

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of Hertfordshire and North Middlesex Area of the Ramblers Association

Held on Saturday 10 January 2009 starting at 2pm in St Francis church Hall, Parkway, Welwyn Garden City

Present: The Secretary holds a list of the 45 people in attendance.

- 1 Welcome by the President:** Nigel Agar welcomed all those present and in particular Tom Franklin, the Chief Executive of the Ramblers Association (RA) and Bob Fenton of the Herts County Council Rights of Way Unit (ROWU). He spoke with pleasure of the radical improvements to access rights which the government had already implemented and the improved coastal access now being discussed in parliament but noted that they had only limited benefits in Herts and North Middlesex. However he was hopeful that the decision by the Woodland Trust to create a new forest in the Middle of Herts would enhance access in an area close to where many people live.

Before moving to the formal agenda the chairman, Edward Walker, announced with regret the death of Fred Matthews president and former chairman of the Essex Area of the RA. Several members spoke of the great contribution which Fred had made to the RA and to footpaths in Essex.

Edward also expressed his thanks to Chris Clyne and Sarah Lea for the refreshments and to all those who had helped with the arrangements for this meeting.

- 2 Apologies for Absence:** Eunice King, Tessa Peters

- 3 Minutes of the 2008 AGM:** These were accepted as a true record

- 4 Matters Arising:** Norman Jones recalled that, in the minutes of her address, Kate Ashbrook had said that the RA intended to employ an in-house lawyer. He understood that this was no longer the case. Tom Franklin agreed to provide an update in his address.

- 5 Reports of Officers:** Where officers had provided a written report, the chairman requested that the discussion should be limited to updates and questions.

- 5.1 Chairman's Report:** Bert Richardson referred to the new forest in Sandridge mentioned in paragraph 3. Both the RA Area and the Friends of the Hertfordshire Way had offered donations on condition that there should be new rights of way. The Woodland Trust had replied with a standard letter stating that they would permit access but not add new rights of access. Both donations had therefore been withheld. Members spoke of the need to ensure that any unrecorded ways were not lost.

Phil Escritt said that he had been invited by the Woodland Trust to a consultation meeting to be held on 19 January and it was agreed that he would report back to the Area Council. Bob Fenton said that the ROWU was also very interested and would be trying to influence its development.

- 5.2 Secretary's Report:** Ken Payne proposed a vote of thanks to David Allard for all the work he had done over the thirteen years during which he had been the Area Secretary and the chairman presented him with a gift from the Area in appreciation.

5.3 Treasurers Report: Annette Cotter is very involved in leading groups for Ramblers Holidays and had handed over the role of Treasurer to David Allard before the end of the year. David agreed to answer any questions on the report and accounts.

He was asked about the operating deficit for the Area and explained that central office have asked Areas and Groups to reduce the size of their reserves. The activities remain the same but the payments from central office have been reduced. This results in an annual deficit and a corresponding reduction in reserves. It is the intention for Areas and Groups to reduce the size of their reserves to the equivalent of about 6 month's activity. He therefore expected there would be another deficit in the coming year.

He anticipated that, as a result of the reduction in their reserves, Groups would need to receive their payments earlier in the year. He expected that the budgets would be approved in February and that he would be able to make the full payment to each group at that time.

David confirmed that if an unexpected expense, such as a legal cost, arose in mid year it would be possible to apply to central office for additional funds.

In response to a question about the increased production costs for Stile David explained that this item included the cost of postage which had increased. A further postage increase is expected this year.

5.4 Footpath Secretary: Mark Westley provided an update on some of the issues in his report.

- There is still no action from GO-NE on the Dene Lane case and no progress on Catherinbourne Farm.
- The HCC Committee has voted to close the path near Hockerill College but RA members expressed concerns about the process being adopted.
- Hywel Morris has submitted fresh evidence for the Carbone Hill footpath.
- The landowner has objected to the Western Enfield claim

Chris Beney is on a national committee which includes DEFRA, Natural England and David Goode of the ROWU. It will provide guidance on the inclusion of structures in orders. Chris would be interested to hear from anyone who has any relevant issues.

5.5 Publicity Secretary: David Dickson reported that new leaflets are available.

5.6 Membership Secretary: Chris Clyne reported an unsatisfactory and frustrating year.

The new computer in central office has been plagued with problems and is still not working satisfactorily. New members have waited up to two months to receive information from Groups and existing long standing members have been wiped off. It has provided huge problems for local Groups. Head Office has been informed but there has been little feedback.

As a result she is unable to vouch for the accuracy of the membership figures in the annual report and does not know whether the list of affiliated organisations is up to date.

Speaking as membership secretary for the East Herts Group, Sarah Lea confirmed the difficulties and said that although the problems had been reported there had been no acknowledgement or action.

Grahame Daniels suggested that the affiliation fees were so low that members of affiliated clubs were effectively freeloading. There was a discussion of the benefits to affiliated clubs from the insurance which is potentially available to them and questions as to whether raising the fees might cause some clubs to cease their affiliation.

Ray Peters stated that although Stevenage Ramblers appeared in the list of affiliated clubs it had in fact folded more than a year ago.

5.7 Countryside Secretary: Philip Greswell encouraged members to write to their MP about the proposed east of Luton developments and said that a model letter was available on the “Keep East of Luton Green” website.

Phil Escritt said that St Albans District Council was expecting a new planning application for the proposed Radlett Strategic Rail Freight Interchange.

5.8 Access Officer: Norman Jones reported that coastal access is in the marine bill before parliament. A website www.unlockingpaths.org.uk has been created for the Alleygating campaign.

5.9 Editor of Stile: Justin Lumley said that the contents of the most recent issue had been more informative but he hoped that the necessity of putting the travel articles on the website had not upset the balance unduly. He was grateful to the sub-committee for commissioning articles.

As chairman of the sub-committee Harold Stokes said that they would be meeting shortly to consider articles for the next edition and suggestions for contributions would be welcome. They could be controversial.

6 Group Reports and Accounts: The chairman invited questions and comments on each of the Groups’ reports and accounts. The following comments were made.

East Herts: The Group was commended for its initiative in running stalls at local markets. Sarah Lea said that is difficult to know how effective these efforts have been. It was suggested that Head office can provide leaflets with unique codes which can track the origin of new members. Other suggestions were to focus on people already walking e.g. in country parks and to link with walking for health and doctors’ surgeries.

North Herts: The Group was commended for its STOOP initiative. Ray Peters said that the publicity was organised by head office who gave an enormous amount of back up. The leaflets should be available soon.

7 Election of Officers & Committee Members: The secretary has a list of the proposers and seconders for each motion

Nigel Agar was re-elected as president. Bert Richardson was elected as chairman and Chris Beney as vice chairman. Both Bert and Chris made it clear that they would only undertake the offices for a limited time and until younger volunteers could be found. Norman Jones was elected as Secretary and David Allard as Treasurer. The Footpath Secretary, Publicity Secretary, Membership Secretary, Minute Secretary, Countryside Secretary, Access Officer and the Editor of Stile were all willing to continue and were re-elected en bloc.

The retiring Independent Examiner, Peter Mellows, was thanked for all his efforts over the years. As there was no proposal for his replacement this was referred to the Area Council for resolution.

There were comments on the absence of Group Representatives from North London & South Herts and from Watford & Three Rivers. The Secretary was requested to write to both Groups pointing out the importance of this representation. The names of the other Group representatives were accepted.

Ray Peters, Edward Walker and Graham Daniels were elected as Individual Members. The representatives from affiliated groups were noted.

8 General Council: David Allard and David Dickson will be the Area representatives

9 Area 25th Anniversary Celebrations: Robin King explained that each group has been requested to organise a walk on specified Sundays. These walks will be open to everyone and he asked for details as soon as possible so that publicity can be arranged. The final event on 18 October will be a series of walks of differing lengths to be arranged by the North Herts Group and culminating in a celebration.

10 Date of AGM 2010: This was delegated to the Area Council

11 AOB:

It was agreed that the refreshment arrangements for future AGMs would be made the responsibility of each Group in turn.

Chris Beney referred to his report on the Ramblers Greater London Forum and invited volunteers who live in the greater London area to replace him.

Bob Fenton's Report: As an additional item the chairman invited comments and questions on Bob's report from the ROWU.

Bert Richardson asked about progress on a footpath Carbone Hill/Newgate Street. Bob said it was planned to be under the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) but as yet there is no firm date.

Asked to justify the claim of "steady progress" in Modification Orders Bob said that they were recruiting and the rate has improved but all orders have to be prioritised. Routes affected by planning applications get priority which can tend to push down more rural routes.

Bob briefly explained how Section 106 Agreements associated with planning permissions can result in money for footpath improvements.

Mark Westley enquired about the availability of definitive maps. The OS have relaxed some of their restrictions and HCC hope to be able to make copies more freely available. The ROWU are also pressing for them to be available on-line. It is eight years since this was originally requested.

Phil Escritt thanked the ROWU for clearing the verge along part of the A414 between St Albans and Hemel Hempstead to provide a safe link between footpaths. Ray Peters thanked the unit for their enormous help in the development of STOOP.

Address by Tom Franklin, Chief Executive of the Ramblers Association

Tom Franklin started by saying that he had come to explain why the RA needed to change and how it planned to change.

There are great opportunities. More people are interested in walking.

Walking has an important role to play in reducing climate change (25% of all car journeys are less than 1 mile).

It can provide an important contribution to improving health. 70% of people do not take enough exercise and walking is a perfect way to counter this. It is free, it does not need special equipment and you can start slowly – so it is available to virtually everybody.

The RA has had great success in its campaigns for access and rights of way but it faces some important challenges. There is a gradual decline in membership and RA's research with people who aren't members but are interested in walking has shown that many people think it is not relevant to them. There is also a need to replenish its pool of volunteers.

The RA has developed a new strategy called "Fresh Air, Firm Ground". The strategy is about working towards a "Walking Britain" where people chose to walk because it is easy and enjoyable. Walks may be in town or in the country; they may be a 20 mile hike or a 30 minute jaunt.

The RA needs to move from being seen as exclusively for serious walkers to become a movement for everyone who walks.

There are four main aims in the strategy.

The first aim is to campaign for better walking environments. We will protect and defend the footpath network and our rights of access. The coastal access currently going through Parliament is likely to be even more popular than moorland access.

We will also look to the future use of the networks to see how they can be improved with new links and new routes from urban areas into the countryside. We will foster the development of urban routes.

We need to adopt new ways of campaigning. One example is e-campaigning using the internet. This is particularly important for attracting younger people. An e-campaigner to co-ordinate this work has just been appointed.

We will adopt new partnerships. For the first time the RA has attended a Conservative Party Conference. We need partnerships with landowners and local authorities.

We will not be afraid to wield the 'big stick' where needed, but we will also achieve more if we win the hearts and minds of people in power. We need people in power to champion our causes.

The second aim is to make walking accessible. The aim is to ensure that as many people as possible know the opportunities to walk, and take part.

We will promote our own walks programmes but ensure that they appeal to as many people as possible. We need to increase the variety of the walks in our programmes. For example a series of walks that pass through film locations in London, organised by our Metropolitan Walkers group, has been massively oversubscribed. The RA plans a newsletter for walk leaders to suggest new ideas.

With lottery funding the RA has launched an initiative to “Get Walking, Keep Walking” in five very deprived urban areas. The effect has been amazing. People did not know what they can do and were not aware of the possibilities.

We want to ensure that the RA is there for everyone whether they are just beginning their walking adventures, or have been walking for a lifetime.

Our third aim is to improve our image. The objective is to make the RA synonymous with walking. A new brand will be launched on 2 March. It will be a radical change and will help people to ‘think again’ about the Ramblers.

The magazine will be overhauled to appeal also to people who don’t want to walk with groups. The new guide book will provide ideas for walks with each edition having a distinct theme such as great views.

The fourth aim is to improve the way we work. Tom apologised for the headaches and embarrassment over the new membership computer system.

The change was necessary. The old system was obsolete and inefficient. About half of new members join on line and many members change their address. At present all these changes have to be processed manually.

The new system will allow these changes to be processed automatically and it will be more efficient. The problems have arisen from the transfer of data from the old system and mistakes in introducing the new system.

With limited resources it has been necessary to concentrate all our efforts on fixing the problems. As a result we have not responded to all inputs. He apologised for the discourtesy. The problems with the new computer will be fixed but it will take time, and he thanked membership secretaries for their forbearance.

We need to improve the way we raise funds and find new sources of income. Retention of new members is a problem. We are looking at what members want and what they get. One possibility is to include some insurance with the membership.

We are looking at our democratic structures to deal with the changes. We are looking at opportunities for people to get involved.

The Board is reducing its size and looking for candidates with particular skills.

We are looking at the way we communicate. At present we produce volumes of paper. We are trialling a monthly volunteers’ newsletter, possibly by email.

We are changing the internal organisation to give much greater flexibility between people working on footpaths and access.

In summary there is a huge amount going on. It's a very exciting time. There are great opportunities but the changes will be difficult and uncomfortable at times

The RA celebrates its 75th anniversary next year. We have lots of success to celebrate but we need to be ready and prepared for the future.

Question and Answer Session

Following this address there was a question and answer session. The main points arising are summarised as follows.

Unlike a private organisation the RA could not just throw resources at the problems with the new membership computer. An external consultant has confirmed that the system should not be abandoned and that the RA is taking the right steps, involving a cross organisational team in sorting out the problems, but it will still take time.

The position on legal action is that it will remain a tool in our campaigning toolbox but we will use other forms of influence as well. There is not enough money to do everything.

The National Trust has many more members than the RA because of differences in what the two organisations offer to their members.

The main reason people join the RA is for its walking programmes and the main reason for leaving is dissatisfaction with these programmes. They are a huge asset, but we need to develop them.

The RA is talking with the Dept of Health about promoting walking for families. The RA does not intend to go directly into schools.

Research showed that the accommodation guide was the least needed membership service and there was a doubt whether it was compatible with our charitable status. It will still be available online – which is where most people look for accommodation these days.

The meeting closed at 5.40pm