

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY
Spring 2007
NEWSLETTER



RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

Thank you for your support in re-electing me as Chairman of our society I am looking forward to leading The Friends of The Ridgeway for a further period and, with the help of the Executive Committee, taking us in a different direction from that we have pursued so doggedly for the past few years. Before the Annual General Meeting I indicated that, if re-elected, I would like to see us concentrate on promoting the delights of The Ridgeway to a wider population. Now that the surface of the Trail is returning to an acceptable standard and now that motor vehicles have been banned from long stretches of it, I am anxious to see more people walking, cycling and horse riding along it. A particular passion of mine is to get more young people out into the countryside and for many The Ridgeway would be a good place to start.

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

My new ambitions have started well but in a way I did not imagine when I presented them at the AGM. On Sunday 22 April, I was one of one thousand people who walked along The Ridgeway! About 850 of those people were below the age of 17, so you could perhaps believe that I have a magic wand and that we are already achieving the ambitions I set out at the AGM. Before you give me credit I do not deserve, I must explain I was participating in the 20 mile long Marlborough College Charity Walk. This is an event that is held every five years and all Marlborough College students have to participate, thus meaning that they each complete the walk once in their career at the College. The walk starts at the College, swings south west through West Woods (carpeted in bluebells at this time of the year), then along the superb ridge to Knap Hill, where it joins the southern Ridgeway. Heading north, lunch is taken at Overton Hill, at the start of The Ridgeway National Trail. The route then follows The Ridgeway to Barbury Castle before turning back to Marlborough on the old coaching road. The weather was good, the event very well organised with frequent food and drink stops and I really enjoyed it. Whether the 850 pupils did is another question!

The event raises a huge amount of money for charity. Each pupil is expected to get at least £100 of sponsorship, so the total raised is over £85,000. What a great way to support good causes and have a wonderful day out in the country

Members of The Friends who have kindly sponsored my Ridgeway walk may be wondering if I am short changing them by only walking the 20 miles I have just described. Sadly for me I must point out that by the time you read this, I should have also completed the 40 mile walk on the 12th May. I am delighted to tell you that my sponsorship for that walk now stands at over £2000. With an incentive of £50 for each mile I walk, I just hope my old legs will stand up to the punishment they are getting!

Ian Ritchie

AGM 2007

It was a fresh and dry day on 25th March, for our annual meeting and AGM, held at the Ridgeway Centre at Court Hill as usual Members started to arrive from midday onwards, with those of us who had not previously visited the Centre admiring its splendid location and appropriate facilities. Lunch was served in the main refectory, with seating at the long tables under the magnificent old beams rescued from farmsteads. Jane Ebbutt and Barbara

Owen. had produced a generous 3-course spread, of mainly home-cooked fare – surely the best £5-worth ever!

We moved from the refectory to the smaller meeting-room, well filled with the 43 members and guests attending. Proceedings started with a short statement by Court Hill Trust, disclosing the unfortunate disagreements with the YHA, which will lead to closure of the YHA Hostel from the end of June this year. We were relieved to hear, however, that the Centre plans to remain open to users of the Ridgeway Trail in another form.

The Chairman, Ian Ritchie then called us to order, and he and Secretary Peter Gould took us quickly through the formal business. The finances of the Association remain sound, and membership is stable. Ian’s decision to stand again as Chairman, and his stated intention to focus on “developing the Ridgeway as a better used, better maintained and better funded leisure facility”, were welcomed with acclaim. The decisions of Peter Gould and Jane Ebbutt to scale down their responsibilities on the Executive Committee were received with regret, with warm praise by the Chairman for all their hard work and invaluable contribution over many years. Small tokens of appreciation were presented to them, along with well-earned Life Memberships. A new Secretary was elected, but volunteers are still sought to take over from Jane as Events Secretary, to enable Janet Hierons to hand over her task as Membership Secretary, and to develop a new function of Publicity Officer. The President and Vice-Presidents, and other Committee members, including the newly-joined Iain MacIndoe, were all duly elected.

The meeting welcomed the passage of the NERC Act, and the consequent application of Restricted Byway status to most of the western section of the Ridgeway, and its effective closure thereby to vehicle use, action to which the Chairman and his associates have largely contributed. The President, Lord Bradshaw, reminded us of the continuing need for enforcement, and its practical difficulties, including effective but unobtrusive signage.

The meeting was followed by a most interesting talk by Mike Sturmer of RSPB on the Birds of the Ridgeway, a subject which the keen attention and perceptive questions proved to be of close concern to all members present.

Jeff Goddard

AN EARLIER BALLOON?

My speculation in the Autumn 2006 Newsletter about the first balloon flight over The Ridgeway was admittedly open to refutation. I may have started to refute it myself: it depends which way the wind was blowing when Colonel Fitzpatrick, Lord Ossory’s brother, ascended from Oxford.

Horace Walpole, who rather disapproved of ballooning and aironauts, accounting balloons “a mere job for getting money from gaping fools” and censuring Lunardi for risking the life of his cat on a voyage even if he had “every right to venture his own neck”, mentions this trip in a letter dated June 21st 1785. “The vessel not being potent enough for two, the Colonel went alone, had a brush with a high hill in his descent, but landed safe about fifteen miles from the University.” So, was he wafted to the high hills of the Chilterns, the Downs or, so far as this society is concerned, in the wrong direction entirely? Does any member, local historian, “aironaut”, Horry Walpole fan actually know?

Anyhow, I’m glad a colonel, not a cat was in peril.

Peter Gould

AN AFTERNOON ON THE KENNET AND AVON CANAL Friday 27th July

From Bradford on Avon to the Dundas Aqueduct and back through the beautiful Avoncliff valley. The price includes a cream tea on the return journey.

The outing will be shared with the Kennet Valley National Trust Association to ensure a full boat. The boat is called the Barbara McLellan and is a purpose built boat for all weathers. She also has a lift for wheelchair access. There is ample public parking nearby.

Please meet at the Upper Wharf, Frome Road, Bradford on Avon no later than 1.40pm. We should return by 6.00 pm.

Cost £12 per person

Not later than Saturday 21st July, please send the completed booking form overleaf and cheque payable to the Kennet Valley National Trust to Jane Ebbutt, 8 Windmill Close, Aldbourne, Marlborough. SN8 2DN

NOTES ON THE HEREPATH

Herepath is an alternative name for sections of The Ridgeway: it is Anglo-Saxon for Army Road. The greatest military activity near the trail in historic times was indeed at that period – the Romans seem to have preferred their own strategic highways. Later this year, I mean to reprint an article on Alfred and the Ridgeway from *Aspects of The Ridgeway*. This article deals with modern times. It is far from being exhaustive.

Michael Riggs sent us a supplementary note on the Ridgeway baseline which incidentally draws attention to the military connections of the Ordnance Survey. “I understand,” he wrote “that the initial triangulations were carried out by the military at what is now the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham. The survey baseline was from White Horse Hill to Liddington Camp, as the major convenient and prominent hilltops. “There was, I think, a survey in 1820 by Col. Mudge RE using a 2” to the mile scale.

“Old guns were used as the end marker points for triangulations.” (When I visited Old Sarum my mind was more on rotten boroughs than triangulation,

Canal Trip Booking Form

Name

Number in Party

Address

Tel No

I/We shall require the wheelchair lift to access the boat.

I/We enclose a cheque for £

made payable to the Kennet Valley National Trust Association.

so I ambled to some wrong conclusions about the note on the map “Gun. End of Base” War memorial for the RA, I supposed, at the limits of a range.)

The next paragraph is taken from Kate Crennell’s account of a Friends visit to Chilton “Just before the second World War the Air Ministry decide to build an RAF station on Chilton Field; known as RAF Harwell, it was used throughout the war and today another memorial stone at the end of the old runway commemorates those who took off from the airfield in June 1944 to take part in the D-day landings. A remembrance service is held there annually.”

The site of Didcot power station was an important WWII munitions factory, and the Didcot-Southampton Railway was strategically vital in the preparations for D-Day. A cutting and bridge survive where the Trail crosses the Beeching line at Blewbury Down. Nearby, the Churn Rifle Range is in view.

Ridgeway Heritage issue 3 notes “earthwork evidence” for an anti-aircraft battery at Barbury Castle Also, at Liddington, a more esoteric piece of kit survived: a large metal trough, a “boiling oil fire tray” that formed a bombing decoy. The trough was filled with burning oil and flushed with water to create violent bursts of flame simulating explosions. The idea must have been to convince the next wave of bombers that Liddington Castle was Swindon. The command post for the decoy survives amongst trees north-east of the hillfort.

The Ridgeway Historic Landscape Survey East (Oxford Archaeological Unit for English Heritage and Countryside Commission 1998) records seven pillboxes along the Thames in Oxfordshire, the remains of WWI practice trenches on Whiteleaf Hill and undated rifle butts below Pulpit Hill NE of Princes Risborough. There is a Boer War memorial on Coombe Hill a few miles away.

Three of the pillboxes are visible from the Ridgeway, one described as extraordinarily crenellated, attached to a half-timbered boathouse in Mongewell Park. One of the others is beside the Moulsoford Railway Viaduct; the third in the grounds of Little Stoke House.

The WWI trenches are considered poor examples, obscured by vegetation. Representing different kinds of zigzag trench, they were built, it is said, in the winter of 1914

“Although they are undated, it is almost certain the [Pulpit Hill Rifle Butts} were constructed after the general issue of rifles to the Army at the time of the Boer War, when target practice became part of military training. The earthworks consist of three large banks crossing part of the base of the coombe . . . They are in a typical topographic position, where stray bullets would have hit the surrounding hillside.”

I am one of nature’s civilians, but have doubts about this statement as military history. The Line abandoned its smooth bore muskets in 1854, until when only the Rifle Regiments used precision weapons. The Crimean not the Boer War began that year. Hythe musketry school was established in 1855. Clearly, by the time Kipling began to write about the Army in the 80s, it was taught marksmanship. (Private Ortheris was a gifted pupil see “On Greenhow Hill” in *Life’s Handicap* and “With the Main Guard” in *Soldiers Three*. Private Learoyd preferred smashing faces or breaking arms with the butt. The philosophic Mulvaney, a bayonet man “wid a long a double twist av ye can, an’ a slow recover” considered “each does it his own way, like makin love, the butt or the bay’nit or the bullet accordin’ to the natur’ av the man’.) The “outer frame” of one Kipling story that I have been unable to trace for verification deals with the issue of a new mark of rifle and its maltreatment by the squaddies as they try to ease the mechanism.

After the embarrassment of the First Boer War (1880-1) the great reform was the abandonment of scarlet for khaki in the field The Army had been reequipped in the 70s with the Martini-Henry after initial delay because the recoil tended to disable the soldier. In 1881, because of continental developments and new technology rather than Africa, a committee was set up to advise on a new weapon: the instantly obsolete Enfield-Martini. By 1890, the whole army was using the Lee-Metford “magazine” rifle. In short there was no “general issue of rifles” at the time of a Boer War (Metford, by the way, is till honoured by

street names in Bristol though his other invention, the explosive bullet was internationally banned under the Hague Convention.)¹

The better-known and even more embarrassing Second Boer War took place between 1899-1902. I suggest the butts were probably constructed then to train the influx of volunteers rather than the Regular Army.

The Rifle Volunteers², a Victorian precursor of the TA, inspired no doubt by Tennyson’s “Rifleman form” in *The Times*, set themselves up for an invasion scare in 1859 with the motto “Defence not Defiance”, were legitimised by Parliament in 1863 and notoriously under funded till 1887. By 1900, the force expanded to 119,000³ about a third of whom volunteered for Africa – overseas service was not required. Professionals may not have held them in great respect and the profane called after them in street “who shot the dog?” or “cat?”⁴ but Volunteers were cheap. In the early 1890s, a regular soldier cost the taxpayer £81 p.a.; the other amateurs cost £13 p.a for a militiaman (infantry), £10 p.a for a yeoman (cavalry). Rifle Volunteers cost £5 a head².

Peter Gould

- Sources 1 Veronica Smith *The Street Names of Bristol*
2 The National Encyclopaedia c 1890 Articles on Volunteers and Small Arms.
3 Notes to “The Army of a Dream” in the Penguin *Traffics and Discoveries*
4 Partridge

**Contributions to the Summer Newsletter by
14th July please**

Mud-free photos, sketches, cartoons would be appreciated
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Items for the website are gladly received at any time

The Friends of The Ridgeway is a registered charity (No 1107926). its objects are the preservation for the benefit of the public of all the natural aspects and features of the Ridgeway National Trail and the provision of recreational and educational facilities in the interests of social welfare for the public benefit