

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY
Spring 2005

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

I write on the day that the seasonal (winter) bans on recreational motor vehicles on The Ridgeway are lifted for the summer. Although I have been critical of Oxfordshire and Swindon Borough Councils for not extending the bans widely enough, the fact is that, mainly due to our efforts, 43 kilometres out of 70 kilometres of the Trail open to motor vehicles have been protected over the past six or seven months. Clearly there has been some illegal flouting of the bans by irresponsible vehicle users but the empirical evidence

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

suggests a significant reduction in the numbers of motorised users. It is difficult to adopt a scientific measure to gauge whether this has had the desired effect on the standard of the surface of the Trail, but subjective observation of some of the traditional 'black spots' suggests that it has. The rain is battering on my window as I sit at my computer and the ground outside is still soft – it will be interesting to observe what effect the return of the vehicles has over the next few weeks.

By the time you read this, the outcome of the General Election will be known and we will be considering if this has any implications for our campaign. There was unfinished business concerning the issue of motor vehicles in the countryside left over at the dissolution of parliament. We will work hard to ensure that this is resurrected, whichever party is in power. The issue is now widely recognised across the political divide and our call for controls has cross party support. What is needed now is a tightening of the provisions that the previous Labour administration was proposing and a commitment to action.

Hardly of the same import as the General Election, but another event will also be over by the time you read this. The Ramsbury and Axford beating of the parish boundary is held each May Bank Holiday Monday. The route is 26.5 miles long and follows the boundary line as precisely as possible. This means that it leaves footpaths and roads, shooting across fields and through woods, following hedges and fences where normal access is denied. It is a very sociable experience, with a large number of walkers and arranged stops for coffee, lunch and (my favourite) tea and home made cakes. I have completed the walk a number of times over the past ten years,

but this year will be different as I am leading the walk! Are you like me when you travel as a passenger in a car? You know roughly where you are going but take no detailed note of the route? So it has been for me on previous boundary walks, following our traditional leader. I therefore bring this piece to an end to set off to walk the first half of the route today and the second half tomorrow, just to make sure I know where I am going! When I volunteered to help, little did I think that I would be walking 53 miles in three days!

Ian Ritchie

AGM 2005

Too bad, you've missed it; the pictures, the latest opinions on Roman religious sites, the gruesome strains of the Irish Ballad and all.

The formal purpose of the AGM was also accomplished – proper minutes will be printed in the 2006 Winter Newsletter just before next year's extravaganza

The previous Executive Committee (Trustees) and other officers were re-elected. No one new had been nominated by the deadline our new constitution imposes, but it was suggested that the Committee use its powers of cooptation to acquire a representative of the YHA. The committee has not yet met so there is no decision to report

Peter Gould

THE PRAM MENACE

Hardened readers may recall, doubtless with a blend of loathing and compassion, that I am fascinated by the law of footpaths. (I also enjoy Alexander Pope and Hieronymous Bosch. Unlike Footpath Law, Psychoanalysis seems to be unreal without being ornamental so I just live with this,)

This brings us to the subject of prams. A polemicist from GLEAM, in the course of an understandable but misguided attack on the principle of “once a highway always a highway” states there is no distinction made between different kinds of wheels . . . whether on a pram a 4x4 or a lorry. There I believe he is wrong.. Prams don't count.

The only person who has been mildly martyred on a point of highway law was a nineteenth eccentric, William Matthias, who lived in Bristol and devoted decades to a dispute with its Corporation and the Society of Merchant Venturers – a sort of Livery Company sometimes called the Bristol Mafia. At the age of ninety-two, he was thrown in gaol for contempt of court because he dug a road and refused to reinstate it on the grounds that, in his opinion, it wasn't a public carriageway. You will be pleased to learn that although this venture brought him close to his second bankruptcy, William Matthias was released to enjoy a short spell as a privileged heckler in the local Magistrates' Court.

Matthias's place in the legal text books (R v Matthias 1861) was based on an earlier episode. The story is so complicated that no one has unravelled it. In essence, the Merchant Venturers wanted to develop some land. gaining carriage access to it along a path across Matthias's property. He denied

that there were carriage rights and persistently blocked the route to wheeled vehicles. As it is a footpath to this day, he was presumably correct.

One day Matthias challenged and technically assaulted a nursemaid in the belief that her pram was a carriage. For this, at the instigation of Bristol Corporation a body closely entangled with the Merchant Venturers, he was prosecuted. The prosecution, or a series of prosecutions, seems to have failed but in the process it was decided that a perambulator, an innovation the law had not hitherto considered, is the usual accompaniment of a large class of foot passengers, being so small and light, as neither to be a nuisance to other passengers nor injurious to the soil.

The papers report some heavy Victorian humour in court. .
“The absurd female fashion of wearing crinoline, an article which had just swollen to extreme monstrosity, was also amusingly introduced. Mr Matthias’s counsel asked if a lady whose dress spread the entire width of the path was to be turned back by a perambulator, upon which Mr. Justice Byles thought that a baby’s carriage would not be half so formidable an obstruction as the meeting of one lady with another.”

The inference must be that a pram is not a carriage and provides no evidence of vehicular use..

Peter Gould

*Offstage, imagine the very expensive drone of a lawyer splitting hairs.
“We submit m'lud, the pram was a pram in the sense of a milk float or conceivably a flat bottomed dinghy on a trailer ...”
A wheezing ghost attempts a joke about a bustle. Fade back to the Real World As Quick As You Like.*

CONTEMPLATE THE SNAIL

Moralists are keen on the ant, the fretful pismire that exemplifies the Work Ethic*. An easy paced snail, on the other hand, provokes no philosophical approval but rather two practical reactions; one brings metaldehyde, the other garlic-butter.

Were I a moralist, I might defend the snail in our age of consumerist values, over-production and hypertension. As a mere observer of the natural scene, I am grateful to the genus because the lark on the wing is hard to spot but the snail on its poetically traditional thorn can be brought into easy focus. Also many of its members are rather pretty.

Several years ago, the Friends of The Ridgeway was asked to comment on a wildlife leaflet promoted by some pack of grant-funded jobsworths. We suggested that besides the obscure, elusive, furred-or-feathered kind in various shades of dingy brown; lime-clad creatures tinted blue, lemon, orange might be observed rather than casually crunched underfoot. Officials numb the pain of a new idea by ignoring it, so this suggestion disappeared into the vast Inanity of Consultation.

Then, chatting with Nicholas Thomas, the Society's former Chairman and a pre-historian by vocation, I learnt that archaeologists find the remains of snails significant.

In pious debate, the case for this enchanting, instructive mollusc, this new-age exemplar for post-industrial society might rest here; but I write with practical intent. Can any member provide for our website an authoritative article on snails-along-The Ridgeway present or prehistoric? If you are a learned and willing person, please contact the editor.

Peter Gould

* According to mediaeval Bestiaries, ants do have a purpose beyond the parables of political economy in Aesop and the Bible. Sick bears, especially bears who have overindulged on Mandrake berries, eat ants as medicine – and serve the fornicating, sandwich-plundering, hyperactive little busybodies right, I'd say. True, the bear signifies the devil, ravager of the flocks of our Lord, but on the credit side, it specialises in unjust rulers and devours cheeky kids.

As so few etymologies based on a colourful story are defensible, it is gratifying that "pismire" really does mean "piss in the mud", referring to the characteristic smell of ants' nests.

Sources *OED*
T H White *The Book of Beasts*
R Barber *Bestiary*

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

**West Woodhay House Garden Show
Sunday 12th June 2005**

11am till 6pm. £5 each admission (Children Free)
These gardens laid out in a downland setting around a beautiful Inigo Jones house are rarely open to the Public

**Marcham/Frilford excavations
Tuesday 26th July**

Dr Gary Lock has agreed to show a group of Friends round the site
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

A 'Walking the Ridgeway Summer course,
with Sue Hollingsworth and Warren Cohen. 14 - 20 August at Emerson College, an adult education centre based on the doctrines of Rudolph Steiner
Emerson College, Forest Row, East Sussex, RH18 5JX
Website www.emerson.org.uk :

**Copy for the Summer Newsletter by
17th July please**
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