



April Issue, 2017



STAFFORDSHIRE AREA RAMBLERS

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Photo – Ramblers enjoying a coffee break during the AGM walk

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Editorial.

As we all know this is a time of austerity. Cuts to Council expenditure means that footpaths are not high on their lists of priorities and this, along with other complications, means that many footpath problems remain just that. This does not mean that we should stop reporting any issues, far from it. Letting the Local Authority know of a problem will build up a list which in turn could lift the order of priorities. Some paths are great, as the picture below shows.



AGM walk... a clear path across fields.

This type of path is obvious and with a number of people walking along it, the path becomes clear. As long as walkers keep to the line of the path, then its use can be seen by all. Sadly, in my travels, I have seen walkers walk several abreast on a walk which can not only damage a field crop, annoy the farmer, it also means that the path is less defined. Fortunately, as Ramblers, we know this but probably the majority of walkers are not members of the Ramblers and are unaware of their responsibilities.



AGM Walk. An undefined path.

Of course not all paths can be defined simply through the passage of feet, as the picture above shows. Nevertheless the path is good simply because there are no obstructions and on this walk, stiles are in place and in good repair. However when a path is obstructed, whether by crops, an overgrown hedge covering a stile, buildings or even threatening private notices, then these should be reported.

Fortunately, many of our Groups are active and repair stiles, clear away undergrowth and waymark routes as well as reporting problems to the Local Authority. The picture on the next page illustrates waymarking by Lichfield Ramblers. They are not alone, several of our groups have similar waymarks and some even waymark a particular route such as Stone Group with their Stone Circle waymarks. This is an excellent way of showing the public what we do and increase awareness.



But sadly, lack of funding has also reached the Ramblers itself. As many will know, we receive an annual payment from the Ramblers to promote our work. Sums are allocated to Groups based on their membership, or if that is insufficient, on their budget. Area too has a budget but now that too is in jeopardy. This year Area allocation was capped to last years figure, despite Area and Groups having increased expenditure owing to inflation. This means that Area and Groups could face the same situation next year so it is important that we too keep an eye on what we spend our finances on. However what is more worrying is that if there are limits on our own expenditure does this mean that the work of the Ramblers itself is in jeopardy? Hopefully by restricting our own payments such a situation will be kept at bay. So we all have to tighten our belts.

To finish a somewhat somber editorial I came across the notice on the next page whilst walking in North Wales. Although not at an entrance to a footpath it does perhaps reflect the views of some and made for an interesting stop. Once on The Cloud I also came across a plaque which read "If you notice this notice, you will notice that this notice, is not worth noticing". Sadly its gone now.



Black Country... a Poem

(for Liz Berry)

Sandwell making merry on its gala day
And offering its six towns challenge walk,
Twenty six miles tracing some only
Of its bewildering canal towpaths.

Room too for roads and railways
Clambering over each other, so that
Aqueducts carry canals over canals,
Railway viaducts reach over both
And more recent motorways span the lot
On massive concrete legs.

Hopeless drifts of litter despoil
A landscape of stark impressiveness,
Natural habitat it seems for
Pylons and ugly metal fencing
Enclosing yards and their forgotten corners.

Along the cut
Towers of pallets balance their random architecture

Against the sky, and a single wall remains
Of some forgotten industry
Awaiting final demolition,
Ghost of former purpose lingering still.

Residues of neighbourliness survive,
Product of the solidarity
Engendered by the heavy industry,
The thirty foot seam of coal
And the iron smelters-
Black by day and red by night-
That grandad and his missus
Gave their lives to.

Industrial archaeology still stands
Next to modern oblong warehouse units
That seek to fill the void,
And buried out of sight is Dudley's
Nile pyramid conundrum,
Netherton Tunnel, three thousand and fifty yards
Of arching brickwork built by
God knows who at God knows what expense
Of money, time and men.

Halfway through a shy graffiti artist,
Working in the dark,
Has sought a brief transcendence.
And indeed what better employment
Offers itself, if you are unemployed,
On some wet afternoon
Than a virgin wall beneath a bridge
To vent your powerlessness,
Affirm at least your name-
As has Tojo the Dwarf across one span
While another is memorial to a mate now gone.

Humbled and impressed I now return
To Sandwell showground
And feel within me pushing for
Expression the voice of a people,
Dirt in their DNA, iron in their soul.
Charles Eden



In my travels I came across this sight on the way up to Shutlingsloe in early December

News

Planning

The Planning Laws are changing. There is now a presumption in favour of sustainable development and large scale schemes on greenfield sites. Parish boundaries can now also be disregarded. In addition Staffordshire County Council has upgraded its criteria for traffic control on highways. In the past they had the option to consent or reject a development of 10 or more houses if there was a moderate threat to life. This has now changed to severe threat to life.

This has implications throughout the County and Staffs Moorlands has several such schemes which are a threat to footpaths.

Fracking

On 16th December MPs backed fracking under National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) such as Cannock Chase. The Government introduced the new rules via a negative statutory instrument – a way of passing secondary legislation that does not require debate or vote.

This legislation affects Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty like Cannock Chase, National Parks including the Peak District as well as our groundwater protection zones

A government committee meeting earlier this week confirmed that fracking in areas of outstanding natural beauty, such as the chase, would only be banned if it was high volume. The new ‘surface protections’ as they are known, will only apply to fracking that uses more than 10,000 cubic metres of fracking fluid, or 1,000 per stage – a threshold that almost half of fracked gas wells in the US between 2000 and 2010 would not have met.

Staffordshire County Council is in the final stages of approving a fifteen year local minerals plan through to 2030 which includes specific reference to hydrocarbon extraction including shale gas and coal bed methane both of which can be extracted using the technique of hydraulic fracturing or fracking. Cannock Chase and the surrounding areas are know to contain Coal Bed Methane although no surveying has been undertaken for Shale Gas at this time. This document can be found on the Staffordshire County Council website.

This article was adapted from the website

<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/keep-your-fracking-hands-off-cannock-chase>.

Expenses Forms

These can now be downloaded from the contacts page of the Area Website.

Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults.

At our last Area Council meeting the question of vulnerable adults and children was raised. The Ramblers has a safeguarding policy which can be downloaded from their website. It's a bit tricky to find.

The Ramblers are committed to ensure the wellbeing of anyone joining its activities and also supporting volunteers in their work. A child is anyone under the age of 18. A vulnerable adult is anyone over 18 who is unable to care independently for themselves.

There are two thrusts as far as Groups are concerned, those who volunteer for footpath work etc and those who attend walks. As far as walks are concerned, the general principles are set out as;

- Anyone under 18 **MUST** be accompanied by an adult with *parental responsibility*.
- People with special needs **MUST** be accompanied by someone responsible for their direct care (need not be a Ramblers member).
- All vulnerable people should be informed of what to expect
- Anyone with medical concerns should make the leader aware
- Adults accompanying the person should be reminded that it is their responsibility to protect the person
- A person can be refused to join a walk if it is genuinely believed that the activity would be unsuitable for them; if taking part posed a danger either to them or to other members of the Group or cause a major disruption to the Group.

It is also suggested that when compiling Group programmes that details such as distance, pace, grade and difficulty are mentioned Pace could be described as how long the walk is expected to take.

It is recommended that Walk Leaders download a copy of the document so that they are familiar with its contents.

Around the Groups.

Black Country Young Walkers

Over the past six months, we have continued with our Sunday programme of walks of varying distances and grades. Our walks have been within Shropshire, Staffordshire, The West Midlands, Worcestershire, Powys and Gwynedd. We have also included the odd Saturday walk, and walks on both the 26th and 27th December. We are now finding that the more challenging walks are the most popular.

There have been two weekends away to Snowdonia – one in October and the other in March. Both weekends included walks on

both the Saturday and Sunday, and opportunities for attendees to socialise on the Saturday evening.

We have also put on some local socials for our members including Band Nights, Pub Drinks and a Meal. Membership has remained at a similar level over the past six months. Thank you to our committee members, walk leaders, event organisers and everyone who has taken part in continuing to make the group a success.

Mark Ridgway and Mark Gatenby

Biddulph Group

Since the annual report Biddulph group have continued to enjoy a variety of walks and social occasions encouraged by our members' support.

Despite not being a big group, we find tremendous variations in members' abilities and preferred walk types. Our Publicity Secretary, Frank Simpson, has recently conducted a far reaching survey of members to ensure that our programme is correct and fulfilling their needs. Analysis shows that medium distance walks are the most popular and we are considering ways of including more whilst ensuring the needs of longer and shorter walks have equal consideration. The challenge, of course, will be to have enough leaders to cover the inevitable additional walks. Discussion is on going.

Our A.G.M. was held in a different venue this year and given a "new look" . It was, in part, social and included a served supper, bar , quizzes, slides of walks during the year and a presentation to all leaders of pens in recognition of their efforts which we rely on.

The formal part of the evening , obviously came first , and began with a short address by Graham Evans who stimulated members to think about the role of the RA in establishing and maintaining our footpath network. This is something which some members hadn't fully considered. The Committee were happy to continue in their roles and were re elected. One new member was elected as a members' representative. All posts are full apart from that of Countryside Officer which has been vacant for a number of years. About 50% of members attended, a slight increase on previous years, and many said that they had enjoyed the evening which gives us something to build on and improve further next year.

Since the last report we have enjoyed a long weekend in Skipton, a coach ramble to Anglesey, a long weekend in London featuring a Sunday led walk and theatre visit and finally an excellent Christmas Lunch at the Rudyard Hotel. We look forward now, during the Spring , to our Winter social event in February with guest speaker Mervyn Edwards, a served hot supper, raffles etc, a long weekend in

Llandudno and coach ramble to Kenilworth and Warwick. The rest of the year is planned and features a monthly social event of some description.

We have a very busy walks and social programme and we will continue encouraging feedback from members and monitoring what we offer to see it meets their expectations.

Linda Drakeford

Sandwell Group Report

Like all Staffordshire groups, our main activity is simple. We put on walks all year round along tracks through woodland or over heathland, meadowland, parkland, marshland, recovering industrial land and fields. We walk up hills and into valleys in sunshine, rain, snow and strong winds with clay, limestone, sand, granite or peat under our feet and skylarks, blackbirds, wrens, motorway traffic or bleating sheep for accompaniment. And, with any luck, some of us show up, chat, make jokes, keep quiet, discuss the meaning of life and enjoy a day in nature together.

I emphasise this simplicity because, as a local group within a national charity, it is easy to lose sight of what we do best which is to provide walks that are a joy to encounter! In thinking about how we run ourselves, preserving this walking experience with others is our priority.

We are fortunate to have members helping out in different ways with some of us finding such frameworks as committee meetings and general meetings tedious or archaic. Do we need so much formality? Could decisions be made as we test ourselves against the elements? And how do we acquire, encourage, value and support our key resource, our walk leaders? They recognise, whether they are introvert or extrovert, that putting on a favourite walk now and then is not so hard and enables others to enjoy it too.

Andrew Budden

Stone Group

The countryside is coming to life again after a wet winter. I'm sure most of us have been knee deep in mud at some point during our walking ventures during the winter months. It's been a topic of conversation many times as to who has led the muddiest walk!

The members of Stone group have continued to contribute to a full programme. New leaders have emerged after undertaking some training with Andy Trowell and Pam Bradley in map reading and planning a walk. Well done to all.

Membership has dipped a little but we continue to have excellent attendance at walks and events. The variety of walks on offer always amazes me. I always look forward to the new programme coming out and mark off the walks and events that are of special interest to me. The leaders put huge efforts into looking for ideas for events, holidays and new areas to walk. Shropshire Staffordshire and the Peak District are firm favourites. Trains and trams have assisted with the transport difficulties associated with linear walks this year. A huge thank you to all our leaders.

The AGM in November was well attended again. Some members of the committee retired and new volunteers were recruited. Thanks for all their hard work over the years. We viewed excellent local wildlife films made by the speaker after the business and refreshments.

The holidays remain popular. In October the Ramblers holiday to Epirus and the Pindhos Mountains was on offer. All those who went enjoyed the trip immensely. During February the group visited the HF hotel in Church Stretton for a variety of walks. A further group head off to Majorca soon. The members who arrange these holidays put a great deal of effort and thought into them, thank you.

Our New Years lunch took place a little later this year, Pevril in the Peak was our choice again. So nice for the group to be able to catch up with old friends in this comfortable environment. Thanks to the organisers.

Walking for health continues to provide an excellent varied programme of short local walks. Their leaders remain enthusiastic about the programme and give encouragement to the walkers.

Lastly a huge thank you to the Working Party who work on our local paths to improve accessibility for all who walk. They work alongside the Council who would be unable to complete a fraction of the work without the volunteers support

Carol Skelton

Stourbridge Group Report

We have a reasonable level of walk leaders and our walks programme offers both long and short walks; with a short walk every second Sunday in the month and often short mid week walks for those in the group who find the long walks too challenging. We had hoped to provide the 'next step' for health walkers who would like to move on. However, despite our efforts in this regard, we aren't recruiting as many as we would wish. Otherwise, we are welcoming new members and maintaining our membership levels.

As well as our walks, we also have our regular jollies and the last twelve months have been no exception.

We started off the year with our Annual Dinner. Abandoning waterproofs, gaiters, hats and scarves we donned our finery for a super lunch at Blakelands followed by that very interesting and amusing speaker, Mr. John Sparry.

Our annual coach holiday in May was to Eastbourne. We were blessed with lovely sunny spring days and really wonderful walks including a nine mile walk from the pretty village of Alfriston to Eastbourne, taking in wonderful views. The next day we walked the South Downs Way and the following day we walked along the cliffs of Beachy Head to Seven Sisters Country Park– some intrepid looked over the edge but we didn't lose anyone. It's a shame we can't be in two places at once because the short walks took in a few very interesting places, one of them being Goring where the group visited a replica of the Sistine Chapel. They also get to go to a few more café lunches.

We had another great weekend at LLangollen in September and our annual Summer Outing this year was to Corfe Castle. I hope those few good folk who sort out these breaks for us and devise all the walks know just how much we appreciate all they do. We are very lucky; we have been to some wonderful places that we may never have known about without them.

We had a cultural evening in June with a visit to the Rose Theatre to see Dad's Army which was a hoot! We are looking forward to brightening up a dark and dismal March evening with a very convivial skittles tournament. Although it can bring out a bit of a competitive element, everyone will be a winner with our American Supper.

Once again, we have lots to look forward this year with a varied walks programme, a few more 'jollies' and lots of chats, badinage and laughs.

Jill Hollyhead

Six Towns Challenge

After seven years, the Sandwell Six Towns Challenge, normally held on the Sunday of the August Bank Holiday weekend, will **NOT** take place in 2017. The staging of this event has been dependent on a partnership with Sandwell Council who are withdrawing from involvement in such events. Regrettably, it is too much of an undertaking for the Sandwell Ramblers Group to run the event on its own, at least in 2017.

Sandwell Ramblers would like to thank participants, organisers, members and friends who, over the last seven years, have enabled us to explore our industrial heritage."

When the current underfunding problems being faced by local councils have been solved, perhaps Sandwell Ramblers can once again

rise to the challenge.

John Scott

I, for one, am sorry to see this event fall by the wayside. Despite being in an urban area it is surprising how much rural walking there is. Fortunately, there is an alternative, offering walks of 6,9,12,20 and 24 miles...the Dudley Trail. See next article.

Discover the Dudley Trail!

It's all about discovery! There's the chance to 'discover Dudley' and all of the hidden secrets of the Borough's landscape together with some of its extraordinary history..... Each route can take you along canal towpaths, disused railway lines, country footpaths and very few roads. Some routes take you past local pubs, through internationally recognised nature reserves or simply along the local canalside, making the walks both pleasing to the eye as well as to the feet!

If you have never taken part in a walking event before there's the chance to start off gently on our 6 miles route and then perhaps discover the fun and benefits of walking as a healthy pastime throughout the year. Each year you can increase your distances, all the way up to our giant 28 miles walk!

Whether you're a walker or rambler or want to dash or dawdle – it's up to you, part of the fun of Dudley Trail is that you can take part at your own pace.

For more information visit <http://www.dudley.gov.uk/see-and-do/himley-hall/events/dudley-trail-2017/>

Peter Matthews



Hamps Way Sign (Stoke/Newcastle)

Example of good waymarking but ill defined path.

National Office

The Ramblers Association, 2nd Floor, Camelford House, 87–90 Albert Embankment
London, SE1 7TW. Tel 020 7339 8500

Area Secretary

Graham Evans, 65 Pacific Road, Trentham, Stoke on Trent, ST4 8RS.
gsevens@gsevens.force9.co.uk Tel 01782 642872

Stepout Editor

Peter Matthews, 1 Barbrook Avenue, Longton, Stoke on Trent, ST3 5UG.
peter.matthews20@ntlworld.com Tel 01782 336556

Other useful names and contacts

Chairman George Greensides, Ambleside, 111 Lichfield Road, Stone, Staffs, ST15
8QD Email – ggg3@talktalk.net Tel 01785 813067

Vice Chairman David Fowler, Churchstile House, Church Street, Kingsley, Cheadle,
Staffordshire, ST10 2AA. Email – cdfowler@ymail.com Tel 01538
753027

Treasurer Peter Matthews –details as above (Stepout Editor)

Membership Sec Dr. Gerald Gittens, 1 Vanity Close, Oulton, Stone, Staffs, ST15 8TZ
Email – Gerald.gittens1@btopenworld.com Tel 01785 815141

Footpaths Harry Scott, 48 Langtree Close, Cannock, WS12 3TT
E mail harryscott@btinternet.com Tel 01543 274805

Access Eddie Dawson, 96 Thames Drive, Biddulph, Stoke on Trent, ST8 7JFE
E mail Dawson2111@virginmedia.com Tel 01782 512851

Countryside Vacant

Publicity Vacant

Webmaster Glen Sibley, 49 Darely Park, Brewood Road, Coven, Wolverhampton,
WV9 5BY. Email - glen@gscs.co.uk Tel 01902 790059

Individual Members' Representatives

David Cashmore 46 Grange Crescent, Penkridge, Stafford, Staffordshire, ST19 5LU
Tel – 01785 712977

Marjorie Cashmore 46 Grange Crescent, Penkridge, Stafford, Staffordshire, ST19 5LU
Tel – 01785 712977

Affiliated Organisations representative
Vacant

Next Issue

Will be published mid October. Contributions please by 15th
September.

And Finally

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