

ANNUAL REPORT 2013

STAFFORDSHIRE AREA RAMBLERS



Picture –Staffordshire’s Rhineland, Churnet Valley near Alton

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Editorial

Another Ramblers year nearly over. Following a good summer for a change, here's hoping for a more pleasant winter. The better weather, will hopefully, encourage more people to go walking and by doing so, keep our paths open. Well used paths help keep themselves free of obstructions. A path seldom walked will often become overgrown leaving it open only for the more robust walker. With the cuts in government funding it will pose a serious problem in years to come as local Authorities will not have the resources to maintain them. All the more reason too, to be alert and take an active role in either becoming a footpath Officer or reporting obstructions as and when you find them. Harry Scotts message is vital so please read and act on his report.

However not all is doom and gloom. In a previous issue I pointed out that you do not always have to go far to be in the countryside. The following picture was taken less than quarter of a mile away from my suburban home.



On another matter entirely, I came across a useful tip on the internet recently. This is especially important for those, like myself, who frequently do our walking alone. By the nature of our activity, we are often in the middle of nowhere, away from civilisation- and at times - a mobile phone signal so the piece below may just save your life.

HOW TO SURVIVE A HEART ATTACK WHEN ALONE

If you start experiencing severe pain in your chest that starts to drag out into your arm and up into your jaw you may be suffering a heart attack. Since many people are alone when they suffer a heart attack, without help, the person whose heart is beating improperly and who begins to feel faint, has only about 10 seconds left before losing consciousness.

However, you can help yourself by coughing repeatedly and very vigorously. A deep breath should be taken before each cough, and the cough must be deep and prolonged, as when producing sputum from deep inside the chest.

A breath and a cough must be repeated about every two seconds without let-up until help arrives, or until the heart is felt to be beating normally again.

Deep breaths get oxygen into the lungs and coughing movements squeeze the heart and keep the blood circulating. The squeezing pressure on the heart also helps it regain normal rhythm. In this way, heart attack victims can get to a hospital for treatment.

Change of Address

Should you change your address or your address is wrong, then please contact the membership Dept at Camelford House, not the Editor as he has no control of addresses.

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.

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President's Address

Our Association has, thankfully, made some very good progress during the last three years. We now have an enthusiastic chief-executive, Benedict Southworth, who understands us and knows what our Association stands for and, like any good Ramblers' Leader, he is keeping us on the right track. I am confident that our Association will make a full recovery to become once again, a good campaigning organisation for walkers.

However, we must always remember that our Association is only as good as its members, and that it is up to us to report footpath problems, to lead walks, to volunteer for footpath work, to serve on our committees and to recruit more members. Without such active members we cannot survive as an organisation that *works for walkers*.

As I reach the end of my three-year term in office, may I say that it has been a privilege to work at Area level with such an experienced team of dedicated officers who will, I am confident, continue to work tirelessly for the success of our Staffordshire Area.

Thank you to all who have helped to keep our association *working for walkers*, in particular those who have given their time to lead walks and to serve on committees during the past year.
Geoff Loadwick, Area President.

Chairman's Report.

As the end of my second year as chairman approaches I continue to be impressed by the commitment of, and hard work done by, members in their groups and on Area Council. Without their efforts the RA would become a pressure group with no practical 'on the ground' presence.

Marjorie and David Cashmore, Graham Evans, and I attended General Council in April at Warwick University. Groups have received my detailed report. It was reassuring to find that the four of us were in broad agreement about the issues discussed. We were all pleased when the 3 vacancies on the Board of Trustees were filled by members under the age of 40!

The CEO, Benedict Southworth, and the chairman, Jonathon Kipling, form a very effective team working to revitalise the Association. They outlined clearly the steps taken to involve and inform the grassroots membership. The steps taken to deal with the

Ramblers Association Staffordshire Area Annual Report 2013 concerns about the relationships with Ramblers Worldwide Holidays and HF holidays were explained and were well-received by the delegates. They are committed to openness as shown by the publication of Board of Trustee minutes. The CEO is an effective communicator and a 'doer', the chairman is deft, astute, and in tune with the concerns of the membership.

HS2 will be a long term issue. There will, inevitably, be considerable disruption of the footpath network. Harry Scott, the Area Footpath Secretary, and David Hewett, have identified 68 paths affected by HS2 phases 1 and 2 and have made contacts relating to footpath diversions

Footpath problems are dealt with at group and Area level and are the most high profile aspect of the work of the RA. This work, together with footpath maintenance, all done by willing volunteers, is where the general public can see the value and importance of our association,

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.

The 2012 Area AGM was hosted by the Walsall Group at Aldridge Community Centre and our guest speaker was Benedict Southworth who had joined Ramblers as our Chief Executive Officer in the previous February. He outlined his vision for the future and how Ramblers needed to change so as to attract more members. He then went on to answer questions from the assembled members who on the whole were very impressed by his answers. At that AGM meeting the issue of what does a 'Members' Representative' on Area Council do? To try to answer this question we need to understand that at the heart of this great charity we try to encourage as much democracy as we can. This of course means that members must be willing to be involved and that is why there are three positions (currently only one is filled) on Area Council. Currently Central Office is looking for volunteers to train as Walk-'n'-Talk ambassadors so that there can be a two way dialog with members. In essence this is what a member

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‘Members’ Representative’ should try to do, i.e. talk to members so as to find out what their concerns are about walking and the Ramblers and then bring it to the attention of Area Council. Equally there are three posts for ‘Affiliated Group’ Representative’. These should be filled by Ramblers’ members who are also members of an Affiliated Group who can then represent that group on Area Council.

I now need to bring to your attention the there are several important posts on Area Council that will become vacant at the next Area AGM. These are Area Vice – Chairman (Person), Area Web-master, Area Countryside Officer and Area Publicity Officer. Our current Area Access Officer, Eddie Dawson, has also indicated that he would like to stand down in the near future and would welcome a volunteer to come forward so as he can ‘show them the ropes’ as it were. Of course as is usual at any AGM all posts are up for re-election and so any member can volunteer to do any job.

At local level Ramblers can only function if we have sufficient volunteers willing to give a little of their time so that others can enjoy walking in the British countryside. Most of what they do is unseen but without them we would all find that each year it would get harder and harder to go for a walk in open countryside. To all our volunteers, at either Group or Area, I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you. To the wider membership and indeed all walkers who are not yet members I say that RAMBLERS NEED YOU!
Graham Evans, Area Secretary.

Membership Secretary’s Report

This year shows a continued decline of Membership for most groups with some notable exceptions.

The reasons are probably very varied. The RA is going to carry out a survey of why people leave which will probably demonstrate a variety of personal reasons. We must do as much as possible to make ourselves an attractive and visible organisation in our local communities. Competition from other walking groups who do not contribute to the maintenance of the footpath network does not help but has to be recognised.

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Groups	August 2011 AGM Report	August 2102 AGM Report	August 2013 AGM Report
1 East Staffs	263	275	263
2 Stone	220	221	215
3 Stoke & Newcastle	459	424	393
4 Lichfield	148	155	141
5 Mid Staffs	240	246	210
6 Stourbridge	228	213	197
7 Wolverhampton	307	297	279
8 Walsall	169	176	153
9 Sandwell	156	162	151
10 Chase	120	122	119
11 Leek	120	125	108
12 Biddulph	123	114	108
14 Bilston	46	45	39
50 Black Country	24	26	28
51 Staffs Walking Group	51	47	67
Staffordshire Area <i>Gerald Gittens</i>	2683	2661	2485

Area Treasurers Report.

During the current economic climate it is gratifying to see that overall, Area has a positive balance of income over expenditure during the least year of approximately £420. This is somewhat less than last years difference but at present our resources are very sound.

Payments to Groups actually increased from the previous year by over £1000 as some had been letting their resources decline during the preceding year. Most Groups had opted for the basic budget based on group numbers rather than creating an actual budget. The cost of meetings and administration as well as casework has increased

Ramblers Association Staffordshire Area Annual Report 2013 slightly. The latter is partly due, no doubt, to the increased work resulting from the Government cuts so this will probably continue to rise.

The cost of printing and posting this Annual Report will appear on next years statement of accounts which will lessen the balance which will appear on the final accounts. As the accounts are currently with the Auditor they are not attached with this report but copies will be available at the AGM.

For the forthcoming budget I have requested a lower figure so that our reserves do not remain so high.

Finally I would like to thank all Group Treasurers for their help and assistance throughout the year. It makes my life a lot easier.

Peter Matthews, Area Treasurer

Area Footpath Secretary Report

As I look back over the year it is clear the County Council budget cuts are beginning to bite. There have been cuts in the Ranger Service, Rangers go out and inspect footpath problems reported by the public, they then report back to the Rights of Way Office. There has also been cuts in the Rights of Way Office, which has compounded the delays. There has been a marked down turn in getting problems resolved. It is clear that ploughing and cropping problems are being neglected; none of the problems I have reported this year have been resolved. Area needs to understand that the County Council no longer has the resources to deal with all of our footpath problems and we need to work around this, as a result of this I have started to refer problems to the legal department. It is clear to me that further cuts will take place in the Ranger Service and the Rights of Way Office during 2014.

Your District Footpath Secretaries have dealt with over 95 planning applications from all parts of the County. All have been investigated and where they affected footpaths comments and objections have been made to the planning offices. Interestingly we have had a large number of Poly Tunnel retention applications for the growing of soft fruit. These tunnels do affect footpaths, causing, blocking, flooding and surface damage.

The number of footpath diversion consultation from the County Council and the District Councils is around 20 this year. This down on previous years and is due to two factors the lack of Rights of Way Staff to deal with them and the cost to the applicant which is around £2,000.

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The District Footpath Secretaries continue to respond to footpath complaints from Ramblers' Association members and members of the public, which come from Ramblers Central Office. We are getting around one or two a week, all of which are investigated and reported to the County Council.

Stoke on Trent continues to be a black hole, getting things done is very difficult, however we did, with the help of a City Councillor, manage to get footpath 102 at Bentilee open and walkable this year. Also good news was the addition of several footpaths to the definitive map, but many more footpaths need to be added to the map, not forgetting the cut off date of 2026 which comes ever closer.

Do not forget, if you are out walking in Staffordshire be sure to report any problems to the County Council or contact me 01543 274805 or email harrywscott@btinternet.com, and I will report them for you, a map reference and a location would be helpful.

Volunteers are always required. We need volunteers to walk a few footpaths and report any problems to the County Council. If you would like to volunteer I can be contacted on 01543 274805 or email harrywscott@btinternet.com. We still need a representative for Dudley, so if you live in or near Dudley and would like to help, give me a call.

Harry W Scott

Area Webmaster Report

The third version of the website has now been running for nearly a year. The webspace is now provided by the Ramblers along with the “Domain” registration. Any groups without a website can consider setting up one at no cost to the group. Hopefully there is someone in the group to be the Group Webmaster.

Information now included in the following sections:

- 1.Homepage – a general introduction
- 2.Area Combined Programme provided by Peter Matthews
- 3.Access information
- 4.News Items
- 5.Footpaths
- 6.Latest Stepout and Annual Report
- 7.Links to useful organisations
- 8.Contacts

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I have been Area Webmaster for many years and seen it hosted by three organisations but now it is hosted by the Ramblers and it will remain there as long as the Ramblers exist.

I feel now is the time to hand over to someone else and develop it so it suitable for ipad & tablet use as well as PCs. I hope there is someone in the Ramblers to take over at the AGM!

If no one comes forward I will continue to maintain it in the current form for another year but I will be disappointed that there were no volunteers to take over.

Information can be found on www.ramblers-web.org.uk and how it all works. Finally, the name of the Area Webpage is www.staffordshireramblers.org.

David Palmer

National Forest Access and Recreation Working Group

Only one meeting this year, so little to report. The National Forest is to introduce details of geological walks with maps. The new long distance trail they are developing, along with interested parties, the National Forest Way is due to launch in 2014.

Jane King

Access Report

After winning the right in 2009 for a complete coastal path around England, the scheme is now put in doubt after the environment minister, Richard Benyon, hesitates to confirm that its funding will continue.

Therefore, all concerned walkers are being encouraged to sign the petition, 'one coast for all' on the 'ramblers.co.uk' website. We need all the signatures we can muster to ensure the continued creation of our right of access to the coast. You must support this request. Log on, sign on now.

Reminder to observe the plant disease and fungal contamination safeguards where requested in all areas

For the last few years, I have been unable to actively carryout my full duties as Access Officer, therefore, I would therefore ask for any interested party to take over these responsibilities. Otherwise, I can continue as I am in this roll to oversee any access projects, problems brought to my attention and keep the group informed and updated on further developments.

Eddie Dawson AAO

Cannock Chase AONB Report

A recent survey has shown that the CCAONB attracts 2.3 million visitors every year, the majority live within a twelve-mile radius, so it is fitting that a local Ramblers group continues to play a full and active part with activities within the AONB.

The group I refer to are the Walsall group whose year got off to a very good start with the introduction of a series of walks leaflets. They were launched on a very wet Saturday morning at Marquis Drive, followed by a walk featured in the leaflets. The bad weather did not deter a large number of people taking part. The leaflets which contain a series of walks away from the more popular paths have proved to be very popular and are selling well.

The icing on top of the cake as far as the groups activities were concerned, was the award of "Volunteers of the year" to the group - which reflects well on all of the Ramblers groups in the area.

An interesting project was presented this year as part of the "Connecting Cannock Chase" project. It involves the restoration of 50ha of heathland on Forestry Commission land to create wildlife corridors. This will include introducing cattle to graze on previously cleared fell sites to help with the control of bracken but it will mean the introduction of fences to keep the stock in. However there will be gates across footpaths to maintain access. Information boards are being introduced on site to inform visitors about the project.

The Forestry Commission gave a very interesting presentation to the CCAONB advisory partnership earlier in the year in which they spoke of planting new species of trees on a trial basis to test their reaction to severe weather and climate change. The presenter went on to talk about the commission's fifty-year plan for the Chase; he said that in fifty years time we will not recognise the place from how it looks today,

This all sounds very exciting the only trouble is that not many of us reading this will be around to see it.

Bryan Phillips

Biddulph Group Annual Report

It has been another dynamic, successful and enjoyable year.

Our total membership dipped slightly over the year, as has that of other groups in the area, due largely to the loss of older members who were instrumental in the formation of the initial group. We are privileged, however to have a very active core membership who ensure that all our walks are enthusiastically supported. This enables us to

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offer the full range of walks — short, medium and long during the week and at weekends. Our annual public summer evening walks have been well attended. Whilst short and medium walks remain the most popular there is always an excellent turnout on pub walk days!

The recruitment of new members and the retention of existing ones is one of our top priorities and we are also focusing on strategies to encourage and support new volunteers. Another priority is the gradual evolvement of the website. The new "archive of walks" is a useful reference tool for all walkers both in and new to the area.

Since my last report our members have enjoyed a number of walking holidays. These include two long weekends, one in a snowy Gloucester, the other in the Brecon Beacons and a coach ramble to Malham Cove. In September we are looking forward to ten days in Slovenia followed by a Lake District weekend in the autumn. Our planning for 2014 is advanced with a week in Tenby and a long weekend in Stratford confirmed. At the planning stage is a weekend in Whitby later in the year. Thought is currently being given to 2015 destinations.

Despite this positive and upbeat report we are mindful of the challenges ahead. Several key committee posts will become vacant through retirement shortly. Replacing their commitment, knowledge and experience whilst retaining the uniqueness of a close, caring and committed group will not be easy.

Linda Drakeford

East Staffordshire Ramblers Group – Annual Report 2012/2013

The East Staffordshire Group has had a very enjoyable year – in no small part due to the members and I must give a big thank you to the Committee who have all, in their own way, given their enthusiasm and time to ensure the success of the Group.

In the middle of the year we noticed a slight falling off of membership; whilst still attracting new members, the number is not offsetting those we are losing. We think that this is in part due to the economic climate – who is going to pay to join the Ramblers when they can join a local walking club for only £5 ? Perhaps we need to emphasise the benefits of supporting the Ramblers – the national walking charity.

On our walks programme, we have gone back to two walks on a Wednesday as we have gained new leaders – offering five or six walks a week. The shorter half day walks remain the most popular. Highlights of the walks programme have included various walks as

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part of the Festival of Winter Walks, a well-supported Family walk – although some of the children were disappointed that on their tick-off sheet the meerkats were not live ! Also the Picnic in the Park where a local warden led us behind the dam of Foremark Reservoir. Mikes' Challenge Walk was a 17-mile Melbourne Meander. In May, we entered four walks into the National Forest Walking Festival – the walk to Fauld Crater being very popular. In September, a walk along the Birmingham Canals explored the industrial heritage of the city. For the Winter programme, we have introduced web-based walks entry to ease the load of the programme compilers.

On the Social side, we enjoyed a tour of the JCB factory at Rocester following an excellent breakfast – an early start but well worth the effort. The Christmas lunches at the Lakeside, Moira and the Ramblers Retreat were, as usual, well-supported. We had a Christmas Lights evening walk followed by food at Rolleston Club. In March, the Annual Buffet was enjoyed by nearly 70 members and the Muddy Boot Award was presented to Peter Clark for his enthusiasm in setting up the much-praised web-site, and, setting up and running the footpath working party. In June, we enjoyed a Willington History Walk led by the local W.I., and finally in September a coach trip to Bourton-on-the-Water in the Cotswolds.

We have holidayed in the Elan Valley, followed shortly after by a weekend in Bath and surrounding villages – this was a short walk + sightseeing holiday – proved to be popular. August saw us on Bleaklow and Kinder, and the main Group holiday in September was to Bassenthwaite in the Lake District.

The footpath working party has been busy over the year with a break for the very hot weather. In the Spring we had an excellent First Aid Course provided free of charge by the West Midlands Ambulance Service (not related !).

Jane King, Group Chairman

Lichfield Group Report

This year has been a successful and an enjoyable one. Interest in our group is being maintained; we've had an average attendance on our Sunday walks of 17, unchanged over the past 3 years.

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Our most popular walk distance is 7 miles, and we can expect 20 people on such a walk. However, attendance falls to 17 for a 10 miler, and above that, interest falls away significantly!

On the social side, we've had a barbecue and 'Olympic Games', an American Supper at the Chairman's house, skittles and barn dancing and celebrated a Christmas lunch together. Muriel Taylor also made a beautiful cake, decorated with Ramblers features, for group member Rose Swaddle, otherwise known as 'Rambling Rose', to celebrate her 80th birthday.

Additionally, this year we have had group weekends to the Gower and to Ambleside. Our next trip planned is to Wensleydale in September.

We also did the biennial Lichfield twinning exchange trip, which this year was organised by the German twin town of Limburg, and took place in the Mosel valley.

Thanks to Ted Taylor, our chairman, and Sue Bell our Treasurer who have announced that they are stepping down this September.

Phil Cheesewright, Secretary.

Mid Staffs Group Report

The group visited Great Yarmouth where we had assistance from a local Rambler who led us on very interesting walks and gave us a talk in the evening. With 46 members participating we had a very enjoyable week. Our Winter Break this year was to Portsmouth in February, with fair weather and good coastal walks. In March 46 members went to the HF Hotel at Bourton on the Water, in a superb hotel but the weather was cold but the walks carried on in true ramblers spirit.

We are now looking forward to a holiday St Asaph, North Wales in September we are hoping that the weather will be kind. We are proposing a holiday in the Bristol area in February and have booked another HF holiday to Whitby to continue the varied programme.

We have had another good year of walks with some new leaders and a varied programme.

Other events included our Christmas Social with a talk from a Tour Manager of "Coastal Walks" in Somerset and a New Year Lunch. We could do with more members to join the Committee and help with various tasks and also more of our new members to come forward to lead walks.

Jenny Maddock, Secretary

Sandwell Group - Footpath & Waterways Report

The Canal & River Trust have been active throughout the summer in trimming margins along towpaths. Essential maintenance to the famous Netherton tunnel took place in the Spring costing £1.5 million. Fortunately the tunnel was re-opened in time for the Sandwell Six Towns Challenge Marathon on 25 August 2013. The 1.75 mile tunnel is a great attraction to entrants.

Bustleholme Weir on the Tame Valley canal was refurbished in spring and early summer. I have written from the Group to thank the Waterways Manager for including in the project, the 72 steps from the towpath down to the River Tame footpath. These are used on Sandwell Stride Health walks.

Sandwell Local Access Forum had a field meeting on 25 April 2013 with Birmingham LAF which has resulted in Birmingham Council issuing a consultation notice regarding its' decision to issue a modification order for a restricted byway on the Sandwell Valley border with Birmingham. This has been a long running campaign to re-open a blocked path. The order is expected shortly.

An informal meeting with our Walsall Group colleagues has seen the start of positive action with regard to several paths, including the Beacon Way on the Sandwell/Walsall border. Footpath improvements included in the Rights of Way Improvement Plan have been done in line with the revised timescales.

The flexible approach adopted by Sandwell RoW Officers has allowed work outside the RoWIP to be actioned on sites including Bury Hill on the Rowley Hills and Sandwell Park Golf Course. At the request of the LAF, the Community Payback team have undertaken clearance of litter and rubbish on several footpaths and open spaces.

The fourth annual self led Sandwell Marathon Challenge walk/run, held in conjunction with the Sandwell Show and manned entirely by Group members, took place on 25 August 2013. Once again, there was an increase in entrants.

A short led walk from the Sandwell Showground was an added feature. We are grateful to the Group Volunteers for their marvellous support which enabled this event to take place. Emailed responses from participants can be viewed on www.sandwellramblers.org.uk

John Scott. Sandwell Group Footpath Secretary

South Staffs District Report

There have been a few changes to the path network in South

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Staffs since last year. Public Footpath No. 20 in Brewood Parish has a minor diversion to allow for a new Health Centre to be built on the field opposite the Catholic Church. Footpath No. 4 in Bilbrook is diverted onto the grass vehicle track from its junction with the River Penk towards Lower Pendeford Farm. Bridleway 50.918 from Park Lane Lodge to Hunting Bridge on the canal in Brewood Parish will now be along the vehicle track. These diversions are minor and much more convenient for walkers.

Two Gating Orders have taken place, one on Shaw Hall Lane at Coven Heath and the second on the Bridleway at Springslade Lodge on Cannock Chase. These are to restrict vehicles but not walkers.

There have also been several changes to the Parish Footpath Secretaries in the District.. Eileen Gamston has retired after many years looking after Wombourne, Seisdon, Trysull and Lower Penn. Thanks go to Eileen for her excellent work with Len, her husband, who helped with footpath maintenance. Jean Parry has kindly taken over Lower Penn and Wombourne and has walked all the paths over the winter and reported some problems. Mike Bodley from the Wolverhampton Group has taken over Trysull and Seisdon. I hope they enjoy walking the paths. Celia Cox has decided to retire from being Countryside Secretary for Mid Staffs Group at the next AGM as she finds access to the Planning Applications is becoming much more difficult.

Planning Applications I have received are averaging about two per month, so an increase on last year. Only a couple needed an objection. David and I have cleared overgrown stiles and fingerposts while out walking as paths do seem to have become very overgrown this year. This is probably due to severe budget cuts at the County Council necessitating a decline in footpath maintenance. The new priority policy ensures only important paths get attended to first with the rest having to wait longer.

Marjorie Cashmore

Stoke/Newcastle Group Report

The walks programme has continued to flourish with members organising weekly walks as well as coach rambles. We've had two very enjoyable weekends away, expertly organised by Tony Adair, who led walks in the Brecon Beacons and Malham. The Christmas lunch, again preceded by an excellent walk on the Roaches, was led by as well as organised, by Brian Thomas, in bright if very cold weather. An excellent day enjoyed by all 48 members. The Boxing Day +2 event,

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which is a popular annual post-Christmas event, was held at the
Blacksmiths Arms, Alton, and organised by Joan & Terry Grattage.

During the summer, our two coach rambles (Rutland Water & Ruthin) were well supported, the coaches amply complete and walkers enjoyed excellent dry weather. The grandparents & grandchildren adventure morning put on by Charlie Bigley had a low response, however, Charlie is prepared to give it another try in the future. Evening walks had a poor response with minimal numbers turning up for the short 5 mile walks.

Overall, we have had another excellent year blessed by enthusiastic members who have taken time and trouble to make our programme a great success. On your behalf, may I thank everyone who has worked to make our rambles so enjoyable and varied, all the organisers of the coach rambles (Graham Robinson, Malcolm Sproston & Dave Martin), and leaders - who strive on your behalf to make rambling the most enjoyable of all outdoor activities.

Finally, I feel I must mention our footpaths team, now captained by Alan Bell. George Shufflebotham was a hard act to follow so Alan deserves our congratulations in putting together an enthusiastic team who continue, along with Staffordshire County Council, to repair and improve our highways and byeways.

Richard Clamp, Secretary

Walsall Group.

Looking over the events of the past year, we feel that the group is continuing to move forward and that members are enjoying the wider range of activities open to them.

We had a great response to the Xmas Meal in Gentleshaw which followed a 5 mile walk designed to whet the appetites of those taking part. Our group holidays also attracted good support both in Wales in March and again in Yorkshire in June, whilst in between we managed to fit in a presentation about climbing Kilimanjaro, trips to the Forest Arts Centre, the dog-racing track, ten-pin bowling and an annual dinner in March. We've gone on from there to include a crown green bowling evening and a summer barbecue and we still have other items either on the calendar or being planned. So a great deal of thanks is due on behalf of group members to all those who helped make these events happen.

This year was the 21st anniversary of the Walsall group and we marked this with a 21 mile walk around Cannock Chase in June that

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brought out 13 of the hardiest of our walkers and finished with very a welcome drink and meal at the end.

Our relationship with Cannock Chase and the AONB team continues to flourish, (see report from our representative on the AONB Advisory Committee – Bryan Phillips) and we have gained a good insight into the Chase area and how it functions as a result. Our volunteers regularly attend working sessions all around the AONB area and their efforts are much appreciated, so my personal thanks to all those who venture out into the sometimes ‘unknown reaches’ of the Chase armed only with a bow-saw and loppers in an attempt to maintain the heathland environment that the region is famous for.

While mentioning volunteers it would be remiss not to add my thanks to those who also assist with the Walsall Voluntary Maintenance Programme, which has now started to take on more impetus as tools supplies get bigger and our overall skills begin to expand also. We’re learning a lot about the local footpaths that we didn’t really know before as a result of this, and the opportunity to expand the local footpath network in Walsall borough now looks a little more likely. (We’re also learning that if you don’t ‘plant’ your footpath markers deeply enough they soon become perches for ducks in the canal!).

We’ve maintained our standards regarding our walks programmes throughout the year, although this has on occasion been quite difficult in terms of having enough walk leaders, but those we do have rallied around to ensure our programmes didn’t have any gaps in them. We are always grateful for the efforts of our walk leaders and it is uncomfortable when we have to ask more from them in order to keep things going. As I’ve said before our group is at the point where more leaders could mean more new members being attracted to our walking programme, but for this you need more members willing to become leaders and so the cycle continues.

If there has been a downside to this year it has been the continued decline in membership numbers. We’ve continue to lose some of our older, more experienced members for a variety of reasons at a rate that exceeds the numbers coming into the group, so we’re especially pleased whenever new faces join us. We see similar problems in many groups across the Area and despite our efforts to recruit more people, (this year using resources kindly funded by member’s donations I have to add); we still seem unable to staunch the flow.

We continue to look to Central Office of the Ramblers in London to give us ideas, incentives or even an increased national presence as we feel that without these our ability to turn around the situation will continue to decline.

Dick Turton.

Wolverhampton Group

First and foremost many, many thanks to all our walk leaders, and to David, our retiring Walks Programme Co-ordinator, for continuing to produce such an excellent variety of walks. We all appreciate the huge amount of time and effort that goes into planning, programming and leading these rambles, especially when they include visits to places of interest, and arranging refreshment at pubs, cafes, garden centres and other venues.

We participated again in this year's Wolverhampton Walking Festival which attracted large numbers of people and meant our walk leaders faced the additional challenges that come with leading very large groups. Their meticulous planning contributed greatly to the Festival's success.

In common with many other Groups in the Area the number of our walk leaders has reduced in recent years. We are pleased to see that Ramblers are providing a series of workshops nationally on planning and leading walks and hope that this will help encourage more members to volunteer as leaders.

Helen continued to organise great social events including the October Whitby Holiday, which included some super walks along the cliffs, and good views when the mists lifted! The highpoint of the hotel stay was the pre-Halloween dinner in appropriate fancy dress – hope we did not alarm the other guests and staff too much. The March Malvern Weekend provided some challenging weather conditions, with severe snow and wind eventually persuading the group to retreat to the comfort of the town hostelryes.

Judith Rose, Chair

Ramblers Association Staffordshire Area Annual Report 2013

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Next Issue

Will be published mid April. Contributions please by 15th
March 2014.