

The Ramblers' Association – Dorset Area



Annual Report – 2005/2006

Introduction

This report summaries the activities of the Dorset Area and its five Groups during the past year. It has been compiled from the individual reports of the Area officers and Group Secretaries.

Area Treasurer

For the first time the Dorset Area has not received the formula based Area entitlement funding in this financial year but played its part in a pilot system of budgeted payments. The budget submitted was over £200 less than the Area entitlement paid in 2004/5 but with falling membership numbers the Area would have received less anyway. As a result of a motion passed at General Council in April, the budget system becomes mandatory for the 2006/7 financial year. However, the Area's bank balance remains healthy, perhaps too healthy when compared with the proposed Area and Groups' reserves policy to be debated at next year's General Council.

The Jubilee Trail Book Fund goes from strength to strength although sales of the guide book have slowed this year. However, funds have been used, equally matched with funding from Dorset County Council, to improve furniture on the Trail and this work will continue in the coming years

Area Membership Secretary

The total membership at the end of the year was less than at the start of the year, and is some 61 members down from the highest level Dorset achieved in December 2004, being 2,235. 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 3.5%, which is significantly higher than the national average of 1.6%. Our renewal rate has dropped from 90% to 88%, but is still slightly higher than the national average, which is 87.5%.

Membership level per 100,000 of population has also dropped from 367 to 347, which positions us at eleventh out of 53 areas, which is the same as last year, and still well ahead of the national average of 250 per 100,000.

Attempts to continue to ascertain the reason why people do not renew their membership has again met with little success with only 7 responses out of over 218 letters sent. The reasons given however, all fall into the categories identified by the Membership Development and Publicity Team at Central Office

Area Footpath Secretary

As in previous years this report again mentions a busy year for the Area Footpaths Committee. During the year the Committee has dealt with some 170 applications, orders and notices relating to changes to the rights of way network in Dorset. The Committee have also had the first full year of dealing with an additional layer of consultation introduced by Dorset County Council (DCC) whereby applicants have to approach the user organisations direct in an attempt to get acceptance of their proposals. It is still too early to decide whether the system has any real advantages to the Committee but it does produce additional work for the RA Footpath Officers. This year we have welcomed two new members onto the Area Footpaths Committee, much needed assistants to help the hard-pressed Footpath Secretaries in the west and north of the county. Up to ten public inquires into path orders have been held this year where the RA has been represented (usually only as an interested party). It is particularly pleasing to report that following a four-day inquiry (at which the RA was an objector) the DCC order for an unacceptable diversion of Powerstock FP32 was rejected by the Inspector.

Mike Beams is a member of the Local Access Forum Working Party on Path Diversion Streamlining, which has made a number of recommendations to speed up the processing of diversion orders. Both Mike and Sue Blake are members of another LAF Working Party advising on the production of the Dorset Rights of Way Improvement Plan – required to be produced by Highway Authorities as part of the CRoW Act. A draft copy of the Bournemouth and Poole Rights of Way Improvement Plan has

been published for consultation with key Stakeholders. A long and detailed joint response has been made on behalf of the RA Dorset Area and the East Dorset Group. Mike and Sue have made their comments via the Local Access Forum. Congratulations to Mike Beams on his election to Vice Chairman of LAF.

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. Rosemary Bramah, the RA Jubilee Trail Co-ordinator is working hard to get yet more improvements carried out across the county with the aid of 'matched funding' from the profits of the Jubilee Trail Guide.

Work by DCC on the upgrading and improving the Wessex Ridgeway has again failed to live up to expectations because of ongoing funding and staffing problems. The RADA has continued to carry out surveys for DCC as part of its Best Value Performance Indicators system required by the Audit Commission.

Dorset is one of the second round of pilot counties for the Lost Ways Project run by the Countryside Agency, this aims to produce historical evidence for rights of way which should have been on the Definitive Map back in 1949 when it was first produced. Last year it was reported that the Archive Research Unit had started work in Dorset. That information appears to have been widely optimistic as there are still discussions taking place on a plan of action with DCC. The first results should be passed to the Council later next year for them to consider making DMMOs (Definitive Map Modification Orders). The research unit is also planning to start in Poole and volunteers can have a role, especially if they have relevant information. The RA will be in touch with DCC and Poole BC to establish what role the RA can play in this important project.

At the end of last year there has been much concern about a large number of applications currently being made to DCC by the vehicle lobby to have bridleways upgraded to byways. This action is being taken in an attempt to have applications lodged before new legislation is introduced to change the status of new byways. As reported in some detail in the latest issue of Dorset Footnotes the Government was persuaded to back date the date of operation of the relevant sections of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC Act) to 20 January 2005. This means that some 50 applications made in Dorset will now, if successful, result in the routes being upgraded to Restricted Byways (that is without public motorised vehicular rights).

One of the two major diversions of the South West Coast Path in west Dorset (the one east from Charmouth) was lifted in May when a new section of Coast Path was opened. However the major diversion between Lyme Regis and Charmouth still remains in place, along with the more minor diversion at Seatown. The resolution of these sections has now stalled following a freeze on funding within the Countryside Agency (now part of a new body Natural England from 1st October 2006). And so the delays go on in getting a true Coast Path at a time when the wonders of the Jurassic Coast are being promoted.

Area Access Officer

Work by DCC slowly continues on providing signage and gates for CRoW Access land using Countryside Agency 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.

The RADA has commented on a few long-term restriction applications on access land – you can see the restrictions in force on the Countryside Agency web-site. A recent example has been the Ham Common fuel depot where a long-term restriction is being recommended for safety reasons. The Countryside Agency has been taking a sensible approach to these applications and adopting the minimum restriction possible.

The Countryside Agency (Natural England) are finalising their recommendations to Government on providing access to the coast in England and we have contributed to the RA consultation response on this. The favoured approach is open access along the lines of the Scottish system without the expensive and time consuming mapping process that had to be followed for Access Land in England and Wales.

Although members of LAF are appointed on an individual basis it is pleasing to report that Bernard Corby, Co-ordinator of the Poole Harbour Trail project, has been appointed this year and is the third member of the RA on the Forum.

Countryside Report

The absence of an Area Countryside Secretary has not meant that countryside work has been neglected. The South Dorset Group has been conducting a vigorous campaign against the Weymouth Relief Road. A number of Group Countryside Secretaries are also members of the Area Footpath Committee and representations are made about unacceptable applications for development, especially those that affect public rights of way.

Dorset Footnotes

Dorset Footnotes has been published three times in 2006, the Spring, Summer and Autumn/ Winter issues, and distributed to all Dorset Area members. The cost of producing and printing Dorset Footnotes in the 2005/6 financial year was £1195, plus distribution costs but less advertising. Distribution is carried out by Groups together with their four monthly programmes. The Area Council thanks and is very grateful for the work of Group distributors and those who help them stuffing envelopes and making deliveries.

It is an aim to try to include all items received from Area Council officers, Groups and members, although sometimes it is not possible to get all contributions into the next issue. If items are left out the editor will always endeavour to give priority to left out items in the following issue. Currently there are four regular advertisers and payments for adverts covered nearly 30% of our printing costs in the past financial year. Use by members of the services offered by advertisers is appreciated.

Your Area Council is always happy to receive comments and suggestions concerning Dorset Footnotes, although when direct questions have been asked in the past there has been virtually no response, we welcome your views.

Webmaster

Visitor traffic to our web site has remained at a similar level this year to that of the previous years. There is a significant difference from October to March which have the heaviest number of hits and April to September which have only about half as many. The "Try a Walk" pages are consistently the most popular pages for visitors so its a pity that there are fewer special activities for the period of highest traffic though the link to the Walks Finder Facility on the main Ramblers' website is very well used.

As a result of an increase in spam e-mail to the webmaster's e-mail address an alternative address is now in use, See the contact page on the web site to find out the new version.

Area Secretary

This is my first year as Area Secretary (actually part year as I took on the position in mid term) and I would like to thank all my colleagues on Area Council for their assistance and support in what has been, and continues to be, a steep learning curve.

One significant change which has been initiated this year is the much greater use of electronic communications which has reduced costs and made for more efficient sharing of information within the Council. Notwithstanding this it should not be taken that internet access is a pre-requisite for Area Council membership. It is however much easier to communicate with a small number of individuals by telephone or letter than with the entire Council.

The General Council this year took place on 21st – 23rd April at Keele University and was attended by Brian Panton (representing Area), Kate Gocher (representing the Groups) with Mike Heckford (East Dorset), Cheryl Hadnutt (Young Walkers) and Geoff Mercer (South Dorset) as guests.

During the year I attended several functions as a representative of Dorset Area notable among them was the Dorset Countryside Day organised by the NFU at the Travellers Rest Farm near Durweston.

The result of this visit is that I now have much greater understanding of the difficulties the farming industry has when attempting to manage the land in a countryside/environmentally friendly manner.

As will have been noted from the Membership Secretary's report we do have a declining membership which is also seen in the Ramblers' Association nation-wide. There is an initiative to correct this decline and the Dorset Area Council will be taking an active part in this in the next year. We will be working closely with Andrew Chadwick, today's speaker, to attempt to understand and reverse this trend within Dorset.

East Dorset

The East Dorset Group's programme has suffered slightly this year from a reduction in the numbers of members leading walks. At the same time, our membership has dropped 3% on a year ago, possibly following a national trend. We have nevertheless led 200 day or part day walks, including one starting in Cherbourg, and two long weekend treks. The walks are well-attended, some of them attracting more than 30 walkers. Our relief leader scheme is still working well and acting as a vital backup for our leaders. We continue to send out regular footpath clearing parties each winter.

This year we started putting some of the East Dorset walks on the RA national web site. This has been extremely successful and on many of our walks there are now one or more people who found the walk that way in the first place.

We have also debated and set out guidelines for train and bus accessible walks. Our latest programme includes several of these walks and we are hoping that they will make membership of our group an attractive option to people who want to walk who are not car owners. The walks could also be of use to our many bus-pass carrying senior members!

Our social programme has included a slide show, our annual lunch in February and a week's walking on the Pembroke Coast path. We are currently trying to increase attendance at these events by advertising them on walks

North Dorset

The Group has been able to provide a nearly full programme of week-end walks, generally very well attended. There has been less demand and provision for walks mid-week. We have been pleased with the number of supporters from other groups, especially South Somerset, and record a particularly successful joint venture with Gillingham Health Walkers, with whom we share some members. Possibly because of increased costs, coach trips and other social events have had insufficient support to make them viable, but a pre-Christmas lunch in December proved to be a very happy affair. Our Footpath Secretary has been more than usually busy, and we enjoyed an arduous day of path-clearing in January. Membership has again declined, as leavers outnumber newcomers, but we have had no difficulty in finding energetic and willing officers for the Committee.

South Dorset

We have continued in our efforts to recruit new members. Displays have been mounted in Dorchester and Weymouth libraries, and we had a stand at the Kingston Maurward Open Day. We have also publicised our activities in the Dorset Echo, the Western Gazette, and on Radio Solent. Although we have enrolled many new members, the net gain has unfortunately been negative.

On the campaigning front, we have written to and had meetings with Jim Knight MP on various issues, and lobbied Dorset County Council for additional ROW resources. We have also participated in the Weymouth and Portland Borough Council consultation on their Open Spaces, Sport and Recreation Strategy.

Our extensive walking programme has included week long breaks in Edale and the Derbyshire Dales, plus a more local Purbeck weekend. We have participated in the Festival of Winter Walks, Use Your Paths Week. Welcome to Walking Week, the Rail Partnership Walks and Discover Dorset Week.

In an effort to be more inclusive, we have laid on more leisurely walks (many open to the public), and a Cheshire Homes walk. This proved so successful that we will in future provide an additional walk for those not wheelchair bound.

We have maintained our footpath clearing programme, and plan to expand this to more ambitious projects such as stile building etc.

Finally, congratulations are due to our Chairman, Kate Gocher, on being elected to the RA Board of Trustees.

West Dorset

2006 has been an immensely successful year for the group. Membership has risen to 191, with many new enquiries and requests for programmes. Group support is reflected in the attendance of a solid core of walkers, with new members welcomed and integrated within the group. This support is also evident in the healthy attendance at social events, especially the annual dinner, and with 20 members enjoying the group holiday at Brimpts farm on Dartmoor.

Leadership too, is strong and has ensured a full programme, averaging 2 walks a week. Leaders have taken on board the on-going need for both longer and shorter walks to cover the varying walking abilities of its members.

Members continue to offer active support, for example, monitoring the Jubilee Trail, volunteering for clearance work on footpaths and bridleways, offering Sunday shorter walks for the general public, walking at a slower pace, and editing the Wayfarer magazine, which keeps group members in touch with group events.

The group hopes to build on these various successes in the next year.

Young Walkers Group

Following a shaky start, 2005/06 turned into a successful year for the Dorset Young Walkers. An advertising campaign in the Spring coupled with a big effort on behalf of the committee to revitalise the walks programme led to an increase in membership, which now stands at approximately 28. The number of new walkers joining the Ramblers' Association and new member involvement in Group activities have also increased, though as ever we are constantly seeking to improve the latter. As a result of this, the previously flagging walks and events programme is now full until the middle of January.

Particular highlights of this year's walking programme included the annual night walk at Cerne Abbas (complete with meteor shower), and the beach picnic walk, which must have seen our highest single Group turnout of the year. Members also participated in a 14 mile walk to Winchester Cathedral in aid of the Save the Children Fund, raising £161 for charity. The summer's evening walks proved popular for the second year running, encouraging new members who wanted to try some shorter walks before committing themselves for a whole day.

The social calendar began with a well-attended Christmas meal in Corfe Mullen. Having started as we meant to go on, the Group organised several meals, including a joint social with the Wessex Group at a Greek restaurant, a Chinese 'all you can eat' buffet and a new members' barbecue in the summer. Other highlights included a night out at the Poole Dog Track and a trip to Weymouth for Bonfire Night. At the time of writing we're set for our highest turnout yet for the Christmas Meal 2006.

Thanks are due to the Young Walkers' committee, past and present, for their efforts over the past year, and to all members who organised or attended walks or social events.

Compiled by

Jim Scott, Area Secretary