

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY



Summer

2004

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

I have always been at pains to make clear that this is a personal column. The views are mine and do not necessarily represent the official policy of The Friends of The Ridgeway. I stress this because I am sure I am about to upset many of our members, probably including all my colleagues on the Executive Committee!

I believe that much time, money and emotion has been unnecessarily expended on introducing the 'Right to Roam' provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

I was an enthusiastic supporter when I first heard the objectives. After all, I started walking in the Peak District and I owe a great personal debt to those involved in fighting the first access battles of Kinder Scout. Thanks to the efforts of those crusaders and martyrs, I was able to climb Jacob's Ladder, get lost in the peat bogs of Bleaklow and enjoy the magical views from Kinder Downfall. From those early days I have developed a lasting love of walking in the countryside and it has remained a constant thread through the twists and turns of my life. But when I reflect on my walking, it has been almost exclusively on footpaths, bridleways and byways. Britain has a wonderful network of such routes but they are under-utilised, ill-maintained and unloved by national and local government. Despite valiant efforts by organisations such as The Ramblers and local footpath societies, many paths are blocked, stiles broken, signs missing and bridges dangerous.

My contention is simple. Before vast amounts of money were committed to trying to introduce the new access legislation, would it not have been better invested in bringing our footpath network up to standard and encouraging more people to use it?

I now get off my soap box to report good progress with our Ridgeway campaign. Wiltshire County Council appear to be moving faster than any of the other councils in introducing seasonal Traffic Regulation Orders on The Ridgeway. They have published their plans, had informal consultation with most of the interested parties and have taken a decision in their Regulatory Committee to introduce seasonal TROs on all byway sections of The Ridgeway National Trail in Wiltshire. The TROs would be in force from 1st September until 30th April every year, starting in 2004. They are currently in the final phase of public consultation. Well done Wiltshire!

Ian Ritchie

SPONSORED BEATING OF THE BOUNDS

of the Parishes of Brightwalton with Catmore
August Bank Holiday, Monday 30th August 2004

All Saints Church, Brightwalton, was built in 1863 to the designs of George Street, one of the very best Victorian church architects, and it is listed Grade 2.

However, it now needs to have its roof replaced at a cost of about £70,000. Together with other repairs and refurbishments, the total cost will be nearer £100,000. This is a huge sum for a small parish to raise, but we are already well over half-way there.

One of the projects to raise this money is a Sponsored Beating of the Bounds of the Parishes of Brightwalton with Catmore on August Bank Holiday. This will be a walk of about 15 miles at your own pace over some of the most beautiful downland country in Berkshire. It will start and finish at Brightwalton Village Hall, starting at 10am, and those who go the whole way may expect to finish between 3pm and 5pm.

The boundaries of these two parishes border the parishes of Chaddleworth, Leckhampstead, Peasemore, Beedon, East Ilsley, West Ilsley, Farnborough and Fawley. In some places the boundaries run along public roads, in others along public rights of way, while in some places they run across private land. In those places where they are not on any public right of way, the permission of the relevant landowner has been obtained for us to walk that way.

Because part of the route is not on public rights of way, it will take many people to places where they have never been before. It will be a great way to see the countryside with your family and friends. Dogs will be welcome, but they must be kept on leads.

At key points where the route crosses or joins public roads, refreshments may be obtained, and transport back to Brightwalton will be available for those who do not wish to continue. Tea will be available at the Village Hall on return.

To take part, each individual or family must produce sponsorship or a donation of at least £10. A prize of £20 will be awarded to the person who has produced and paid the greatest amount of sponsorship.

Sponsorship forms may be obtained from:

David Gardiner, The Old Rectory, Lilley, Newbury, Berks RG20 7HH

Tel / Fax: 01488 638227

E-mail: DAWGardiner@aol.com

to whom any who do not wish to walk may send a donation if they wish.

ZORB

A Tourist glossy produced by the North Wessex Downs AONB boasts that the recreational activities of the Downs include "zorb", rolling down hills. Rolling down hills was indeed a traditional English pastime Jane Grigson, (*Good Things* p.275) repeats from *Kettner's Book of the Table*, (1877) that the young folk of Northamptonshire after eating as gooseberry fool as they possibly can used frequently to roll down a hill and begin eating again. Without references, since "conversation in the Coronation Tap, Bristol, circa 1982" lacks academic gravitas, is an anecdote about Dr Johnson declaring that he hadn't had a good roll for years before launching himself downhill. Perhaps kids used to chalk on the walls of Lichfield "Sammy Johnson is a Zorber" but the word didn't make it into his dictionary, nor into OED. I'm intrigued by the term and would welcome plausible, intelligent suggestions about its provenance and etymology.

YANKEE DOLOUR

The "off road problem" is not confined to this quaint, nookshotten island; even the wide-open spaces of the Land of The Free-for-All can't accommodate unrestricted motor sport. According to the New York Times, "Facing mounting fiscal and environmental costs from damage done by the sevenfold increase in off-road vehicles in national forests in the past 30 years, the Forest Service has for the first time proposed a rule that could eventually limit their use" Though, an agency spokesman, said no extra money had been set aside to enforce the new regulation Less familiar is the candour of the offroaders' spokesman. Asked about the appeal of mud, Ms. Drigger said: "I like getting muddy. If you haven't gotten muddy, you haven't ridden."

Peter Gould

THE VALE AND RIDGEWAY PROJECT: EXCAVATIONS AT MARCHAM/FRILFORD 2004

Excavations date back to the late 19th century when work at a nearby quarry revealed a cemetery. In the 1930s a temple and underlying Iron Age structures were found. The fascination of the site is the continuity and change it represents from the Iron Age through Romano-British to the Anglo-Saxons. 'A complex and mysterious site.'

This is the 4th year of the current series of excavations by The University of Oxford School of Archaeology, under the direction of Dr Gary Lock. It fits in with the wider aims of an earlier project, the Hillforts of The Ridgeway, which explored sites on the downs. The current series has uncovered an Amphitheatre area approximately 40 metres diameter with an inner arena, a Temple, shops, a large 4th century building, and numerous artefacts including ceramics, jewellery, coins and implements. Excavations take place during only 4 weeks in

July each year, as a training exercise for archaeology students. Workers include students fulfilling part of their course work, mature students and volunteers. At any time, there may be 50 to 100 people working on the site, organised into groups working in trenches under the supervision of post graduates.

On 27 July, a group of 19 people from Friends of The Ridgeway visited the site for a conducted tour of the excavations, and were shown round by Gilbert Oteyo and Chris Gosden. There is nothing to see above ground level, as features have been smoothed out since the Saxon period by ploughing and by intensive agriculture since WW2. But below a foot of turf the structures start to emerge, mainly walls and floor surfaces, which could have been covered up for 1700 years. Each area of interest is numbered, and its details recorded. Any artefacts found are bagged and removed

for further examination; one trench has revealed 350 items. This year, they are exploring the Temple boundary area, the shops outside the Temple wall, and the Amphitheatre area. Structures outside the Temple wall indicate shops for serving pilgrims/travellers with food and drink. Many walls and floor surfaces have been uncovered and flagons have been found indicating a 'high class wine bar'. No significant animal bones or other evidence of permanent occupation has been found, indicating that people passed through rather than settled here. In the amphitheatre area on the eastern side, a 10 foot deep trench has revealed a 4th century rubbish dump and drains from 55AD and 155AD, along with many water channels. Many of the walls have been heavily robbed, but a well preserved wall of a new building has been found which will be further excavated next year. In the eastern entrance to an arena area, a domed shaped floor has been uncovered, and 4 skeletons have been found

nearby: a man facing downwards (thought to be a punishment as his spirit could not exit his body through his mouth), a man on his back and 2 women, one with limbs in unusual positions; all middle-aged and thought to be late Roman. The skeletons have been removed for analysis and will be reburied later at the same site with a ceremony.

Some of those currently involved with the excavations (including Gary Lock and Chris Gosden) have established The Vale and Ridgeway Trust, a new venture to fund and promote research into land use, settlement patterns and ritual practices within the Ridgeway and Vale area. It will provide training and educational facilities for local people and support a range of activities including fieldwork and documentary research. It is hoping to raise £50,000. If you wish to get involved or make a donation, contact The Vale and Ridgeway Trust, c/o Manor Farm, Marcham, OX13 6NZ

Janet Hierons

COAL ON THE RIDGEWAY

A colourful Ridgeway anecdote recounts its use for the delivery of coal. The source is *Highways and Byways of Berkshire* (1919). "There are men living in the Vale of White Horse now who remember the days when coal came from South Wales along the Ridgeway by waggon and the residents in the Vale sent their teams up to the Ridgeway to fetch it. . . . It will hardly be credited, but it is true."

That coal came over the Ridgeway I could credit, that it came from South Wales I doubted. Also, I wondered why.

Doubt arose from the needless cost and difficulty of transport. The coal reserves of Wales began to be exploited late in the 18thC, but there was no easy way to move a heavy and bulky commodity from Glamorgan to Wiltshire until the Severn Tunnel opened in 1886. Before that, one alternative was by land *via* Gloucester - thirty odd miles in the wrong direction and back again passing close by two other coalfields, the Forest

of Dean and the Bristol & Gloucestershire. The alternative, by water, entailed the cost of loading for a short trip across the Severn Estuary and up the lower Bristol Avon, both tricky navigations, and unloading for road haulage. From Bristol, coal might even go by rail direct to stations along the VWH. Carting it across the vale and up a hill to be fetched back down again seemed perverse. (The Sharpness railway bridge 1879 was a Midland Railway venture serving Forest of Dean rather than Welsh collieries. There is no obvious rail link to Berkshire.)

Welsh coal was a high quality anthracite much prized by the Navy, Merchant Marine and railway companies. For domestic and coarse industrial use, there were more convenient sources than Wales and a reasonable transport link: the Bristol and Somerset coal fields served by canals.

The Kennet & Avon was fully open in 1810. From the South

Gloucestershire pits, it was fed by a dramway with a wharf on the navigable Avon at Keynsham above Bristol. From Somerset, the K&A was fed by the Somerset Coal Canal, opened in 1805 to the Dundas Basin on the canal itself.

The K&A followed the Vale of Pewsey not the Vale of White Horse. At Semington, however, the Wilts & Berks canal branched off to Swindon, connecting with Wantage and Abingdon. It did not go very near the Ridgeway. Like the Great Western Railway link mentioned above, the route of the Wilts & Berks invites the question "why bother to haul coal across the Vale and up a hill to have it fetched back down again when it could be delivered directly from the nearest wharf?"

The K&A, busy but never very profitable because of the construction costs, was badly hit when the parallel Great Western Railway opened to Bristol in 1841. Because of coal, tonnage did not fall much, but revenue fell drastically. The

19thC was not cursed with Just In Time Delivery: moving a heavy, bulky commodity slowly and cheaply by water made sense. It didn't make profits. The company paid its last dividend in 1849-50. The GWR itself took over maintenance in 1851, promising a fixed income to the company but it bought the waterway outright in 1852. A canal company not only maintained the infrastructure: it was also a common carrier. Till 1873, the GWR accepted this role on the K&A. The significance of this date is that the railways, both GWR and the Somerset & Dorset reached the Somerset coalfield early in the 1870s. The Somerset Coal Canal, which needed the K&A as an outlet, prospered no longer. Commercial traffic from the coal canal did continue both westward and to the Wilts & Berks, but it was in serious decline. Dealers on the Wilts & Berks had found other sources of coal, delivered over the N Wilts canal, or the River Thames.. (Historians of the Wilts & Berks are wrong to believe the Somerset field was

exhausted in the 1890s. Despite famously difficult geology, the mines were still worked after World War II. Probably the output was elsewhere diverted by rail.)

Road tolls are another factor. In early 19th century England, the best roads were maintained by turnpike trusts which charged the user. Evading tolls was a national sport, but there was a particular history of resistance to turnpikes in the coal industry. The army had to be used to protect the tollhouses around 18thC Bristol from colliers. Nor was this just the traditional anarchism of a savage populace untamed by Methodism or Hannah More. The account books of a country-gentleman coal-owner record a payment of £10 for cutting down turnpikes,

The scale of charges on turnpikes is instructive. On one Mendip system, each horse drawing a cart was charged between 3d and 6d, depending on the width of the wheels. Narrow wheels did more damage. A 50% surcharge was

sometimes levied from November to April. Some trusts did have special rates for coal carts.

The turnpikes had their advantages: on an unimproved road, seven or eight horses could draw two tons for twenty miles in a day. On the pike, the same number of horses could draw five tons for thirty or forty miles. The Ridgeway was an unimproved road. (On a broad gauge canal such as the K&A one barge could carry as much as 60 tons. A one-horse narrow boat, as used on the SCC, carried up to thirty tons.)

The familiar generalisation that the turnpike system came to an end when the railways arrived, is true enough to be misleading. Some toll roads actually prospered as feeders to the railway. Neither did the trusts not fold up at once: they had debts to clear. In the Mendips, the piecemeal dismantling of the system began in 1867 with the Bristol Trust and lasted till 1883 with the Wells Trust. Doubtless the process was similar elsewhere.

(Perhaps one of our readers knows the exact dates for Wiltshire Berkshire and Oxfordshire?)

One obvious reason for transporting coal along the Ridgeway is that coal was needed up on the Downs, rather than down in the Vales. Two centuries of *Jerusalem* and half a century of zonal planning predispose us to underestimate the industrial use of the "traditional countryside". (Wayland's smithying was done by magic.) Like oil in the 20thC, coal was the precious bane of 19thC civilisation, but lime was a staple commodity for agriculture and construction, not to mention hygiene and criminal justice. (Later in 19thC in Reading Gaol, you could tell what the warders had been doing by the quicklime on their boots.)

When lime burning, it was apparently cheaper to take the fuel to the kiln and then transport the fairly light product to the market. (On the Pembrokeshire coast, boats brought coal in to a beachside kiln and floated lime away.) Certainly near Farnborough, perhaps elsewhere, there were kilns close to The Ridgeway.

The plausible horizon of memory in 1919 is a problem. We need to consider not simply how far back a few people might recall events, but how far back their recollections would, hypothetically, challenge the credence of guide-book readers and also, crucially, the date after which anecdotes would be commonplace. No one could have remembered the times before the canals. The last years of their economic primacy and their decline in the railway age would have been a feat of

recollection, but not an impossible feat. Commercial cynicism and traditional regard for the biblical three-score-and-ten both suggest a date soon after 1852 when the GWR took complete control of the canal. (1873, another commercially significant date, really wasn't so long ago in 1919.).

In conclusion: people living in the second decade of the last century remembered the last independent years of the K&A when Somerset or even Gloucestershire coal from was carted to lime kilns using a

Sources:

John Latimer *Annals of Bristol*

Robin Atthill *Old Mendip*

Angus Buchanan & Neil Cossons *Industrial Archaeology of the Bristol Region*

Wilts & Berks Canal website

route that was historically toll free. As a spin-off, some coal was collected by other users. Welshmen did use the Ridgeway, but they were drovers taking cattle to the London market and this, helped by the firm association of coal and Wales when Cardiff was the world's largest coal exporting docks confused memories.

Oral history has its dangers. So does historical conjecture like this article. I keenly invite documented refutation.

Peter Gould.

DATA PROTECTION ACT

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