walkers on Cannock Chase and similarly among local residents, however the Police say that data tags are now available for bikes and that they can be used by horse

riders to fit on horse tack. The Police were questioned about the number of sexual anti-social behaviour occurrences on the Chase and admitted that they are reactive rather than proactive in this matter, this is due to the lack of manpower. Several walkers have told me of unpleasant events that they had witnessed while walking on the Chase, some people find it amusing others are offended. The Police insist that all such incidents be reported so that a log can be compiled and an action plan formed.

Neil Penderson the station manager of Cannock fire station told us that he and his firefighters have produced what looks like a “Domesday Book” of Cannock Chase. This impressively large tome contains full details of all access roads and tracks, also details of all water supplies on farms and water tanks and mobile water bowsers. This information is vital for firefighters in the event of a fire or rescue. He went on to tell us that among Staffordshire fire stations are the five most modern in the country and that Cannock fire station is one of them. They are classed as community fire stations and contain meeting rooms for non-profit making community activities. We were reminded that any walker on the Chase or elsewhere who having injured themselves and needing assistance should, if they are unsure of their position, and also providing that they can get a signal on their cell phone, ring 112 not 999 this will put them through to the operations control room who will be able to respond by tracking the map coordinator on the mobile phone.

Last, but certainly not least, is that the management plan for the C.C.A.O.N.B has been published. This important document gives details as to how the A.O.N.B will be managed over the next five years. It is worth pointing out that the funding grant from DEFRA has been cut and that the officers are actively seeking sponsorship to make up the shortfall.

Bryan Phillips

The Canal and River Trust (CRT)

The Canal and River Trust (CRT) is the charity which replaced the old British Waterways Board. It aims to look after the waterways in its care in perpetuity. Free access to towpaths is a CRT commitment. I attended an Open Boaters’ Meeting on 23rd January 2014 at The Bond in Birmingham, chaired by Richard Parry, the CRT’s Chief Executive.

The CRT is strongly decentralised, and the regions of Central Shires Waterways and West Midlands Waterways cover Staffordshire. Waterways Partnerships exist to provide guidance to these regions, with vacancies in the Partnerships being advertised on the CRT website. The CRT sees the role of volunteers as essential. There is a Volunteering Opportunities page on its website, where you can find out more if you are interested.

By developing canal walks in our areas, where possible, we can keep towpaths ‘patrolled’ and used, and also help the CRT with their aims of improving health and well-being in the local area. Sharing walks developed with the local Waterways region, could also provide publicity for Ramblers, as could volunteering for helping with towpath clearance with CRT. The CRT would also welcome any proposals by groups for “community adoption” of a length of canal.

Judith Meredith

National Forest Access and Recreation Working Group

In May the National Forest Company launched the National Forest Way ; a new long-distance trail, over 75 miles, extending from the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire through Derbyshire and finishing at Beacon Hill Country Park in Leicestershire. About 19 miles of the route lies in East Staffordshire. They have also included links to neighbouring towns and cities, so it is possible to access the route using public transport.

The only meeting of the Working Group was held in March. At the meeting the Forestry Commission declared that following extensive surveys in 2013 no traces of ash die-back had been found on their woods in the area. Rosliston Visitor Centre near Burton-upon-Trent will be celebrating their 20th anniversary in November – a very good base for leading a walk !

Over the year, there has been consultation over the next 10-year strategy of the National Forest Company, which was launched in June.

Sophie Churchill, Chief Executive, who many of you met at the last Area AGM when she gave a talk on the NFC and National Forest Way, will be leaving the company at Christmas following 9 years in the post.

Martin King

GROUP REPORTS

Biddulph

Reflecting on last year's report I was impressed by the difference a year has made. Although it was very positive and reflected the experiences of a committed group of walkers the situation now is markedly different. Membership has risen gradually and we are attracting new walkers from Biddulph and beyond our immediate area. Numbers of people on walks has risen in each of the categories we offer. Whilst retaining our traditional pattern of mid-week alternating medium and short walks with fortnightly long Sunday walks and monthly medium weekend walks consideration is now being given to trialling an additional mid-week day. This will offer members greater flexibility, help recruit new members and possibly reduce numbers on the very popular pub walks which can have as many as 35. Our evening walks this year have been very popular with both the general public and members.

Last summer the committee issued an extraordinary appeal to members for volunteers. Entitled "Your Committee Needs You" it outlined a number of roles which we felt were necessary for our continuing development. They included the strategic posts of Chairman, programme secretary, representatives to various bodies, path clearance, new committee members and leaders. The response was nil! Far from being deterred the appeal continued and by the November AGM we had the much needed support which we have built on since. We have always had some social activities but given a new spirit of cooperation and involvement we began offering a social activity outside the normal walk programme monthly. To date we have had theatre visits, pub quiz night, coach ramble, brewery visit and hog roast. Future plans include bowling, city walk, canal cruising and guest speakers.

These are in addition to a week in Tenby and long weekends in Whitby and Stratford. Next year's holiday will be to the Isle of Wight. Our webmaster has redesigned our website this year to enable more detail to be added to our quarterly walks programme and made a fantastic job of it. We now find it easier to use, more informative and a very useful tool for planning future walks. Feedback from other groups who have discovered our site via Ramblers "Find a walk" initiative has been positive.

At the end of last year's report we were apprehensive about the loss through retirement of key members. Those members, who have given outstanding service in the past, will continue to support us in other ways. From this strong position we are looking forward to the coming year enjoying more walks and social activities with friends.

Linda Drakeford

East Staffordshire

This year we celebrated our 20th anniversary – we were officially inaugurated in February 1994 and have seen our membership grow from 80 to over 260. Over the last 12 months we have seen membership numbers fall slightly, we are gaining new members but this is not offsetting the loss.

We hosted the Area AGM in November, offering two walks including a short heritage walk of Tutbury, and a very impressive display of cakes !!

With our walks programme we offer 5 or 6 walks a week of varying lengths. We have supported the Ramblers Festival of Winter Walks, and the National Forest Walking Festival. We led one of the walks at the launch of the National Forest Way and later in the year walked the three stages from Branston to Alrewas – all 16 miles of it. The Family Walk, based at Calke Abbey, was a great success despite the wet weather, and we welcomed the families again to our Picnic in the Park.

On the Social side, over 80 members enjoyed Christmas lunches at the Ramblers Retreat, Alton and Lakeside, Moira. With 2014 being our 20th anniversary year, we held a fish & chip supper in February featuring photos from past holidays and the group history.

The main anniversary event was our annual buffet in March, attended by over 90 members, including some of our original members who had been especially invited. We had tried to repeat the menu of the first buffet and followed the meal by a very entertaining talk by Ashley Franklin, co-author of Derbyshire Ramblings – Walking in circles down the Derwent Valley. The Muddy Boot Award was presented to Martin King for developing the web-based walks programme where leaders can enter their own walks.

Later in the year, we enjoyed a trip to explore the 'Workings of Fauld Gypsum Mine', a walk with buffet after at Rolleston, a moonlight walk, and a coach trip to Ironbridge.

We have taken holidays in Madeira in March and the High Peak Weekend saw us walking up Black Hill and along the Mam Tor Ridge. The main Group holiday will be taken in October in Bamburgh, Northumberland.

The Footpath Working Group have been improving walking in the Marchington area despite a late start due to transport problems.

The web-page continues to be developed as members find the benefits of the walks programme being available – it incorporates a map of where the walk starts !! The Group also has its own Twitter account.

A successful year, thanks to all the hard work of the Committee and support of the members.

Jane King

Lichfield & District

This year has been another progressive and enjoyable one, with participation in our Sunday walks programme being maintained at a level of 17 – unchanged over the past four years. Whilst Sunday walks normally vary in length between seven and twelve miles, this year we also introduced a programme of shorter, more local walks of around four or five miles, taking place on Friday evenings and finishing in a pub – the ‘TGIF walks’. These proved very popular with all who took part.

Additional walks were organised, one called the ‘Mince Pie walk’ around Blithfield between Christmas and New Year, another called the ‘Fish and Chip walk’ around Alrewas in July even persuading some former members to renew their interest in the Ramblers. There was also a spectacular ‘Bluebell walk’ in May. In addition, a number of us attended the inauguration of The National Forest Way on 17 May, enjoying a seven mile walk from the visitor centre at Rosliston, walking along the new Way from the west and making our way back via Netherseal and Overseal.

About a dozen of us went away for short breaks, walking in Wensleydale last September (very interesting weather in Yorkshire!) and the Lakes in February. About a dozen are also booked to walk in the Forest of Dean this coming September.

On the social side, over 40 people attended our Christmas lunch held at The Highwayman at Shenstone; later on, we had an enjoyable skittles evening in Tamworth in March. Plans are afoot for a barbecue and sports evening in late August.

Ed Watson

Mid Staffs

It has been a busy time since last I wrote in Stepout with many challenges to attract new members. We welcome a new Chairman and Treasurer David Jakeman and Mike Birch. The group have visited and enjoyed a variety of holiday venues St Asaphs, North Wales in September 2013, Bath in February 2014 and HF holiday to Whitby in March 2014. A small group of us walked in France in June 2014.

The next HF holiday to Dolgellau, North Wales is already booked up for 2015. We has updated our website so please visit it. We are trying hard to improve the walks programme to give it more variety and suitability for all.

We are looking to expand our social activates the skittle evening and coach ramble were great successes. We are planning a coach ramble to the Cotswolds in September, with more events in the pipeline for Christmas and New Year. The task ahead is to recruit new members and encourage new walk leaders to come forward, and to encourage more social activities, so we can have a more diverse programme.

J Maddock, Secretary

Sandwell.

The past year 2013/2014, my third year in office, has seen the group enjoy another full programme of walks, weekends away and the occasional social event.

The challenge to maintain our overall membership numbers gets ever more difficult although we view our core strength as our regular walkers numbering 40/50 (our actual membership shows 142). Probably similar to other groups as our average age increases this has a strong bearing on our walks programme. On Sundays as an example we will vary from 25 walkers down to 10 as the length and difficulty increases. However we believe it important to maintain a varied weekly programme on Sundays with a lesser programme on Tuesdays. Since our location is totally urban travelling further afield becomes essential in order to create a variety of challenges. This has seen us visit Worcestershire, Staffordshire, Leicestershire, Gloucestershire, Derbyshire and Warwickshire during the year. When we do get weather problems fortunately we have the Sandwell Valley trails to fall back on right on our doorstep. In addition a very

successful weekend away in Wensleydale was enjoyed and a weekend is planned at Fort Belan in North Wales for this month.

Our 6 Towns Marathon in August is now a regular feature , sponsored financially this year by My Time Active, and organised in conjunction with the local council, proving again to be a big success with a 15% increase in 26 miles participants and a successful inaugural Stride Jamboree walk. The Stride Jamboree Walk is borne out of the very busy programme of Stride health walks in the Borough numbering in excess of 30 every week. Unfortunately our aim to get Stride walkers graduating into full Ramblers is not overly fruitful although I would stress this is not a reflection of the hard work our members do in leading a number of these walks on a weekly basis.

It would be totally remiss of me not to thank all our walk leaders, volunteers and club officers without whose help none of this would happen. On the topic of volunteers I am sure very many Ramblers will know John Scott who for many years was our Chairman and Footpath Secretary. John stood down from the committee at the end of last year and as yet we have not managed to replace anyone into the Footpaths role. John does however continue to Chair the Local Access Forum, organise the 6 Towns walk and is a weekly Stride walk leader. Hardly inactive you may think but replacing dedicated volunteers such as John is proving extremely difficult and I am sure we are not the only group in this position.

We do occasionally find time for the odd social event although it always strikes me that to walk with Sandwell is in itself a social event . However beware the pub stop, you may never get them moving again! But in all a barn dance , annual dinner/dance, the Christmas walk and meal (thanks again to the Yorkshireman pub in Rugeley for their tolerance of our carol sing/song- we will not be competing for choir of the year!), the New Years Supper and the new addition of a curry night out complete the programme.

My term of office of 3 years comes to an end in November, it has never been boring, always a challenge, but above all the camaraderie of our members makes it all worthwhile. I am sure together the club members will tackle the challenges both old and new.
Barry Jordan, Chairman.

South Staffs District

The Rights of Way in South Staffs District have not changed since my report in the April Step Out. The proposed diversion of the

Staffordshire Way from the White House at Mitton to Bickford Meadows in Penkridge Parish will go ahead once the Order is made and Confirmed as we had no objections to it. It will not cause any inconvenience to walkers. The two applications for wind turbines in Penkridge and Otherton Parishes were refused planning permission as was the conversion of a small stable block to a large dwelling in Hatherton Parish. Only a small number of planning applications have been received this year and only three required objections.

Footpath maintenance work is still being carried out by John Gilmer and his team in Enville and Kinver Parishes. David and I have been busy over the summer clearing overgrown stiles and fingerposts in many parishes with the new set of hand tools, but some paths have had to be reported to the County Council as they are so badly overgrown as to be impossible to walk without a suit of armour. Many problems have been reported to the County Council which have been dealt with as have reports of problem paths sent in by members of the public.

I have attended a consultation by the District Council on their Site Allocations Document (S.A.D.) for Penkridge Parish. This S.A.D. is intended to identify further sites to provide houses up to the year 2030. Penkridge has enough Brown Field Land for its allocation of 350 homes and a care home. A further six sites have been proposed, two being sites in the Green Belt and one in Open Countryside. I did not object to them as no footpaths will be affected and they are already close to housing. The District Council will compensate for the loss of Green Belt Land by designating land to the north of the village as Green Belt instead. The other three sites were objected to as I considered they would contribute to urban sprawl alongside the A449 road towards Stafford.

Marjorie Cashmore, District Footpath Secretary

Stone

The summer sunshine has made walking a real pleasure and the mud from the winter months is long forgotten. The variety of walks provided is a testament to our group members and their willingness to continue to plan and lead walks. Our walk programme remains varied in distance, terrain and covers a wide area. We have an excellent website to advertise the programme. Leaders are always coming up with new ideas. All walks continue to be well attended. Visitors from other groups comment on the warm welcome they receive.

Staffordshire and the Peak District remain favourites with our walk leaders. We have visited mountains in Wales and the Lake District. We have very competent leaders who inspire confidence in group members to try these difficult terrains. Days out to Bakewell Market, Norton Bridge Railway Junction and Toyota Car Factory have provided diversions to the walking programme. There have been too many walks to list them all, thank you so much to all who coordinate events and lead walks. A big thank you too to the Walking for Health leaders who tirelessly provide walking experiences for the less able walkers.

A Ramblers holiday to Competa, Spain was well supported and enjoyed by those who attended. Dolgellau was the venue for a 3 day walking break in June and some members are enjoying a Ramblers holiday in Sedbergh as I write.

The groups walk book Stone Circles has been updated ready for reprinting and has featured in the programme. Many of the short walks were done in the evening followed by a pub meal.

Our working party deserve a pat on the back; they continue to undertake local projects to repair stiles and gates alongside council workers. Keep up the good work.

To promote membership to our group we held a stall at the Stone Framers Market and we joined with the Stoke Newcastle branch at the Stafford County Show. We hope our new programme continues to inspire people to come along and try walking.

A date for your diary, 30th November we are host to the Staffordshire AGM. Hope to see you there.

Carol Skelton, publicity officer

Stoke/Newcastle

This past 12 months has seen group members taking more interest in social activities which are important to creating better cohesion in the general working of all things related to 'rambling'. Getting members to socialise other than the week to week walking programme gives a great boost to our group's activities and in our case has enabled members to meet people from other groups in the Staffordshire area, mainly through our coach rambles, which are proving to be creating a greater interest in our walks.

Weekends at Coniston and Skipton proved most successful and were fully supported by members eager to book themselves into B&Bs. Day trips to Southport, Winchcombe and Llangollen were also well

attended, thanks to the efforts of our 'trio' of keen members who recced and planned the walks and to whom we all owe our thanks for their work in organising these enjoyable days out. I make no excuses for, on your behalf, thanking all leaders, and indeed the committee members, for making things happen to expand our range of rambles and take us to places we have only heard of but never visited. Christmas lunch at the Broughton Arms, Balterley and Boxing Day +1 at Sneyd Arms, Whiston were enjoyed by all and well-attended, as was the Advent walk at the Loggerheads Hotel, which has been reintroduced.

The downside to our programme of walks has been poor attendance on the summer evening walks and, due to insufficient numbers, the need to cancel the White to Dark long distance linear walk.

Richard Clamp, Secretary

Walsall.

Hopefully the Walsall group is continuing to satisfy the walking expectations of it's members, whilst also providing a suitable range of opportunities in both the social and conservation fields to maintain a wider range of involvement for those who wish to partake.

Our group size generally means that we are just about capable of filling our 6-monthly walk programmes without overloading our walk leaders and risking losing their great enthusiasm, and as always it is difficult to estimate the amount of time and effort that individuals put into making this happen. The group owes a continuing debt of gratitude to our walk leaders and programme coordinators for generating programmes that are varied, interesting and successful - as the number of walkers that attend will testify.

That said we are still managing to bring forward new walk leaders who have responded to our call earlier in the year and we're starting to see good well-lead walks from them which is very encouraging for the future of the group. We're very grateful to them for 'taking the plunge' and want them and any others thinking about it to know that we're here to support them throughout the 'adventure'. [As I've said so often - that folks are starting to tire of it - "Without our Walk Leaders this group is going nowhere"].

So things are looking more stable on the walking front and supporting this we have had a good run of social events, to both invigorate and relax members, which have also been well attended and

have ranged from meals in Burntwood, (Christmas), Walsall Wood, (Annual Dinner), Burntwood, (Kevin's party), to walking holidays, (Lulworth Cove and Llanwrtyd Wells), a coach trip to Chester, and several evening events including theatre trips, jazz evenings and quiz nights.

Many thanks must go to all those who organised these events and to those whose support made them so successful. Clearly the more of these we have and display on the web-site the more attractive the group should look.

With reference to the above, our membership numbers have held static over the past 12 months or so, despite welcoming several new members to our walking parties which has been in itself has been very uplifting. We continue to believe that it is the loss of our older/originating members through infirmity, etc. that is balancing out our efforts to attract new members. It's something we have to deal with on a continuing basis, as none of us are getting any younger, and our members have repeatedly rallied around to help in our recruiting drives. It's just a little depressing for them when despite our best endeavours, the numbers remain stubbornly the same.

In addition to walking and the social scene we continue with our efforts to maintain the local footpaths around Walsall, both rural and urban in some cases, and are now receiving good support from the Council's Rights of Way Team in keeping us supplied with tools, materials (and new locations to work on). Our team has really worked hard this year and I'd like to express my thanks to all those who have taken part. Re-growth this summer has been intense and we've been confronted by 'jungle conditions' on a number of occasions when we expected the routes to be largely clear.

We still maintain our relationship with Cannock Chase AONB, attending their volunteering sessions at least once a month and in doing so finding out a little more each time about what makes Cannock Chase what it is. Over the past 12 months we've been involved in brash clearing, heather seed spreading, willowherb control and Himalayan Balsam pulling to name but a few. Bryan Phillips remains the Area representative at the AONB Joint Advisory Committee and his report can be seen elsewhere in this edition.

All in all we've had a pretty good year, with plenty going on made possible by a significant amount of support from our members and volunteers too and we look forward to the future optimistically.

Dick Turton.

Ramblers Association Staffordshire Area Annual Report 2014

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Next Issue

Will be published mid April. Contributions please by 15th March
2015.

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.