

Stop press: General Council, 16 & 17 April 2011

David Smith

We held the publication of the Spring 2011 edition of *Stile* to bring you the highs (and lows) from General Council, the Ramblers' National AGM, which has just taken place in Keble College, Oxford. Your representatives were Phil Escritt, Declan Leyden (both attending for the first time), Harold Stokes and David Smith.

Highlights

Guidelines on stiles and gates (this Area's Motion). DEFRA recently published Good Practice Guidelines on this subject, prepared by a working party that included Area Council member Chris Beney and Ramblers' Central Office. Applying the Guidelines will make walking in the country easier for every walker, and the motion called on Ramblers to publicise the Guidance. With comprehensive explanatory material prepared by Chris, and an excellent maiden speech by Phil Escritt, the Motion was carried unanimously.

Ramblers' stance on the High Speed 2 Railway (HS2). The railway's impact on many aspects of national life is potentially huge and it will cross a corner of this Area. After vigorous debate, Council supported the Charter for High Speed Rail recently published by the Campaign to Protect Rural England. This criticises the present basis for HS2 and calls for it to comply with a clear set of principles, including public consultation and minimising adverse impacts. Ramblers will work with other campaigning bodies to this end.

Walkers' rights of access to woodlands, rivers and canals. Campaigning for these rights of access was made a priority at last year's Council. The Board was urged to report on progress and to keep up the pressure.

Sale of Forestry Commission land. After another vigorous debate it was agreed that Ramblers primary concern is access not ownership. Only if key access requirements are not safeguarded will we oppose sale of this land.

Membership and Finance. These are the top priorities after last year's problems. How are we doing? Membership is still falling and we have a long way to go. However the organisation is very focused on measures to increase recruitment and to reduce the wastage caused by nearly half of all new members not renewing after their second year. We are predicted to end this financial year in balance, but 2011-12 could be more difficult.

Consultation paper on 'Liberating Led Walks'. There was a good workshop which examined:

- removing obstacles that make it difficult to set up new groups (e.g. family groups or those catering for special interests). The vision of a Ramblers Group in every town and village was held up.
- freeing volunteers to contribute without getting bogged down in committees and bureaucracy, or even not belonging to a Group.

'From decline to growth'. The Chief Executive of the Scouts Association described how it turned round similar problems to the Ramblers – but the transformation to an outward looking, socially inclusive organisation took 15 years. The process involved extensive consultation with members, exploiting opportunities for electronic communications and e-learning, reorganisation and devolution to local level. This stimulating talk left us all thinking how to apply the lessons to the Ramblers.

Lowlights

There was real regret at the loss of the expertise of two highly valued Trustees who recently resigned. This arose from an issue about access to the senior management team.

My impressions

The college buildings and grounds looked lovely in the spring sunshine. But this was no walk in the park, more like standing under a waterfall trying to absorb the torrent of information from 150 delegates indulging in their (second) favourite activity: passionate, well argued, sometimes humorous, debate of the Motions submitted by the Areas. The first working session on Sunday started at 7:30 am!

Concerned Ramblers was much less of a force for change than last year: its current role seems to be a watching brief. It is a powerful and humbling experience to be confronted by the dedicated efforts on behalf of Ramblers of the delegates, volunteers, trustees and Central Office staff present.

Matters for consideration

Do we want to offer to host General Council in 2014 (the next available slot)? Oxford Area, this year's hosts, started

planning its input nearly three years ago and 50 volunteers helped with the event.

Groups to begin considering matters that they wish to offer as Motions for General Council 2012.

Overall

There are big challenges which the Board and staff are striving to address. Hammering out how to make progress is difficult but there is no question about Ramblers robust vigour and sense of democracy. We came away with many ideas and much to consider.