

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY
Spring 2003
NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

Since the last Newsletter, the death was announced of our President, Chris Brasher. A tribute to him and the work he did on our behalf appears elsewhere in this edition.

We held a very well attended AGM in March and again there is a report on proceedings elsewhere in this Newsletter. It hardly seemed a year ago that a very fit Chris Brasher was entertaining us with a talk that linked Beethoven, Tolstoy, Wordsworth and Aneurin Bevan with The Ridgeway - another remarkable achievement by a remarkable man!

Also in Issue 60

<http://website.lineone.net/~friendsofridgeway/>

My optimism in thinking that the revised proposals of The Ridgeway Management Group (RMG) would move in our direction was misplaced. Despite the huge response by our members and others to the original proposals, perversely the RMG has tried even harder to accommodate the wishes of the pro-vehicle lobby. From an original intent to introduce three experimental Traffic Regulation Orders they have reduced this to one. They have abandoned the proposed introduction of three sections of voluntary restraint by the vehicle users. In addition they have introduced new ideas such as investigating a licensing system for vehicles, thus institutionalising the legitimacy of 'off-roading' on The Ridgeway. Although the RMG admits that the vast majority of written representations they received were opposed to vehicle use, in their ten page summary of responses they dismiss the idea of a ban on non-essential motor vehicles with one line - 'This broad brush approach was felt to be unworkable and will not be progressed'.

You make think that the previous paragraph paints a pretty gloomy picture. Paradoxically it has proved just the stimulus we needed to move our campaign into a higher gear. It has clarified what we have always suspected - the RMG is composed mainly of Highway Engineers who are much more used to repairing roads in Swindon or Reading than they are to looking after a National Trail. It has flushed out a clear statement from the National Trails Officer that the RMG is not concerned with the 'political issue of who should be allowed to use The Ridgeway. The Council Members of the Local Highway Authorities can take that decision.' You may rightly wonder, with such a view prevailing, why the RMG bothered to conduct a lengthy and expensive period of public consultation at all!

Fuelled with anger and determination by the responses of the RMG, we have pursued a number of avenues over the last two months. In particular we

- Had a very useful meeting with West Berkshire

Council, who have previously voted unanimously to ban inappropriate motor vehicles from The Ridgeway in their area. With our help, they are now working on plans to bring this about.

- Supported a motion in Oxfordshire County Council to seek a similar ban. The motion was narrowly defeated for reasons of political sensitivity within the Council (it would have meant overturning a recent decision by the Planning Group) but 20 Councillors all spoke in favour of a ban, not one person opposed and an amendment was passed calling for an immediate investigation into the use of Traffic Regulation Orders on The Ridgeway in Oxfordshire.
- Are pressing Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire County Council to hold similar debates.
- Are seeking support for our case from English Heritage, the Council for British

Archaeology and the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

- Represented our case in a very important meeting with Alun Michael, Minister for Rural Affairs, in the House of Commons. The Minister is taking a close interest in our campaign and convened the meeting to hear about the RMG's revised proposals. He expressed his disappointment with progress. Supported by a number of our MPs (Julia Drown, Robert Jackson, David Rendel and Boris Johnson) and representatives from West Berkshire and Wiltshire Councils, we were able to press our case very strongly. So much so that the Chief Executive of The Countryside Agency, Richard Wakeford, agreed to produce a strategy for The Ridgeway within two months to present to another meeting with Alun Michael. This is very significant - The Countryside Agency is the body responsible for National Trails and Richard

Wakeford admitted that they had not demonstrated the leadership required over this issue. We are sending some further thoughts to Richard and are looking forward to the next meeting. On this occasion I hope that my natural optimism is better founded than it was on the RMG's revised proposals!

In writing this piece, I can't help thinking that Chris Brasher would have been pleased with the latest developments in our campaign and would be encouraging us to keep battling on. I can think of no better memorial to him than to achieve a motor traffic free Ridgeway and I will be personally inspired by this objective.

Ian Ritchie

Chris Brasher CBE 1928 - 2003

Chris Brasher, our President, died at the end of April. Many fulsome obituaries have appeared and there is no point in trying to emulate them here. Suffice to say that Chris had a remarkable life and will be remembered for many things. A gold medal winner at the Olympics in 1956, pacemaker to Roger Bannister when he ran the first mile in under four minutes, founder of the London Marathon, an award winning broadcaster and journalist, a highly successful businessman, racehorse owner, mountaineer and conservationist - he packed a lot into his 74 years.

For us, Chris was a wonderful choice as President. He lived close to The Ridgeway and walked and cycled along it regularly. He had a deep love of the countryside along the Trail and cared for it passionately. He hated the damage that motor vehicles were doing to the surface of the Trail and he strongly objected to the intrusion they caused to the peaceful enjoyment of walkers, cyclists and horse riders.



His name allowed us to gain much greater prominence for our campaign. He was always willing to find time to represent us. His background as a broadcaster and journalist meant that he was always good for an interview or a quote - I particularly liked his description of the vehicle users as 'rural vandals'. He spearheaded our withdrawal from the Code of Respect, the act that effectively launched our current campaign.

Chris will be missed by many people for many reasons. Personally I will miss his wise counsel, his numerous ideas and suggestions but most of all I will miss his encouragement to be tenacious in our fight to save The Ridgeway. Tenacity and a fighting spirit are things that characterised Chris's life. Winning the 'Battle of The Ridgeway' (as he called it) will be the best way for us to remember him.

Ian Ritchie

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Sufficient unto the day is the tedium thereof: the formal minutes will appear in the winter issue of the Newsletter. What you need to know now is that the former committee was reelected with Janet Hierons as membership secretary.

In a Goring village hall hastily converted to an art gallery to display the works of Brian Hanlon we heard an update on our campaign – Ritchie's Ramblings brings a more updated update – a wide ranging address by Lord Avebury and songs from several centuries performed by Anything Goes with chorus of Ridgeway lovers *ad lib*.

The wide-ranging address, abridged here, though I hope I have preserved the main line of argument, began with a crisis of English civilisation in 1006 and developed to the aerodynamic inefficiency of 4WDs the politics of oil in 2003.

“The Danes, advancing along the Ridgeway were victorious at the decisive Battle of Kennett, fought there Kennett was the only known crossing of the river west of Newbury. The Ridgeway was quite a detour, but as the Roman route had fallen into disrepair and was overgrown, they continued along the quiet Ridgeway to meet the militia ambush and change the landscape history around Avebury forever. So The Ridgeway is as much a part of our history as the great Norman castles or the palaces of the Tudors, and is equally worthy of

preservation. It is part of prehistory too, having existed since long before the Danes, before the Romans, and before the civilisation which built Avebury and Silbury Hill. Many of the people who attended the ceremonies at these religious sites in what has been described as ‘the Great Landscape of the Gods’ must have travelled along The Ridgeway to get there, so it is a necessary part of understanding the context of the monuments.”

The track also has its literary associations

“Richard Jefferies, whose almost spiritual love of the countryside was awakened on Liddington Hill,

“The plain road was made beautiful by the many thoughts it gave. I came every morning to stay by the star-lit bank”

“Almost certainly Jefferies was referring to The Ridgeway, which like many other works of the human race, is a part of the landscape and an enhancement of its natural state. It belongs at the same time to the unspoilt countryside, and to the stupendous works of our ancestors before the beginning of recorded time. It should be designated as an ancient monument in its own right because, as my grandfather wrote in 1865.

“as population increases, and land becomes more valuable, these ancient monuments become more and more liable to mutilation and destruction.

“I was prompted to write to the DEFRA Minister Alun Michael, suggesting that he might invite Sir Neil Cossons, chairman of

English Heritage, to advise on how The Ridgeway might be preserved in its original form, as a highway that doesn't carry motor traffic. The examples given of what is meant by the Historic Environment could easily have encompassed The Ridgeway, and whether or not the Minister asks for Sir Neil's advice, we could lobby for the problems to be highlighted in the 2003 Report. This would at least ensure that they would be looked at from a new angle, somewhat different from that of highway engineers who dominate The Ridgeway Management Group. If The Ridgeway is indeed legitimately seen as an ancient monument, the respect that we accord it would surely be much higher, and its management would not be left to highway authorities. As your late President Chris Brasher said:

“Had the campaign concerned a beautiful listed building, there would have been no question but to protect and conserve it. But because it is a very old, wonderful and priceless track, it has been left unprotected from

rural vandals”

“Why is English Heritage not represented on The Ridgeway Management Group, when they are considering the most important monument of all, and how on earth can a matter of such importance should be left to an amorphous committee, which has no democratic legitimacy, is not accountable, and has no power to take decisions? Officials representing highway authorities along the trail, and from the Countryside Agency, would not be inclined to take on powerful vested interests, but would always strive for compromises and lowest common denominators. This was neatly epitomised by J₀₅ Joslin, National Trails Officer, when she said:

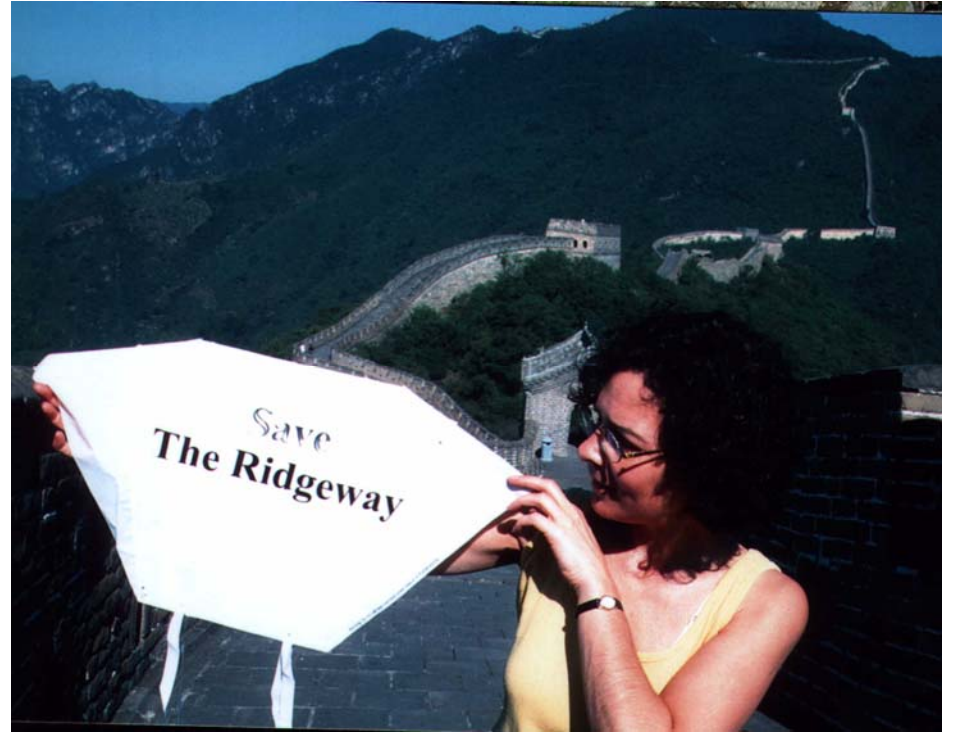
“4x4 drivers do have rights and we don't want to be killjoys, but the conservation of The Ridgeway is important”.

“A body composed of people who think like that would automatically reject difficult or radical ideas, and there is no sign that in their deliberations they have been guided by

principles. Where the interests of different user groups are in conflict, and experience has shown clearly that codes of practice are futile, a choice has to be made, and it is clear that either you allow motor traffic, and surface the trail to cater for it, forgetting about other users, or you exclude motor traffic and restore the peace and quiet of the countryside for everybody else.

After a general case against gas guzzling, a peroration:

“The Ridgeway has been around through the centuries, and has survived invasions, world wars, the plague that wiped out three quarters of the population, and even the mass tourism of the 20 century. If we have to sacrifice lives and spend billions of pounds on defending our civilisation against a brutal thug several thousands of miles away, who may or may not have intended to attack us, surely we can make the small amount of effort needed to safeguard a unique part of that legacy against the playground panzers who are already destroying it.



THE TRUE STORY OF OUR PACK HORSE
BY THOMAS R. L. BLACK, B.E.M.

Written in the spring of the year 2000 when Tam was 88 years old, from memory, with a bit of help from his younger brother Stephen Black, via post to New Zealand At the time of the expedition, he was 11

The true story of our pack horse adventure is still stuck in my mind. It all turned around the fact that my younger brother, Stephen Black, and I, Thomas Black, read about the pack horse roads of the British Isles. At Wendover in Buckinghamshire, we lived more or less on such a road now a macadam surface in some places. I was fascinated when my teacher gave me a lesson on the Icknield Way, mostly a grass road following the base of the chalk hills. There were two roads, the upper and the lower Icknield Ways.

My father, a first rate historian, often told me that the lower road was used in summer. But in the winter it became no more than a muddy swamp which was quite impassable. Being below the chalk hills the winter rain soaked through the chalk and when the rain water got to the clay, it was stopped.

I had a little pony and explored

a lot of the Chiltern Hills on interesting rides. I never went too far away from home. I think I knew there was too short a time between breakfast and luncheon, and that shortened the distance I could go. I would ride up Coombe Hill to the monument dedicated to those brave men who gave their lives fighting against the Boers in South Africa. Below, to the north, there was the beautiful vale of Aylesbury and, to the south, there was Chequers.

If you look to lower Aylesbury, there are two roads below: the upper and lower Icknield Ways. Glance to your right towards Wendover, there is Wellwick House. This was the home of Judge Jeffries known in his time as the hanging judge.

We loved to explore all around Wendover. I was given a real canoe and we explored the Wendover Branch Canal, now not used. Most of our free time

was taken up by exploring. We walked everywhere, got dirty and hungry, so we had to return home to eat good legs of beef, apples, pears and nuts from the garden, and fish from the stream at the bottom of our garden. It was a happy life for two.

Later I was given a pony and rode further out from our home. The pony and I got on well together. Then on an eventful day we would explore the Icknield Way by using the pony as a pack horse. We thought that matter over, how to do it? Hard. I had never seen a pack horse. I had to ask myself where would be the best place to place the load. I did know that until the horse collar was invented the horse who was pulling the load had its breathing made difficult. The horse collar was almost as important as the wheel.

I was all thought and design. We would need something like the saddle strap. This would have to be padded. More design work and then the making of the whole thing. We more or less got it in our minds.

Two sleeping bags, a knapsack resting between the sleeping bags to hold the food. Two cups and two small tin plates. We were progressing.

Then came the great day we loaded our pack horse and said good bye to Mummy and Dad. We left the lawn and were on our way.

Past our Dad's study, the whole load was between the horses four legs. Much to my annoyance, my father opened the front door and said, "Gosh, you were quick."

We put the load together again and made the strap a lot tighter. Then we were on our way. We aimed for Princes Risborough. I was leading the horse. We took turns and followed the upper Icknield Way. At Princes Risborough we got on to the Pack Horse Way.

Then we were tired and took the lead off the horse and tied her up to a tree. I have failed to mention the tent, a job made by another Black, a good Scot.

To be continued

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Sunday 11th May Bluebell Walk

2.30 West Woods, Lockeridge near Marlborough. Approximately 4 miles, muddy if wet Meet at CP in West Woods, reached up a metalled bridle track from the village of Lockeridge. OS Explorer 157 GR 152674
Leader: Jane Ebbutt 01672 540368

Sunday 1st June Chiltern Walk

Meet at the Lions of Bledlow in Bledlow Village for a walk of 6.5/7 miles at 10.30. Parking near Church or telephone box. OS 165 GR 776021
Leader: Roger Lerry 01494 721142

Wednesday 11th June Scouring of the White Horse County

A lecture by Brian Edwards at the Wiltshire Heritage Centre (Formerly Devizes Museum) Long Street Devizes. 1a.m.

Tuesday 29th July Excavations

11 am A second visit to see the progress of these excavations. Leader: Dr Gary Lock from the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education
Start Time: 11.00
Length: less than a mile
Meet: The old Noah's Ark Inn, on Wantage Road, A338, in Frilford, Oxon Buses: Wantage to Oxford no.31 roughly every 30 mins, alight at the Garford Turn Grid Ref: SU 438 962

Saturday 9th August Letcombe Regis

Meet at Letcombe Regis Village Hall GR 379 865 at 11.00 am for an 8 mile walk Bring a picnic lunch
The walk will take us up to the Ridgeway near Segsbury hill fort and return via Letcombe Bassett. Light refreshments will be served in the village hall on our return.
Leader Bridget Benn 01235 764661

Copy for the Summer Issue by 28th June please

18, Hampton Park, Bristol BS6 6LH

Ridgewayfriends@aol.com