

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY  
Summer 2007  
NEWSLETTER

**RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS**

The signs aren't good.

The demise of the Countryside Agency and the establishment of its successor, Natural England, was heralded by the Government as being an important step in protecting our natural heritage. Why, then, is it accompanied by a reduction in the budget the new body has to spend? Expenditure on National Parks, National Trails and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty looks likely to be cut.

**Also in Issue 77**

Another Opinion on Access	p3
Court Hill Centre	p5
Ridgeway Link Path	p6
Alfred and the Ridgeway	p8
Inquisitive Life	p10
Receipt of Fernseed	p11

**Website: [www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk](http://www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk)**

At a time when there is a general consensus on the need to promote walking and cycling in the countryside to build a healthier nation and to combat obesity, Government expenditure on sport and funds from the National Lottery are being diverted to bankroll the London Olympics.

Local authorities, who have the task of maintaining National Trails, are strapped for cash and their Rights of Way budgets are under severe pressure. When it comes, for example, to a choice between urgent repairs to the streets of Swindon or clearing drainage gullies on The Ridgeway, it is not surprising where the money goes.

Against this background I admire the commitment shown by the Ridgeway National Trail team. Margaret Caddick, Jos Joslin and their staff do a great job within the confines of their budget. And, although I have crossed swords with most of the Local Authority Rights of Way officers along The Ridgeway at one time or another, I sympathise with the very difficult task they have to do.

What is the answer to the concerns? More money! Yes - but where should it come from? It is unrealistic to assume that any new money will be available. Everyone will have their own favourite areas of national and local government expenditure where they would like to see cuts. In my view it is again unrealistic to suggest that it should come, for example, from cutting the defence budget or trimming the spending on the Olympics. To be realistic, it needs to come from a budget under the control of Natural England.

At the risk of again upsetting some of our members and jeopardising my relationship with my many friends in The Ramblers and The Open Spaces Society, I make my simple suggestion. Stop spending any more money on the current project to open up more coastal access to the public and plough the money into National Trails and the revitalisation of our existing footpath and bridleway network. Divert the millions earmarked for coastal access and give us a network of paths and trails we can be proud of. Promote them and get more people, particularly younger ones, out into the countryside.

At this point I have to stress that the opinions in this piece, as with all my Ramblings, are my own personal views and do not reflect the official position of your Society. I would be interested to know what you think, though!

A final thought. When Wiltshire County Council agreed to impose a seasonal ban on motorised vehicle use of the Byway sections of The Ridgeway in their area, it was on the basis of keeping the vehicles off the trail for the wet months of the year when they would do most damage. The ban applies each year from the beginning of October to the end of April. Having just suffered the wettest May, June and July since records began, is there an even stronger case for a year round ban?

Ian Ritchie

#### ANOTHER OPINION ON ACCESS

The editor also has strong personal views on access. I'm all for it and think the public has been excluded for too long not just from Mountain Moor, Heath, Downland but from Coast, not to mention Woodland, as well. From the first recognition early in 19thC that the squires had nicked the countryside, to the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949, a century and a half passed. The access provisions did not work; so another half century later came CROW, imperfect but a major step forward. With a timescale like that, you can be philosophical and say that another fifty years doesn't much matter, or like me, you can get a bit impatient and insist on significant improvement while your feet are still functioning

The conflict between footpath access and open access is a delusion; they are complementary. This country, one of the richest in the world, can afford both. In cash terms, the tourist counties should be better off for the investment. In real economic terms, the benefits are incalculable: a fitter, happier population. By Government standards, a few million pounds is petty cash. (Am I right in thinking that Britain paid the last instalment on the first World War last year? If we needed Armageddon

so badly we bought it on the never-never, surely we can put a major social improvement on the slate? Don't ask me about Concorde.)

The Rights of Way Network is one of the great romantic glories of England. It is thrilling to set out on a path that can take you ultimately anywhere. The network has been likened to a great cathedral, beautiful in itself and rich with history, that you would not trade in for a neat cast concrete tabernacle with central heating and fluorescent lighting just because a developer offered a few quid in part exchange.

Who did the likening? Well, me, actually, the sour Augustan fan who enjoys iambic pentameter couplets but can't abide path rationalisation schemes. On the topic of open country access, I am less rhetorically restrained. Wandering without concern for the niceties of the Highways Act across open countryside is not just one of the great romantic glories of England, it is the greatest solace and delight of the human spirit for those of us not blessed with mystical delusions. Enter that in the balance sheet and gross it up. (OK, there is also Bach if you want to be picky.)

When I first joined the Ramblers' Association, its journal was not the glossy it is today; published articles by Tom Stephenson the RA's first Chief Executive. The first I read epitomised the open access case in a limerick. \*

*There once was a man who said, "Damn!"  
It is born upon me that I am  
An engine that moves  
In predestinate grooves  
Not even a bus but a tram*

So, Ian, are you are you a man or a tram?

Peter Gould

*\*(Maurice Evans Hare 1905, if such details interest you. I quote from memory. The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations differs slightly)*

## **THE RIDGEWAY CENTRE, COURT HILL, WANTAGE**

The New Court Hill Centre

Members will have been sad to hear from the YHA's announcement earlier this year that their hostel at Court Hill near Wantage was to close with effect from 30<sup>th</sup> June, following disagreements between YHA and the owners, the Court Hill Trust. The YHA Hostel had operated since 1987 in the cluster of converted timber barns owned by the Trust. However, those attending the AGM of the Friends at the Centre on 25<sup>th</sup> March were relieved to hear that the Court Hill Trust planned to keep the Centre's accommodation open and to provide enhanced facilities and greater local and community access.

The YHA operation has now closed, but the new venture of Court Hill Trust has seamlessly succeeded it. The Manager, Simon Bunyard, continues in post under the new ownership, and has plans for new activities and facilities, with a broader-based operation appealing to a wider market. They will of course continue to welcome YHA members.

The Court Hill Centre will continue to offer accommodation, totalling 60 beds, in its two-storied bunkhouse, comprising both the traditional dormitories, and family rooms, together with two large tipis sleeping 5/6 each, and a camp-site for smaller tents. There are drying room, laundry and cycle shed facilities, and evening meals, breakfasts and packed lunches are all available. They now also offer bike hire, and two favourite routes can be downloaded, with maps, from the National Trails website.

The Centre also plans to widen its appeal both to the local community and to users of the Ridgeway in general. The Barn Tea Rooms will be open to all every day from 10.30am-5.30pm, offering drinks, ice creams, light lunches and teas, with their renowned home-made cakes; and a programme of summer activities for children will be offered, with craft sessions and courses in orienteering skills, etc, every Thursday through the holiday period. There are full details on the Centre's new web-site at [www.courthill.org.uk](http://www.courthill.org.uk).

Whilst YHA will no longer be operating the Ridgeway youth hostel at Court Hill, it wishes to provide new youth hostels within reach of the Ridgeway. A study has recently been carried out with the Chilterns Conservation Board to investigate possible new hostel opportunities within the Chilterns AONB, and our newsletter for Autumn 2006 described the new hostel next to the Goddard Arms pub at Clyffe Pypard, a short distance from Avebury, which is proving very popular for walkers and cyclists along the Ridgeway.

### **OPENING OF THE RIDGEWAY LINK PATH – 20<sup>TH</sup> JUNE, 2007**

The venue was the new Chilterns Gateway Centre on Dunstable Downs, not far from the outskirts of Dunstable. The building is long and low, lying just below the scarp of the Downs, its sloping roof echoing their curves, its glass front wall commanding an amazing view over the Vale of Aylesbury towards Leighton Buzzard. Fortunately, after all the rain, it was a bright, fresh morning, albeit with a stiff breeze over the ridge.



The group of invitees gathered in the exhibition area at the far end of the building, past the National Trust shop and the cluster of café tables. The dignitaries from the project partners, the Chilterns Conservation Board, the National Trust and Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire County Councils, were joined by people from the Local Access Forums, the Chiltern Society, etc, and your Secretary representing the Friends of the Ridgeway.

Soon CCB's Chief Executive, Steve Rodrick, and Strategic Access Officer, Annette Venters, our excellent organiser, called us to order, to listen to CCB Chairman Sir John Johnson, Philip Broadbent-Yale of the National Trust, and Nicola Harper of Natural England tell us about the new Centre and path and their respective interests.

The new Ridgeway Link was an idea springing out of the Three Counties traffic review of the area, and aims to improve accessibility of the Ridgeway and enhance the rights of way network in the area. The new route follows the line of the Icknield Way for the 7.5 miles between Ivinghoe Beacon and the Gateway Centre, providing an up-graded path, of National Trail standards, with steps where needed, way-marking and no stiles, and benefiting from the Centre’s modern facilities and easy access to public transport in Dunstable.

The Centre is owned jointly by the NT and Bedfordshire CC, and is managed by the NT. It is designed to minimise impact on the ecology, and its iconic Wind-Catcher, at first glance an impressive modern sculpture, is in reality a temperature-stabilising part of the ventilation system! We clustered at its foot for a brief photo-shoot before setting off on the promised walk along the first part of the new path, towards the Whipsnade Tree Cathedral, returning for an excellent lunch back at the Centre.

On the way home I could not resist a return visit to Ivinghoe Beacon and the start of our Trail, to look out over the line of the new path, and to enjoy the all-round views from this wonderful view-point. The Beacon provides the most dramatic possible start and finish point for the National Trail, but there is no doubt that the new path will provide an



access route and facilities which will greatly assist many users of the Ridgeway, particularly those without cars and willing helpers to meet or see them off! It will also no doubt become itself a popular and attractive walk for many of the 250,000 people living in the Dunstable and Luton area, as well as for visitors.

Jeff Goddard

## THE RIDGEWAY AND ALFRED (Reprinted from *Aspects of the Ridgeway*)

From the hills south of Oxford, from Boars Hill and Wytham, the dark line of the Downs marks the horizon. Between it and the river lies the ancient borderland between Wessex and Mercia.

The way that runs along the ridge of the downs between Avebury and Streatley has kept its name unaltered since Saxon times. Some names and boundaries provide evidence older than the literary evidence of Chronicles and early histories: the Ridgeway was already ancient when Alfred was born at Wantage in 849 A.D. and the name of the Icknield Way is pre—English. Our ancestors seem to have assumed that



earthworks whose origins were unknown to them should be ascribed to Woden, Grim (a Norse god) or the Devil; these ditches and dykes were probably boundary marks rather than communication routes. We can deduce from dated charters that

sections of ancient roads were recognisably in existence in the time of Alfred and later.

The Life of Alfred was written by a contemporary Welsh cleric, Asser, and is our chief source of knowledge. He tells us that the whole line of the Downs was known as Ashdown. They may have been named after an ash tree, as Berkshire got its name from “berrow” meaning boxwood. This rather vague name for the downs lasted into the eighteenth century and its vagueness makes it impossible to identify exactly where the battle of Ashdown took place. Asser himself is very precise in his description, if not in location. He had seen the battlefield with his own eyes and had observed “a rather small and solitary thorn tree” around

which he says “the opposing armies clashed violently”.

Hard though it may be to place this scene, the description fits well with the scene we would expect when walking along the Ridgeway on a winter day. The battle of Ashdown was fought by Alfred while his brother Ethelred was still king, and was a famous victory over the Danish invaders. The Danes had crossed the country from East Anglia in mid—winter and dug themselves in at Reading between the two rivers. Alfred attacked them and then they followed his force across the Downs, turning upwards from the Thames perhaps at Cholsey towards Scutchamer Knob. The results of the victory were short—lasting, and it was only after long tribulation that Alfred defeated them again, decisively at Ethandun (Edington) in 878 A.D. This was again on the Downs but further south, near Battlesbury Camp on the Edge of Salisbury Plain.

The battles described so dramatically by Asser are also simply recorded in the Anglo—Saxon Chronicle, the first piece of English historical writing.

More evidence on place names comes from early charters which have survived as permanent written records largely because the great early monasteries such as Abingdon and Winchester needed to record their land holdings. Some of these places can still be checked against survey landmarks. A charter of 944 from Abingdon preserves the grant of land at Blewbury to Aelfric Bishop of Ramsbury, and refers to a white hollow way that ascends the hill to the Downs as far as the Fair Mile. The Downs of Blewburton (named after the hill fort) are defined by “the tall thorn tree at the Icknield Way”, the heathen burial place on Lowbury Hill and by the Ridgeway itself. A reference to the “herepath” or warpath of Anglo Saxon soldiers reminds us that below the line of the Ridge another route was used for military purposes, and as such, clearly defined and recognised

Two famous places near the Ridgeway, Uffington and Woolstone by the White Horse, take their names from Uffa and Wulfric, though previously they had been part of a larger estate known as Ashbury. The same charter that describes their boundaries mentions also the bare—topped Dragons Hill. The Manger is also referred to, but described more simply as “the ring ”

Many of the associations with Alfred are legendary rather than

historical, but it would be hard to dislodge the tales like the burning of the cakes from our folk memories. Where an earlier age ascribed massive earthworks to Grim, the Victorians, more historically conscious, were determined to link places with great men and great heroes. We do, however, have hard documentary evidence about Alfred including the charters and his Will in which his wife received his private estates at Lambourn, Wantage and Eddington, and his daughter received Ashton Keynes and Chippenham. It is remarkable that Alfred was born in border territory at Wantage: perhaps his father was simply holding newly—won territory.

By the time of Alfred’s death, and after the fearful invasions of the 970s, the Danes were held back by a system of fortified burghs (whose outlines are visible at, for instance, Wallingford) and by a clever use of sea power. It was, however, Alfred’s grandson Athelstan, born in 895 and crowned at Kingston in 925, who sealed the union of Mercia and Wessex. Athelstan took the offensive against the Welsh and against Cornwall, and re—fortified Oxford and Wallingford. He chose to be buried at Malmesbury near St Aldhelm the famous Anglo—Saxon abbot and chronicler. His conquests were larger and his victories greater than those of his grandfather, but he did not leave behind so vivid a memory.

The Ridgeway area was not always a border, though it has some of the character of the Offa’s Dyke territory. It was not even a major route of communication, though it was used as such by the Danes in their incursions across England. But as the site of battles, meetings and places associated with Alfred’s victories and later recorded in his Will, it plays a large part in the earliest period of English recorded history.

Alex Eaglestone

### **THERE IS INQUISITIVE LIFE OUT THERE**

Anyone who edits a club newsletter welcomes proof that he is not bombinating in a vacuum so it was reassuring to be sent an e-mail from a descendant of George Graham the balloonist whose Ridgeway over flight was described in Issue 74. I was also told about the plaque to the Oxford aeronaut, James Sadler, the first Englishman to rise in a balloon. He ascended from Merton Fields, but landed at Woodeaton, short of the

Ridgeway. So Colonel Fitzpatrick, with a fair breeze may still have been the first person to see the Ridgeway from the air.

Also, Annis Flew has suggested a possibility for the Kipling reference I couldn't trace (Newsletter 76 p7): a story called "Black Jack" in *Soldiers Three*. Briefly, the young Mulvaney was set up by his comrades to take the blame when they shot an NCO with his rifle. After an harangue from the armourer sergeant on the maltreatment of the newly issued Martini-Henry, Mulvaney booby-traps the gun in the hope of killing or blinding the real murderer. The story was published in 1895 but the anecdotal core is set during Mulvaney's early days in the army, so the date is plausible.

Setting the plot aside, the reference supports the *National Encyclopaedia* comment that this gun was issued slowly because it sometimes disabled the soldier firing it.

However the issue of this new rifle is an essential element in the plot of "Black Jack" whereas I recall a framework to a story where soldiers were using twigs to ease the mechanism. Perhaps there is yet another reference for someone to spot.

### RECEIPT OF FERNSEED

I hope they never need applying to The Ridgeway, but the regulations on cross-compliance include a gem that deserves a wider audience than readers of the new edition of *Rights of Way, a Guide to Law and Practice*.

Cross compliance requires farmers who want an environmental handout from the EEC to obey various laws that apply to their land. In so far as they are visible features in the landscape – not like many "red or green dot" paths a mere legal right – footpaths and bridleways have to be respected.

'Visible' is defined in the regulations as meaning 'visible as a route to a person with normal eyesight walking or riding along it'. Guidance by DEFRA states that 'visible' includes that which would be visible if the requirements of the Highway Act 1980 had not been breached.

Accordingly, where a path is not physically visible because it has been ploughed out, and the path has not been reinstated as required by the 1980 Act, the path is 'visible' for the purpose of the regulations.

As compensation for myopia, glaucoma, diabetic degeneration of the retina and traumatic cataract, I wonder whether I might make legal history by asking that the principle of cross-compliance be enforced in respect of a path that should have been visible (even though invisible) to a person with normal eyesight walking along it despite the fact that the person walking along did not, subject to any rulings on public euphemism (social workers for the use of) under the Disability Act, have the normal eyesight necessary to see something that should have been there but wasn't.

What I can see in my mind's eye, which perceives with total clarity things that are metaphysically, not physically, visible is all those angels dancing on the head of a pin: their number equals infinity plus one. I submit this rave is a trespassory assembly in defiance of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Against my soundest musical prejudices, I once supported someone's right to play the didgeridoo by the roadside in the vicinity of Stonehenge, but that entity noodling on the tuba has definitely untuned the sky. The law is the law. Fiat Justitia ne ruat caelum.

Peter Gould

### Contributions to the Autumn Newsletter by 14th October please

Mud-free photos, sketches, cartoons would be appreciated  
Peter Gould, 18, Hampton Park, Bristol BS6 6LH  
[Ridgewayfriends@aol.com](mailto:Ridgewayfriends@aol.com)

**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