

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY



Autumn

2003

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

I am ever fascinated by the evolution of the English language. Have you noticed how weather forecasters on the radio and television now talk about 'useful rain'? I suppose after one of the driest periods on record, stretching well into autumn, the qualification 'useful' means significant or substantial. Who finds it is useful is a good question - farmers for sure and for many gardeners. It is probably important for water authorities but it is apparently too late to help the French winemakers. For walkers and users of The Ridgeway, it will be a mixed blessing. I am personally looking forward to the recovery of the parched grass and of the hedgerows but not to the

Also in Issue 62

Ridgeway Walk	p3
VWH Wind Farm	p3
Matters Visual	p3
Marcham/Frilford Excavations	p4
Florence & Cress	p6
Events Organiser	p8
AGM	p8
Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk	

softening of the surface on the vulnerable stretches of the Trail. It will be good that some of the hardest ruts will cease to be threats to my ankles and knees. On the other hand, even the increased numbers of 4x4s and motorbikes we have seen this summer have had little worsening effect on the rock hard surface on the stretches I regularly walk. The dust they raise in their wake has been tiresome as, of course, remains their noise. However, as I look out of my window and watch the first hard (and useful?) rain I have seen for months, I am sure that normal conditions will soon return. I am particularly interested to see what will happen to the recently repaired sections in Oxfordshire and would be pleased to receive reports from members telling me how this work stands up to the ravages of the vehicles over the winter. Please let me know.

In my last Ramblings, I expressed optimism that our campaign was producing results. The first tangible evidence of this is the proposed Traffic Regulation Order on Smeathe's Ridge. I have written to members separately about this and I am grateful that many of you responded to Wiltshire County Council expressing your support for the action. We anticipate that the decision will be made at the end of the year and we will keep you informed of developments. As I write, we await the production of The Ridgeway Management Plan by The Countryside Agency. This is overdue (surprise, surprise), frustrating my hopes to give you a full report on its proposals in this Newsletter. Once again, we will try to keep you informed as soon as we hear anything.

Finally, thanks to all those members who have helped our cause by purchasing our Christmas cards. It is still not too late to order some if, like me, you prefer to leave your Christmas shopping later than most of the British public seems to do!

Ian Ritchie

RIDGEWAY WALK 2004

The 43rd Ridgeway Walk is scheduled for Saturday **8th May**

Entry forms should be available early in 2004 and copies will be sent to this year's entrants. Otherwise you can download the entry form for the 40 mile events from the web site at ridgeway40.org.uk or e-mail jungledrums@waitrose.com, or send a 4"x9" SAE to:

Ridgeway Walk: Alan Smith, 3 Harlington Road, Bexleyheath, Kent DA7 4AS; (020 8301 3829)

Ridgeway 40: Mike Sandford, 22 Stevenson Drive, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 1 SN (01235 532207)

Ridgeway 20: Ron Cutler (01235 850578)

WHITE HORSE WIND FARM

The Friends opposed an application for a wind farm in the Vale of White Horse that would have been visible from The Ridgeway at Uffington. The proposal was rejected by 8 votes to 7. This decision, however, is subject to appeal and there is an extant planning permission for another scheme.

MATTERS VISUAL

As our new website developed, ladders and lacunae became apparent. From Kate Crennell, we acquired a bibliography of remarkable range, whilst our gallery of mud-and-rut photos must be difficult to parallel; on the other hand, historical photographs, illustrating the Ridgeway, the surrounding landscape and villages from the birth of the technology to, let us say 1960 are lacking whilst the webmaster's knowledge of the painters and sculptors inspired by the Downs is frankly abysmal. I would be delighted to hear from any members who can fill the lacunae, darn the ladders.

Peter Gould

2003 MARCHAM/FRILFORD EXCAVATIONS

Thirteen Friends were conducted round the excavations at Marcham/Frilford on July 29th by Gilbert Oteyo, the project's Education Officer. As part of the Hillforts of the Ridgeway Project, this was the third season of excavations on the site by students of Oxford University's Institute of Archaeology under the direction of Dr Gary Lock.

Earlier excavations had revealed a Romano-British temple and underlying Iron Age structures. Photographic evidence showed the presence of a circular structure at the east end of the site which was thought to be an amphitheatre. However, as the 2002 excavations



Gilbert Oteyo welcoming Friends to the Garford Excavation Tour on a grey day, luckily the rain held off until lunchtime

proceeded, doubts began to accumulate about this interpretation. When water was hit at the base of the structure's retaining wall, the team tended towards the idea that this might have been a pool enclosed by a shallow bank.

The 2003 excavations have deepened the conviction that this was not simply an

amphitheatre. The depth of the water in the re-opened trench in the circular structure has been found to go down two metres to chalk bedrock. Timber retrieved from just below the water is waterlogged and difficult to handle. Underwater excavation cannot be undertaken, however, without specialist equipment which unfortunately is not presently available.

The eastern entrance to the circular structure was also re-opened. It appears that the wall surrounding the structure was cut into in order to make a later entrance. With at least three phases of building here, the roughly cobbled-up ramp leading the entrance to the circular structure may have been constructed to connect with an earlier entrance. The thinking now is that there might have been an Iron Age sacred pool here, possibly converted later by the Romans into an amphitheatre.

An exciting feature of this year's dig has been the large number of objects found. Indeed, the Friends were greeted by the find of a small pottery crucible for ironmaking. The finds in the trench (No. 2) covering a large stone structure near the pool/amphitheatre, now thought to have been partially unroofed, have included 200 Roman coins and a large quantity of fine jewellery, possibly votive offerings. Also found, in particular areas, have been serving and drinking vessels, animal bones and, curiously, a midden of oyster shells, pointing to the theory that this could have been an area of workshops, shops and eating stalls connected with the nearby sacred pool and temple.

The challenge to discover more will continue in 2004.



The room without an entrance at the edge of the pool/amphitheatre, view looking towards the River Ock

FLORENCE AND CRESS IN GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

On one of the hottest days of the summer, August 9th, with the temperature soaring to 35 C, a group of nine people, led by Bridget Benn, set off on a walk leading from Letcombe Regis, near Wantage, up through Segsbury hill fort to the Ridgeway on which we admired a handsome new stile and a memorial to Bob Abrahams provided by his friends. (Bob Abraham was born and lived in Letcombe Basset where his father was the village blacksmith. Bob worked at Segsbury Motors in Wantage. He spent every spare moment walking the Ridgeway and downs, in what he called "God's own country," with his dogs. (A feature of the attractively designed stile is the easy access for dogs).

Lunch was taken under the lee of a high hedge from which there was a glorious view of the Vale and Thames valley. Then down into Letcombe Basset, where, after a visit to the church, Bridget took us past the Old Rectory where Dean Swift had spent three months in 1742



A recently erected commemorative stone to Bob Abraham beside a new stile on the Ridgeway above Letcombe Basset



Members of the walk resting in the shade from the hot sun.

writing tracts under a mulberry tree which still exists and quaffing pints of Lord Bolingbroke's Florence. The rectory is now a stables, where the late trainer, Captain Foster, had Grand National winners in 1972, 1980 and 1985.

Bridget when took us to see Arabella's picturesque cottage from Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*, Letcombe Basset being called Cresscombe in the book. We passed the former cress beds, in which children and dogs were splashing and cooling themselves. The village also has associations with John Betjeman who successfully campaigned for the old thatched cottages not to be pulled down. We climbed again out of the village past old chalk pits and collapsed thankfully into Letcombe Regis Hall, where Bridget had thoughtfully arranged for tea and cakes to be provided by the WI.

Anna Hanslip

Florence wine, in 1707, was advertised at 6/- a gallon.. The 18thC wine pint, like the American pint, was 16 fl oz, half a standard modern bottle.

BOLD INNOVATION

Tradition dictates that appeals for help in running a society should appear just before the AGM - in a daring break with tradition, we're going to do it now.

EVENTS ORGANISER WANTED

Our small programme of walks, talks and visits needs to be refurbished and extended for next year: a task for a lateral-thinking member with a little time, and a lot of zip and zest who lives near the Trail. (Anyone with these attributes would be very welcome at committee meetings, but this is not necessarily a formal committee post.)

Interested? E-mail, phone, write or speak live to the Secretary, Chairman or any committee member. (We regret that applications by pigeon, heliograph, quipu or ouija board cannot, for purely technological reasons, be attempted to be considered.)

FOR THE DIARY

AGM 2004

21st March

Goring

All the excitements and enticements will be set out in the next Newsletter, but make a note now to ensure you are not thereof deprived by inadvertence or prior engagement.

**Copy for the Winter Newsletter by
30th December please**

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Items for the website are gladly received at any time