



Annual Report – 2006/2007

General Overview

Membership numbers in the Dorset Area reached an all time high of 2396 in November 2004 but since then there has been a continuing steady decline. A similar decline has been experienced by the Ramblers' Association nationally. This is of concern and a number of initiatives are underway to attempt to reverse the trend.

There has been a significant change at the top of the Ramblers' Association where Tom Franklin has just been appointed Chief Executive. Tom has, for the last five years, been the chief executive of the charity "Living Streets" whose aim is to be the champion of streets and public spaces for people on foot, working on practical projects to create safe, vibrant and healthy streets for all.

This is very close to the aims of the Ramblers' Association and we hope to draw on his wide experience to increase the visibility and effectiveness of the Ramblers' Association to the wider public.

As a precursor to this two areas are worthy of note.

Get Walking Keep Walking

The Ramblers' Association is a member of the Active Travel Consortium, a unique grouping of cycling, walking and health organisations, which has received funding of £20 million from the Big Lottery Fund's Well-being programme to help communities in England build healthier lifestyles.

The Ramblers' share of the funds will go to support the Get Walking Keep Walking project aimed at people who aren't already active enough for good health. It will be spent supporting people to do more everyday walking close to home - not only for health and leisure walks but also trips to the shops, school or work. This has been successfully piloted in South London and South Birmingham and provides free locally based 12-week walking programmes combining information and motivation with led walks and other activities.

Coastal Access

This has been on the agenda of the Ramblers' Association for some time but the latest proposals by Natural England have given it a new impetus. At the heart of Natural England's recommendations is a coastal corridor that will enable the public to walk all the way around the coast, an impossible feat at present. Currently access to the coast is patchy at best and many walking routes are unnecessarily diverted inland.

Our vision for the English coast is for the general public to have right of access on foot to coastal areas, including beaches, cliffs and foreshore. Currently, no general right to walk on the coast exists.

Obviously there would need to be common sense restrictions to address nature conservation and safety concerns and to take account of private and/or commercial developments but this should not be an insuperable problem.

This is the next significant improvement to the public's right of access following on from the Freedom to Roam Legislation and we ask for your support in this.

General Council 2007

General Council this year was held at the University of Reading and was attended by Mike Heckford and Ron Davis (representing Dorset Area) and Brian Panton and Patricia White as guests.

Of note was the emergency motion submitted by Mike Heckford on behalf of Dorset Area which was

Pedestrian (Footpath) Level Crossings

This General Council instructs the Board of Trustees to urgently liaise with the Rail Safety and Standards Board and Network Rail to insist that a rail industry standard is issued for railway pedestrian (footpath and bridleway) level crossings to provide for a statutory minimum level of signing, equipment and maintenance in the interests of the safety of users.

I am sure that you will have been as surprised as I was that this was not already in place given the number of accidents and fatalities reported in the national press.

This motion was passed unanimously.

Area Secretary

This is my first full year as Area Secretary and as part of this I attended the Area Secretary Workshop in Oxford where I had the opportunity to talk to Area Secretaries from other areas in the South and South West. It was an enlightening experience not only showing that we have many of the same problems and concerns but also the positive way that these are being addressed. The overriding impression I left with was that the success of the Ramblers' Association at local level is dependent on a small number of enthusiastic volunteers and I would urge any of you who have the time to seriously consider joining us in that task.

Treasurer

Although this report is being written before the year end and can only be a forecast, it is anticipated that the final balance sheet will show that finance for the Dorset Area remains healthy with expenditure for the year virtually matching income. The method of funding for all Areas changed in the current financial year from an area entitlement, a long standing formula system based on a set amount for running an Area, an amount based on the number of Groups in an Area and a percentage of the membership fees and donations made to Central Office in that financial year from members in an Area, to a budget system of expected income and expenditure submitted by an Area Council. It would seem that your Area Council submitted a realistic budget for 2006/7.

Membership Secretary

The total membership at the end of the year was some 74 members less than at the start of the year. This decline seems to reflect the national trend, which has shown a steady decline in overall membership.

Our decrease in membership over the last year has been 3.4%, which is significantly higher than the national average of 1.4%. This is the second year running where our average is much greater than the national figures. Our renewal rate has dropped slightly from 88% to 87.3%, and for the first time for a number of years is less than the national average of 88.1%.

Membership level per 100,000 of population has also continued to drop from 347 to 335, which positions us at twelfth (eleventh last year) out of 53 areas, but still well ahead of the national average of 247 per 100,000.

Despite continued attempts to ascertain from Dorset ex members why they do not renew this again has met with little success. However, from the few that have responded it would seem the major reasons are either the walks are too long or that travel too fast, meaning they cannot enjoy the views. It must be pointed out however, that there have only been less than 12 responses

Countryside Secretary

There are two major issues to report this year, firstly the continuing debate over the Weymouth Relief Road. Whilst Area Council supported the South Dorset Group in their objection to the new road on countryside issues negotiations between representatives of the Council and the authorities will ensure that should the road be built then rights of way affected by the road will follow improved routes, particularly the South West Coast Path and the Jubilee Trail. Secondly, a proposal to create an underground gas storage facility on Portland with a pipeline to Mappowder to access the National Grid. We are largely satisfied that measures built into the project to ensure that impacts upon the countryside and rights of way will be minimised and restoration work undertaken following the completion of the project.

Area Footpath Secretary

It seems that every year we report on a busy year for the Area Footpath Committee. The last one was probably the busiest ever. Not only were the number of applications, orders and notices up to a record level of 210 but in a three-month period members were involved in making comments on three major consultation documents. Firstly, there was the RA Draft Footpath Strategy. The Footpath Committee members had the unusual opportunity to comment directly, in a personal capacity to Central Office, or to have their comments included in the corporate response made on behalf of Dorset Area. The Footpaths Committee also responded to the RA draft response to the DEFRA consultation on the right of certain landowners to apply for extinguishment and diversion orders. These proposals were considered to be a totally unnecessary, costly and bureaucratic procedure that would result in certain wealthy landowners being able to queue jump the current system. Footpath Committee members also submitted their comments for the Area Access Officer to make the corporate reply for the Area on the RA draft response to the DEFRA consultation on Improving Access to the English Coast.

The Footpath Committee spent a lot of time considering and commenting on the consultation versions of the Rights of Way Improvement Plans for Dorset and for Bournemouth and Poole. It is disappointing to find that neither plans have been published and it looks as if they will both miss the Government's November 2007 deadline for submission. However, late news is that the Bournemouth and Poole RoWIP will be out for public consultation in October this year.

The highlight of the year must have been the RA victory in its appeal to the House of Lords, on the ruling in what has become known as the Dorset case. More properly it is called the Godmanchester and Drain Case. Full details about the case have already been published in the RA house magazine Walk so they are not repeated here.

Further work has been carried out this year on the upgrading of the Jubilee Trail with a number of new gates and signposts being provided. Our thanks go to Rosemary Bramah, the RA Jubilee Trail Co-ordinator for her work on this trail. In addition she is now working on the publication of the third edition of the guidebook to this trail. This edition will include a new style of mapping that is being produced in consultation with Dorset County Council's (DCC) mapping section. This will save us having to pay the astronomical increase in copyright license fees now demanded by the Ordnance Survey.

Work by DCC on the upgrading and improving the Wessex Ridgeway has yet again failed to live up to expectations. Indeed, strong representations have been made to DCC about alterations, without consultation, made in four locations on the route. However, it is pleasing to record that, after a long delay, an improved route has been formally dedicated from the A357 road to White Pit in Shillingstone. This makes for a safer road crossing and less road walking.

The major diversion of the South West Coast Path between Lyme Regis and Charmouth still remains in place, together with the more minor diversion at Seatown. The resolution of these sections has still not been determined although further meetings with landowners, local authorities and interested parties are taking place in October and November. Members will be informed of any further developments at the AGM and in Dorset Footnotes.

Last year we reported that the Archive Research Unit (contractors for the then Countryside Agency) had started work on a pilot scheme of the Lost Ways Project in Dorset. However, now that the Agency has been absorbed into Natural England, there is a review under way into the best way to proceed with this project. Work has stopped in Dorset, and the aim is to produce proposals to Ministers by this December. This must have implications for the 2026 cut-off date in the CRoW Act, for all rights of way claims to be registered.

Area Access Officer

Work by DCC slowly continues on providing signage and gates for CRoW Access land using limited Natural England funding. The main areas of attention have been heathland in the south of the County but attention is now turning to downland areas. The RA have been provided with a list of sites covered so far and will be kept informed on progress.

DEFRA have just been out to consultation on their proposals for access to the coast in England and we have contributed to the RA response to this. The recommended approach, which the RA supports, is to define a corridor round the coast with access rights. One contentious issue is the proposed definition of the corridor on estuaries as the first permanent crossing point. This would rule out Poole Harbour and we will contest this. The next steps are legislation to enable the corridor and a methodology to define how it will be determined.

Mike Beams was re-elected as Vice Chair of the Dorset Local Access Forum (LAF) and chaired the working group looking at the draft ROWIP, the Coastal Consultation and other consultation documents. Although members of LAF are appointed on an individual basis Sue Blake and Bernard Corby are the other RA members on the LAF and are both on this working group.

Webmaster

Interest in the Dorset Area web site www.dorset-ramblers.co.uk has remained mostly at similar levels with the number of hits typically being in the 6,000 to 7,000 hits per month range. The lowest number of hits per month since the current webmaster took over occurred in November and December 2006 when less than 4,700 hits occurred in each of these months. The reason for this drop was not obvious from the usage statistics. Some revisions have been made to the South Dorset Group text and the entry for one of the affiliated group plus the links and text on the try a walk page have been revised. The latter was prompted by a change in the way local group information is made available on www.ramblers.org.uk. A little experiment has also taken place with regard to displaying photographs on the site. The East Dorset Group intend to hold a photography competition at their AGM and the experiment was used as a test regarding ways to display photos from the competition on the site.

Group Reports

East Dorset

We have provided 200 walks for our members, 24 of which were accessible by public transport, and 2 long weekend treks. Sadly, group membership is again down slightly and a couple of the arranged social events were very poorly supported although a farm visit seemed to go down well.

Our other efforts to support walkers continue. We had 6 footpath clearing days in the winter and our Footpath Secretaries have dealt with numerous applications/consultations on changes to the rights of way network. A good working relationship with Dorset County Council ROW team has been helpful in reaching satisfactory conclusions. Any public enquiries on ROW matters are attended by an RA representative to defend our position.

We have decided to revive the "Purbeck Plod". This is a 25 mile circular challenge walk starting in Swanage, and will be held on 15th June 2008. An organising Committee has been set up and advertisements are already being placed in relevant walkers' magazines. Now we need plenty of volunteers to man the check points and look after the walkers.

North Dorset

This has been a good year despite some bad weather. We have come quite close to our aim of providing two walks each week, and attendance has been encouraging. Especially welcome has been the revival of interest among both leaders and walkers in mid-week rambles. Our working party enjoyed a good day's clearing on the Trailway at Shillingstone in January, and a sizeable party attended the opening of the Trailway's fine new bridge over the Stour at Fiddleford. We had a cheerful annual reunion lunch at Shaftesbury in December, and joint walks with the Gillingham Health -Walkers in July at the Gillingham Festival. A new format for this year's A.G.M. has been planned in the hope of increasing attendance, which has sadly been declining, though it is pleasing to be able to report that last year's, enlivened by a fascinating illustrated talk, was a most enjoyable event.

South Dorset

As ever, we have publicised the Group and the RA via the local media, through exhibitions in Weymouth and Portland libraries, and at the Kingston Maurward Open Day. We have added Wessex FM to our list of media contacts. Sadly, the net result is a marginal reduction in membership, but it does seem to have stabilised at just over 400. On the positive side, we have attracted many new members to our walks, providing a welcome injection of new blood.

To raise the profile of the Group further, we are in the initial stages of setting up a Group website. Love them or loathe them, they are an integral part of modern life. We spoke at a Public Inquiry into a proposed extension of a coastal caravan park. The Inspector agreed with us and refused permission.

With other environmental groups, we have opposed the Weymouth Relief Road, which would cut through an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and would also affect other sensitive sites, whilst providing only a short term solution to perceived problems, and creating others.

We have, of course, maintained a comprehensive and varied walking programme, participating in all local and national initiatives. We have introduced 2 to 3 mile walks for those new to walking, and for those who can't walk as far as they used to. We have had a week's walking break in Shropshire, and a weekend doing the Liberty Trail.

All in all, we have had another challenging but enjoyable year, and look forward to the next one.

West Dorset

The group continues to flourish. The actual number of members participating in the programme of walks this year has grown, with overall membership remaining at just under two hundred.

As usual, we have enjoyed a full programme with an average of two walks a week being offered. These walks continue to be of varying lengths and include areas of Somerset and Devon which border West Dorset. New leaders have come forward and we hope to recruit even more as the number of walkers grows. Leadership remains at a high standard.

The Liberty Trail from Ham Hill in Somerset to Lyme Regis in Dorset was successfully walked in three sections within our March to June programme and was skilfully planned and led by two of our leaders.

Many of us look forward to a group holiday in the Elan Valley in October. All group events are very popular and well supported. The Wayfarer magazine, which goes out to members with the programme, continues to inform and entertain.

The group looks forward to the changes and challenges of another year walking together in our beautiful countryside.

Young Walkers Group

2007 has been arguably Dorset Young Walkers' most successful year to date, and has included a number of 'firsts' for the Group. DYW has begun to get more involved with wider RA activities, starting with our first Festival of Winter Walks hike. While the weather could have been better and we'd have preferred for the pub to be open when we returned, we are undaunted and currently preparing for this year's Festival walk, a circular hike in north Dorset.

Other firsts included our inaugural camping trips and a long weekend in a cottage in the Peak District. While I wasn't fortunate enough to attend, I am told that a good time was had by all and these will certainly be features of our ongoing programme. In the area of publicity, a Group member recently attended the Bournemouth Arts Institute Freshers' Fayre for the first time, reporting a good level of interest from the students. Many thanks to the East Dorset Group for the tip off about the event and the loan of the display stand.

A major project this year has been the re-invention of the Group website, which is our primary publicity tool. The new site is easier to maintain, containing updated news, a committee section, a car sharing notice board and a means by which individual members can submit walks and events online.

Membership has risen in 2007 to an all-time high of 41 (last time I checked), plus a few walkers moving from other areas who have yet to transfer to our Group. The increase in membership has allowed us to train some new walk and event leaders, and get to the stage where in most months we have a walk every weekend - compared to slightly more than one a fortnight this time last year.

The next major event in our calendar is the 2007 Christmas Party, at which we are expecting a record number of attendees. Our AGM next April marks 5 years of the DYW, so if you're in Dorchester at the time, keep an ear out for a celebration.

Finally, I know I say it every year, but thank you once again to the ever-increasing number of volunteers and regular attendees who keep the Group running.

Compiled by

Jim Scott

Area Secretary