

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY



Autumn

2004

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

I write this directly on my return from walking the newest National Trail, Hadrian's Wall. Newest, that is, in terms of its recognition as a National Trail but probably second only to The Ridgeway in terms of its age as a route used by man.

What are my immediate thoughts? Well, it has much to commend it. It is roughly the same length as The Ridgeway National Trail, making it suited to walking in a week. We walked it from West to East in five days, starting at Bowness on Solway. The first day was a bit of a disappointment, flat with a lot of road walking along

Also in Issue 66

TROs the latest	p3
Explorer Expiring by Numbers	p6
Footpaths v Access	p7
Weland Smith	p 8
Greenham Common Link	p10
Tarmac The Ridgeway?	p11
Notelets for sale	p12

Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

the estuary. It improved around Carlisle, following the banks of the River Eden. We seemed to pass through Carlisle without realising that we had been through the centre of a major town.

It was halfway through the second day before we saw any 'wall'. There were signs of the vallum earthworks on the first day but now we began to see evidence of the stone construction itself. English Heritage has done a good job in providing informative signs at most of the major sites. We finished our second day near Greenhead and I suppose my feelings to that point were ones of mild disappointment.

They changed on the third day. This was a wonderful walk along the natural crags that the Roman wall builders used to great effect. The wall runs along the very edge of the crags, giving superb and commanding views across the countryside. The going here was the toughest on the Trail but by far the most rewarding. It was easy to imagine the hardship of the

Roman soldiers, far from home, maintaining their vigils on cold wet nights in the depth of a Cumbrian winter. The forts at Housesteads, Birdoswald and Vindolanda deserved more attention than our schedule allowed.

It was downhill all the way from there, both in terms of height and the enjoyment of the route. There was a lot of walking beside the military road on the fourth day and our fifth and last day was mainly on pavement by the side of the River Tyne through Newcastle.

On the positive side, the route is well waymarked and is clearly attracting large numbers of visitors and walkers - I met people from the USA, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden and France in my five days. It has obvious historic attraction and there are numerous sites to explore along the way. The going is generally easy under foot and it does not suffer from the intrusion of off-road motor vehicles. The Trail is being strongly promoted and B&B accommodation is readily

available. A number of companies offer organised walking holidays with luggage being transported between overnight stops. It is clear that the Trail is bringing millions of pounds into the local economy. On the other hand, for me the main attractions of the Trail are contained in, at best, two days walking and there is a large amount of pounding along roads, some in quite urban surroundings.

The walk has reinforced my view that our Ridgeway has so much to commend it. The mix of scenery is much greater than on Hadrian's Wall. Perhaps surprisingly, The Ridgeway is much more remote from civilisation. Its history and that

of many of the sites along the route is older. The flora and fauna along the route is more varied. However, we need to resolve the problems created by the off-road vehicles. We need more energetic promotion of the Trail by the National Trails Office. We need improved public transport - what a tragedy that the Explorer has been killed off. We need improved signage on the ancient sites along the path. We need to make The Ridgeway more accessible to those with disabilities. In short we need more imagination and determination to bring the joys of The Ridgeway to a much wider constituency. Sadly I do not see this drive and creativity coming from those currently charged to provide it.

Ian Ritchie

MOTOR VEHICLES ON THE RIDGEWAY

As regular readers know, we were delighted when The Ridgeway Management Group took a decision to introduce a seasonal ban on non-essential motor vehicles on The

Ridgeway each winter, starting in 2004. Although less than the complete ban that we campaign for, we saw this as a big step in the right direction. It would mean that recreational motor

vehicle use on the Trail would be banned between 1st October and 30th April each year, the time when the Trail is most vulnerable to surface damage.

We can report some progress, although when it comes to the members of The Ridgeway Management Group, things never seem to happen with the speed or thoroughness that we would like!

The plaudits (the golden walking boot?) must go to Wiltshire County Council, which introduced the seasonal ban on all its length of The Ridgeway in early October. We will be keeping a close eye on how well the ban is obeyed and making representations to Wiltshire Constabulary if there is any evidence of it being breached.

West Berkshire Council did not move quickly enough to introduce the permanent seasonal ban but has decided to put a temporary ban on the Trail for this winter. Notices have appeared in the local press and the ban is due to go into

effect from the 12th November. We will try to work with West Berkshire Council to ensure that next year the permanent seasonal ban is introduced.

Oxfordshire County Council has also not moved quickly enough and is being somewhat coy about the precise sections it intends to cover with the ban. Apparently they are in the process of applying for temporary Traffic Regulation Orders but we fear that they may not take the opportunity to include all the sections of The Ridgeway currently open to motor vehicles. We continue to monitor their tardy progress and to apply pressure where we can to speed them along.

The booby prize (the muddy wellington?) must go to Swindon Borough Council which is doing NOTHING! They say that they have repaired their sections of the Trail and they believe it is now in a state to withstand motor vehicle use over the winter. Not only do we believe this to be ill-founded but we are astounded at the way that Swindon BC

now fails to follow the decision taken by the Ridgeway Management Group, of which they are a member. For years we heard the excuse that an individual Council, despite favouring a ban, could not act in isolation of the other Councils along the Trail. We are invoking the support of the local MP (and one of our Vice Presidents) Julia Drown and the Minister, Alun Michael, to put pressure on Swindon BC to come into line with the rest of the Highway Authorities.

If members see any breaches of the Traffic Regulation Orders, they can report offending vehicles to the appropriate Police Authority as follows:

- Wiltshire
Call 01380 722341 and ask to speak to the Service Desk
- Thames Valley (Oxfordshire and West Berkshire)
PC Peter Hale
Tel:01235 556820
Mob: 07970 145402

We would also like to be notified of the same information as we are trying to build a comprehensive picture of how the Traffic Regulation Orders are working. In the first instance please send the details to

Ian Ritchie
The Limes Oxford Street
Ramsbury
Wilts SN8 2PS

Tel/Fax 01672 520090
Email ian.ritchie@ukonline.co.uk

Care should be taken when recording such breaches and we suggest that no approaches should be made to the vehicle drivers/riders. If possible make a note of the time, date, location, vehicles involved (registration numbers if possible) and any observations on the way the vehicles were being driven/ridden. If you are reluctant to contact the police because of inadequate information (e.g. no registration numbers) then we would still like to hear from you.

HOW THE EXPLORER EXPIRED

Do you remember those whimsical problems maths masters used to pose? This sort of stuff: "two men are filling a bath with jelly. One buys an orange for twopence, the other has a bag of mixed socks. What time should the velocipede reach Croydon?" Out of fashion in schools, such helical thinking is still practised in government pentagrams. When the Ridgeway Explorer was cancelled I asked the National Trails Office what it cost them to charter two buses on a Sunday. The answer to this mindlessly straightforward question I expected to be "about £1,000". The actual answer was

"In 2002 we only ran 11 Saturdays (July to Sept) and carried 359 passengers (32.6 per day). We ran 23 Sundays/Bank Holidays and carried 769 (ave 33.4per day).

"Then in 2003 we ran the highest level of service ever - four jnys in each direction throughout (Swindon - Reading), both on Saturdays

and Sundays. This used two buses and ran on approx 28 Sats & Suns during April - October 2003. In 2003 on Saturdays we carried 994 passengers (ave 35.4 per day) at a cost of £17,674 (75% of which was funded by the Countryside Agency) - the cost of subsidy was therefore £17.81 for every passenger carried. On Sundays we carried 1208 passengers (ave 36.6 per day) at a cost of £18.080 - £17.24 subsidy to every passenger."

Assuming any value of pi and that none of the drivers was a Mormon, answers on a postcard please. You must show your workings.

Has any reader recently taken a commercial decision based on data scrambled like this? I never have.

Peter Gould

**2005 AGM
Goring Hall
March 13th
Details in the Winter
Newsletter**

FOOTPATHS V ACCESS

Ian Ritchie is doubly misguided to suggest [*Ritchie's Ramblings in Newsletter 65*] that 'right to roam' access should have waited until the nation's rights of way are in order.

First, if the two were linked we would probably never obtain any right to roam access. Even with adequate resources (sadly lacking at present), getting the paths in order will be a Sisyphean task. And Sisyphus, you will recall, never did get his stone to the top of the hill.

Second, Ian has missed the important point that right to roam and rights of way are complementary. Look no further than the Ridgeway itself. The provisional access map for Oxfordshire (now subject to the appeal process) shows important blocks of access land adjoining the trail on the top of the Berkshire Downs and especially in the Chilterns, where Ewelme Downs, Pyrton, Shirburn and

Beacon Hills have all been mapped.

If these survive appeal, nearly four miles of the face of the Chiltern scarp (between Watlington Hill and the A40) will be open to wander over – with the Ridgeway running at its foot. The horizons of Ridgeway users and hillside wanderers will both be expanded.

Chris Hall
Chairman, Oxfordshire Area
Ramblers' Association;
committee member Friends of
the Ridgeway.

The first Access Bill came to Parliament in 1884.. It failed. The first Access Act was passed in 1949. It had little effect. Limited as the scope of CROW 2002 may be, if implemented it will work. I think we've waited long enough.

As for the time it will take to put the path network in order, how long is a piece of elastic?

Peter Gould

WELAND - A FADED HERO

With the possible exception of Alfred the Cake-burner, the only English folk heroes to live in the public consciousness are Robin Hood and his meinie. (King Arthur was a Celt celebrated by Frenchmen.) In the epoch of synthetic mythology, from Tolkien to Star Wars to Pokemon, Weland the Smith is no better remembered by every school kid than the lame artificers of classical antiquity, Vulcan and Hephaistos.

In modern literature, so far as I know he appears twice. Walter Scott is underrated as the novelist of contemporary Scotland, but his gadzookery no one can underrate. *Kenilworth* will not reintroduce Weland to the wider public.

Kipling translated Weland to Sussex and indeed described his mythological waning. That many children are encouraged to read *Puck of Pook's Hill* nowadays, we may doubt.

Somewhere, Terry Pratchett alludes to the story without naming the smith. In the Discworld version, if you leave your horse and sixpence overnight, both will have inexplicably disappeared by morning. (By the way, when the Pratchett *oeuvre* becomes thesis fodder, some academic drudge will have to correlate Kipling's account of Weland's divine impotence with the paratheology of *Small Gods* or jargon to that effect.)

So who was Weland when his demi-godhood waxed? In Anglo-Saxon literature there are a few references. Before fighting Grendel, Beowulf makes one specific bequest. If he is killed, his breastplate, his finest piece of armour, an heirloom from his grandfather Hrethell, is to go to his Lord, Hrethell's son, Hygelac. It is "Welandes geweorc", Weland's craftsmanship.

Weland was the archetypal craftsman. In the real King

Alfred's Boethius "Ubi nunc sunt ossa Fabricius" is rendered as "where now are the bones of Weland once the cunning goldsmith of old". Out of context - anyone with a copy of *De consolatione Philosophiae* to hand may care to verify this - Fabricius seems to be a proper name which Alfred with etymological precision, took to be a particular Smith.

The most copious and least comprehensible reference comes in *Deor*, perhaps the most satisfyingly melancholic Anglo-Saxon poem. *Deor*, an unemployed minstrel cheers himself up by recounting the misfortunes of others and repeating the refrain

Thaes ofereode: thisses swa maeg

That ended, so this may

One of these unfortunates is Weland. "The strong-minded warrior knew exile, exile cold as winter, and suffered hardships, lonely and sad. He was in deep trouble after Nithad neatly handicapped him, a better man.

That ended, so this may

Her brothers' death did not upset Beadohilde so much as her own condition when she realised she was pregnant. When she knew that she could not contemplate the future steadily.

That ended, so this may

Foreign sources, the Elder Edda and an Icelandic saga, make sense of these allusions. (*The names have been left in Anglo-Saxon forms. Pedants may complain about this. Pedants may also complain about the use of "Anglo-Saxon" rather than "Old-English". Their complaints will be joyously ignored, as I don't have to pass an exam.*)

Weland was one of three brothers married to Valkyries who were destined to leave them after nine years. The other brothers followed them, but Weland stayed at his smithy. He was captured by Nithad, hamstrung and set to work on an island whence he escaped by flying. He killed Nithad's sons, made drinking cups of their skulls, for their father and ornaments from their eyes and teeth for their mother and

sister. The sister, Beadohilde, he raped. For her, presumably, the consolation was an heroic son with a magic boat, Wade whose reputation lasted till Chaucer's time.

Weland was remembered in Berkshire long enough for Camden, the Elizabethan antiquary to record his legend rather condescendingly in *Britannia*. The smithy is so

called "by the vulgar from an idle tradition about an invisible smith replacing lost horse-shoes there."

By modern heathens, I learned from a website, because of his metalworking and flying skills, Weland is regarded as the patron of the aircraft industry.

Peter Gould

PEACEFUL MEMORIES PLEASE

The request that follows came by e-mail without a postal address.

Replies to the editor on paper or by e-mail will be forwarded.

I'm currently writing about my active days at Greenham Common in the early to late 80s and am m@iling you in the hope that anybody who was involved with Ridgeway Friends back in 1985 recalls anything about the 'trail to Stonehenge' walk when women from Greenham walked the Ridgeway to Stonehenge for the 1985 solstice. I remember coming across some local inhabitants from a nearby

village who were insisting (as they always did) that on every Tuesday - which was the MODs bombing practice day. the footpath was unofficially 'closed' and the villagers were only too insistent that we join them in THEIR protest. If any of your members/subscribers etc have any memories of events around the mid 80's I would gratefully appreciate any feedback.

RADICAL SOLUTION

We have received from Charles Dunckley an offer of help in solving the problem of the Ridgeway surface by a method that differs drastically from the Society's usual panacea. The committee solicits your reaction.

As a young man during the 1940's living in Aldbourne, I well remember the beautiful Ridgeway as it was then. Indeed my father often took myself and my brother Graham out along the Ridgeway for summer picnics in his Morris 8, not a 4 wheel drive vehicle but two wheel drive and with skinny cross ply tyres! The surface of the Ridgeway back then allowed such summer outings as it was not deeply rutted or rendered an impassable quagmire as it unfortunately is now.

Thinking back, it would be impossible for my father to traverse the Ridgeway in his Morris 8 in the present day such is the damage to the surface. I for one feel that a 4 wheel drive vehicle must be an absolute necessity if one intends to travel along the route such is the neglect of the Ridgeway.

The time has come to re-surface the Ridgeway with properly laid Tarmac road surface complete with adequate drainage and pavements for walkers, therefore reducing the requirement for people to use these monstrous 4 wheel drive cars along the Ridgeway route. instead we should see more sustainable usage of the Ridgeway by smaller, more economical and less environmentally impacting cars and once more people can enjoy the countryside from the comfort of a car. If one considers the cost of such a project against other major roadworks such as the Newbury bypass one would find the cost negligible by comparison. There may also be additional economic benefits to local communities along the route.

Has this option been fully considered to date?

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Ridgewayfriends@aol.com
 Items for the website are gladly received at any time**