

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY
Spring 2004
NEWSLETTER



RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

Spring is a good time to look forward. We must begin to build on the success we have achieved in securing a ban on motor vehicles on The Ridgeway each winter. I know that there is more still to do to make the ban effective and I promise that your Executive Committee will continue to devote much energy in that direction. There is, however, a need to start to plan for a better future.

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

One of the things that has concerned me since taking up the role as your Chairman is that we do not lose sight of why we have been waging our campaign. Our aim is to return The Ridgeway to a peaceful and special experience for its true lovers – the walkers, cyclists and horse riders who delight in its history, its flora and fauna, its wonderful scenery. The Ridgeway is a National Trail. It runs close to many large centres of population. It is more accessible than any other National Trail except perhaps the Thames Path. And yet The Ridgeway is desperately under utilised. On a recent 20-mile walk from Overton Hill to Uffington I saw one 4x4, three motorbikes, no cyclists, no horse riders and only four walkers. Admittedly this was on a weekday, but a similar walk from Uffington to Streatley on a Sunday yielded one 4x4, three dangerously driven quad bikes, over thirty motor bikes, three cyclists, one horse rider and fifteen walkers. By contrast, on a weekday visit to Hadrian's Wall, I met over thirty walkers in the space of ten miles. Talking to B&B owners, Tourist Information Offices, pub landlords and youth hostel managers in the area confirmed my suspicions. The Hadrian's Wall National Trail is being effectively marketed, is being enjoyed by large numbers of people and is making a very significant contribution to the local economy.

To start the debate I put forward some ideas to revitalise interest in The Ridgeway National Trail:

- Set up a Ridgeway National Trail Trust, independent of the Countryside Agency and the local authorities, to oversee and develop all aspects of the Trail. The success of the Hadrian's Wall example shows the way forward.
- Enforce the winter ban on motor vehicles and restore the surface so that it fully meets the standards laid down for National Trails. No longer should the state of the surface be a major factor in keeping away visitors.

- Produce first class promotional material for The Ridgeway to encourage visitors. The excellent leaflets and web site of the Chilterns Conservation Board show what can be done.
- Relaunch The Ridgeway National Trail with a vigorous PR campaign to extol the virtues of 'Britain's oldest road'. I believe The Ridgeway has more to offer than any other National Trail - but I admit that I am a bit biased!
- Improve the events programme with a wider variety of well-publicised walks, lectures, special interest group meetings and one-off 'spectaculars'.
- Increase the number of young people who visit the Trail by developing links with schools and youth organisations.
- Improve and promote access to the Trail for the disabled and families with very young children.

What do you think? Let me know any ideas you have to bring the joys of The Ridgeway to a greater number of people. Let's rejoice in the progress we have made so far, but let's start to plan for a better future.

Ian Ritchie

ALDWORTH VILLAGE HALL

Saturdays 9 - 12

Tea, coffee, home made cakes,
'comfort facilities' and various trading stalls

When the village shop closed, a band of volunteers decided to open the Aldworth village hall, 100 yards from The Bell, to villagers and passers by. Ridgeway users welcome.

RIDGEWAY FORUM

It is refreshing to report on a very positive Ridgeway Forum meeting. The Forum meets once a year and is an opportunity for an exchange of views between representatives of the Countryside Agency, the local authorities along the Trail and the various user groups. Past Forum experiences have not been good. This time, following the adoption of The Ridgeway Management Plan, there was an encouraging focus on how all the parties can work together to implement the Plan. In particular the local authorities are beginning the consultation process to ensure that the seasonal Traffic Regulation Orders are introduced later this year, in time for the next winter. It will be important for our members to contribute to this process and we will try to advise you to whom to write and when.

With protection in place from the ravages of the motor vehicles over the winter period, repair work is scheduled for much of the Trail over the coming months, made possible by match funding from the Countryside Agency to add to the local highway authority budgets.

It was good to hear that a new Ridgeway National Trail Officer has been found to replace Mike Furness. She is Margaret Bradley and she joins the team in July.

The only regrettable issue raised in the meeting was the demise, on economic grounds, of the Ridgeway Explorer bus service. Following a suggestion by one of our Committee members, Chris Hall, we put forward a proposal to examine the use of volunteer drivers for the buses. This idea was welcomed by the meeting and is to be investigated by the National Trails team.

The meeting was rounded off by a presentation from James Littlewood on the excellent work being done to encourage more people to access the countryside of the Chilterns AONB.

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THE AGM

According to recent custom, the formal minutes of the AGM will appear in next winter's Newsletter.

What you want to know now is that nearly 100 people attended: a record for the Society.

The new constitution was overwhelmingly adopted with one amendment. Our charitable object is to include the provision of educational as well as recreational facilities.

Under the new constitution, the old committee was re-elected with the addition of Chris Hall as Mandarin of the mysterious east beyond the Goring Gap. The meeting failed to provide an events organiser, but no reasonable offer will be refused.

The highpoint, as you already know was the ministerial announcement of a seasonal ban on motor vehicles

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A BIG 'THANK YOU'

to all members who sponsored me on the 40 mile Ridgeway Walk. Despite awful weather and appalling conditions under foot, I managed to complete the route from Overton Hill to Streatley along The Ridgeway on Saturday 8th May. My time (13.5 hours) does not set any records but I am very pleased that my companions (including two members, Steve Doone and Steve Piltz) and I made it. The walk is organised by one of our members, Alan Smith and he and his team do an absolutely superb job in running this annual event.

Sponsorship of me by members of The Friends totalled a magnificent £1250 which, with Gift Aid, is worth £1600 to my chosen charity, MBG. I am very grateful for your support but more importantly, so are MBG and the people of Gunjur in The Gambia.

With many thanks

Ian Ritchie



SNAP

The last Newsletter told the story of Snap, the deserted village close to the Ridgeway near Aldbourne. One beautiful day in early spring, too early alas for the gentians of High Clear Nature Reserve, a few of us went there. Whether your taste is for detective fieldwork, reflection on social history, or unfocused musing on the vanity of human endeavour, the visit is worth it.

To the story, there is a coda. The anachronistic depopulation of Snap for the sake of the sheep did not escape reproof. In 1914 the local MP described





the Wilson family as oppressive and tyrannical. Had he made this remark in the Commons, it would have been covered by Parliamentary privilege. As he made it at a public meeting, he was successfully sued by Henry Wilson's sons.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Excavations at Frilford Tuesday 27th July
Visit to see the progress of the Marcham/Frilford excavations with Dr Gary Lock from the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education
Meet 11.00 at the old Noah's Ark Inn, on A338, Wantage Rd, Frilford. Grid Ref 438962
No 31 bus from Wantage to Oxford (30 minute frequency). Alight Garford Turn
Contact Kate & David Crennell 01235 834357

END OF THE EXPLORER

With the most discreet of whimpers, the Ridgeway Explorer bus service has been suppressed. Though the responsible officials were quite right to be ashamed of the decision, they should nonetheless have informed interested parties such as this Society and the Ramblers' Association. Better still, they might have consulted them in an attempt to save the service.

The Ridgeway Explorer bus was a brilliant idea: perhaps the one really good idea the National Trails Office ever had. Not only did it allow access to the Ridgeway for those who cannot or will not drive, it also made long linear walks along the Trail convenient for the most devoted Toads, established a bus service for local people and, for the disabled or lethargic, provided a scenic tour of the Downs and the Thames Valley. It should have been a model for every National Trail.

Unfortunately, the administration let down the concept. The simple procedure of chartering a couple of buses and sending the bill to the Treasury is not the British Way. The money had to be scraped up by negotiation between the National Trails Office (funded by the taxpayer) and all the local authorities along the western Ridgeway (also funded by the taxpayer). While they happily exchanged correspondence and attended meetings about which cocoa tin a few quid should be extracted from, decisions were made late, publicity appeared too late, timetables were published much too late. As a way of employing officials, the system was pretty good; as a way of getting a bus on the road and passengers on the bus it failed.

Peter Gould

Copy for the Summer Newsletter by
17th July please

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Items for the website are gladly received at any time