

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY



Spring

2010

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

When I count the blessings in my life there are thankfully many. A small but important one is the view from the desk at which I work and from which I write this piece. It is in a room at the back of our house overlooking the garden and this is a very good time of year to sit at that desk. The snowdrops and daffodils have gone but the magnolia tree is in magnificent full bloom. The apple blossom is coming through in various shades of pink and white. The tulips look almost artificial, so perfect is their shape and colouring. Immediately outside the window is an acer whose leaves are just breaking through. In this tree are five various types of bird feeder and it is a constant fascination to watch a changing cast of bird characters alight upon them through the day. So far today I have seen blue tits, a robin, blackbirds, house sparrows, long tailed tits and jackdaws. The highlight this week was a flock of goldfinches and the perpetual lowlights are the pigeons, the scourge of my

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

vegetable garden. The birdsong provides my working soundtrack. When I reflect on all of this it is a minor miracle that I get any work done at all!

As so often, the peace of my garden is in contrast to the pressures and pace of the outside world. I feel that particularly today as I write on polling day of the general election. By the time you read this, the drama should be over and we will have determined how our country is to be governed for the next few years. To someone who is very interested in politics, this has been a remarkable election. Susan and I were enjoying a few days in the Yorkshire Dales at the time of the first election debate broadcast, staying at the estimable Angel Inn at Hetton. I am so glad that we decided to have an early meal in order to watch the debate live on the TV in our room. Rarely has there been such an event that has changed the complexion of an election in the way that this did. From that broadcast onwards the campaign has been wide open and the result very difficult to call. I feel a very long night stretching ahead of me!

It would be remarkably bold and foolish to make any kind of prediction as to the nature and shape of the next administration but it is easy to predict tough economic times ahead as the new government gets to grips with our staggering budget deficit. I worry that there will be repercussions for us in The Friends of The Ridgeway. Amongst all the priorities of health, education and defence it is unlikely that we will escape unscathed. Funding for National Trails comes from national government via DEFRA and from local government in the form of the local authorities along the Trails. Both sources will be under much pressure. In the nature of an election broadcast, here are my promises to you.

- We will continue to fight to improve the state of The Ridgeway. We will not let the successes we have achieved over the past few years be reversed

- We will press ahead with our ambitions to open the Great Stones Way between Avebury and Stonehenge
- We will continue to grow in membership and in developing our concept of Local Groups, so well illustrated by the excellent model in the Vale of the White Horse
- We will endeavour to bring the delights of The Ridgeway to younger people through our Junior Ridgeway Explorer project

I know that I am addressing a constituency that is sympathetic to my manifesto but none the less, I appeal for your support. This will be a tough period ahead for our society and I anticipate calling upon you to give time, money and commitment to our cause. I hope I can count on your vote.

Friends of the Ridgeway trip to the Marcham excavations has been arranged for Wednesday 21st July at 11 am

THE GREAT STONES WAY

As our Chairman Ian Ritchie reported in the Annual Report booklet, having received financial backing from our generous donors, The North Wessex Downs AONB, the Salisbury Plain Local Action Group “Plain Action”, and Wiltshire Council, and with the support of our members, the Committee was able shortly before Christmas last year to commission a professional feasibility study, in order to assess the investment costs, the volume of potential walker interest and the economic benefits of the project. The study was effectively complete in time for the lead consultant, Mike Furness of Land Access Ltd, to report back to the gathering at our AGM, and his final report has now been received. His conclusions are as follows:-

- The proposal is a good fit with the relevant national and regional strategies, and with Wiltshire’s Rights of Way Improvement and Local Transport Plans.

- As a good quality route with a very strong heritage theme, The Great Stones Way should appeal to a great many walkers and quickly establish itself as a high-profile Strategic Regional Route. Usage is conservatively estimated at between 250,000 and 400,000 walkers per year.
- As a route meeting international standards of access, surface and security, with appropriate signage and information, substantial investment will be required. Development is technically feasible, although there are concerns as to the major road crossings – some of which can be alleviated by choice of route. The section south of Stonehenge to Old Sarum will require a proper crossing of the A303, possibly at the Longbarrow crossroads.
- The cost of development, including legal costs, contingency and project management, is estimated to be in the region of £105,000 from Avebury to Stonehenge, and an additional £55,000 for continuation to Old Sarum.
- Existing services are adequate to launch the route, but demand generated by the project would support additional provision, creating 160 to 260 new jobs.
- The route, once fully established, is expected to generate economic benefits of between £6mn and £10mn per annum, conservatively based on the experience of other similar trails.
- There is good opportunity to develop a series of shorter distance circular walks based on the spine of the GSW. The number of archaeological and historic attractions that can be visited en route is overwhelming.
- The proposal fits well with the advertised aims of several grant schemes, particularly LEADER, with its focus on rural, economic development.
- The overall conclusion is that there is a very strong economic and social case for developing The Great Stones Way, as an internationally important recreational amenity, with a world-class heritage appeal.

In view of these very positive findings, the working group has agreed to recommend to the Committee at its next meeting that we press ahead with seeking funding for the project, and starting to identify suitable contractors. Meanwhile, we are initiating preliminary talks with the LEADER groups and other potential donors. We recognise of course that any donor will be looking for match funding, to complement the grants and public support we'll be asking for, so we'll also be working on plans for fund-raising, which are likely to be launched later this year. The next few months will be a challenging and busy time, but we hope to maintain the momentum of the project and to deliver this exciting new opportunity for walkers as soon as possible.

Jeff Goddard

WEBSITE

Your web-site continues to develop, under the new team of Secretary Jeff Goddard as scribe and Sarah Newman as expert and WebMaster. Since our last report to the Newsletter we have had two seasonal changes and pub walks, from Autumn at the Goose at Britwell Salome, through our winter excursion with VWHLG to Bishopstone, and our current snowdrop walk to Swyncombe. Our summer stroll along the high downs will soon be ready to post, and we're waiting for your pub recommendations!

There has been much new information to post as well. The Great Stones Way project has demanded the opening of a whole new section to itself, with briefings on the scheme and its origins, details of the route with a few photos, and an up-date on the feasibility study findings. We're hoping that a few sturdy members will brave the route as it is, bare of signage, and let us have some photos of the route's best views for the new collection.

Also new are the start of a new Art section, with details of our first guest artist, Anna Dillon; and a new section on the weather of The

Ridgeway, with an informative article by Philip Eden for the Royal Meteorological Society, and links to forecasting sites and for cloud-watchers. Any good photos of spectacular cloud formations will be very welcome here!

RIDGEWAY JUNIOR EXPLORERS

Plans are afoot for the addition of a new page to the Friends of The Ridgeway web site. The aim of this page will be to encourage young walkers to go up onto The Ridgeway with their families and discover a whole new weekend or holiday pastime full of history, flora and fauna.

Once the design details are complete we will be e-mailing a sample page to Primary Schools, Beavers, Rainbows, Cub, Brownies, Scouts and Guides along an approximate route of The Ridgeway. We hope to encourage these groups to visit the web site and to include information, features and stories from the Junior Explorers page that relate to and will enhance their current projects together with promoting a desire to get their boots on, get out there, get walking and enjoy the wonders that are the ancient history and nature of our country.

Watch this space!

THE RIDGEWAY SUBMARINE

“Danes at the Goring Gap?. Thank God we’ve got a submarine.” Ethelred the Unrede The Apocryphal Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

I’m used to finding naval activity in unlikely places (notably the paravane in the ponds of Hollywood – S Glos not LA) , but cobbling together an article on modern military sites along the Ridgeway for a Newsletter a few years ago , my mind was uncrossed by the thought of a submarine pen near the Trail

So a casual purchase from Oxfam, *The Terror before Trafalgar*, Tom Pocock 2002, surprised me with the remote possibility that

someone walking the Thames side stretch of The Ridgeway in 1820 might have spotted a submarine on a mission to lift Boney from St Helena.

Tom Pocock is a recognised scholar journalist, not a nutcase on the web, so this merits local investigation. To summarise his account, a rumour that a submarine had been hired to rescue Napoleon was supported by Walter Greaves (a friend of Whistler) whose father, a Chelsea boatyard owner recalled the capture and destruction, way down below London Bridge of a “mysterious boat that was intended to go under water for the purpose of getting Napoleon off the island of St Helena” (Not the only plan to release this pest again; Lord Cochrane wanted him as Emperor of South America.)

This may be the stuff of oral history, but Pocock cites two documents from the Public Record Office for activity at Wallingford. The background is that the American inventor Robert Fulton touted his design for a submarine in France, Britain and, during the war of 1812, even his own country. In England, Tom Johnstone, smuggler and naval pilot, took up the idea. Unable to interest the Admiralty he approached the Grand Old Duke of York, a soldier but a fan of the flamboyant Admiral Sydney Smith who had liked the idea. The Duke authorised a secret project in a boatyard near Wallingford.

Responding to the usual bureaucratic delay, Johnstone suggested to the Admiralty that he might sell his sub to a foreign power. The Duke of York’s brother, the Duke of Clarence (pineapple-headed Sailor Bill whose coarse manners, ménage of grasping, thieving bastards and general stupidity are remarkable even by royal standards) cancelled the project forthwith.

So, the challenge to local historians in the Friends is “where was the boatyard? Are there any local records or traditions?”

PG

ON THE DOWNS

*Back on its springy turf again
the surge of downland breaks at my feet
a green tsunami whose swoop and swell
rolls from the ridge I trod as a boy
having cycled that way one mad afternoon
to find and adore the unseen force
I had surely felt near the beech-wood copse
this side of Windmill Hill.
Must be five thousand year since the god arrived
a Neolithic knock-on from the fertile crescent
promoter of tree clearance
agriculture, livestock
the building of hill-fort
henge and tomb and of death
as a door to life after death
grave-goods easing the way.
His message today is delivered
by a godlet. Smallest of falcons
yet efficiently sleek, he streaks like a dart
from the grass at my feet then up
for the fluttering song-drenched blue
scattering skylarks, their lives on the line.
And the merlin, a lark now secure in his talons,
is as good as a god for me.*

Lawrence Rich 2009

**Contributions to the Summer Newsletter by
3rd July 2010 please**

The editor prefers email text and can only process electronic images
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Items for the website are gladly received at any time

The Friends of The Ridgeway is a registered charity (No 1107926). its objects are the preservation for the benefit of the public of all the natural aspects and features of the Ridgeway National Trail and the provision of recreational and educational facilities in the interests of social welfare for the public benefit