

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY



Spring

2008

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

Like me, many of you will be members of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). The CPRE does great work in fighting for our countryside and has been a useful ally in some of our battles on The Ridgeway. Under the sponsorship of their President, the author Bill Bryson, they have just launched a crusade against litter. This will be a three year campaign, focusing specifically on rural litter and flytipping. The CPRE will be encouraging direct action, such as local litter picks and the lobbying of local authorities. More fundamentally, they will be highlighting the importance of preventing litter in the first place.

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

I suggest that we in The Friends can do our bit to support this worthy initiative. I know that a number of you serve as Ridgeway Volunteers and are already involved in removing litter from the Trail. I intend making litter collection a part of my frequent Ridgeway excursions and urge you to do the same. Elsewhere in this issue you will read about our enthusiasm for Local Groups. Perhaps litter and flytipping can become an early priority for such groups to address. On behalf of The Friends I will be writing to the local authorities along the Trail, asking them to give more attention to this problem.

A recent visit to Canada made me realise how accurate Bill Bryson is when he says “Other countries have virtually eliminated litter from their landscapes. There is no reason why we can’t do as much here. We need to aim high.”

Ian Ritchie

LOCAL GROUPS

The Friends of The Ridgeway started life as a campaigning organisation, and has defined itself over many years by its opposition to the despoliation of the ancient Ridgeway Trail by mechanically-propelled vehicles - off-roaders and trail-bikes. Despite the signal victory of the NERC Act, and the application of the new Restricted By-way status to much of the Trail, the protection of the whole of The Ridgeway remains an issue and will continue to be the highest priority for the Committee, as we are sure it will for the membership as a whole.

However, all Friends organisations continue in existence on the basis of the interest and involvement of their members. They exist not only to campaign and exert social and political pressure on decision-makers, but also to provide support for the management, preservation and improvement of the operation and to promote its appreciation and use. We in The FoTR are fortunate in that our focus has been on that section of the ancient Ridgeway which is a National Trail, and accordingly there is an efficient team led by the National Trails Officer (NTO) which provides management for the Trail and runs the Volunteer scheme. The NTO team, funded mainly by Natural England and partly by local Highway Authorities, sees to signage, maintenance and the many administrative problems which arise from time to time. The Friends of

other long-distance paths undertake at least monitoring and often actual maintenance work, fund-raising and management. We have accordingly not needed to solicit the active support of our members for these purposes, and our small subscription has usually been ample to cover our funding needs.

However, the successful outcome of the struggle against the off-roaders is not the end of the story, and there are new challenges to be faced. Another article in this issue details the current Review of National Trails by a Natural England task-force, and the Committee will be engaging with them throughout this summer. Despite protestations to the contrary, we suspect that budget pressures lurk behind the exercise. This Review is likely to consider new constitutional arrangements for the management and funding of the National Trails network, and we must face the possibility that we may be called on to play a more active role. Any such enhanced involvement will rely heavily on local communities and their support of and commitment to their local sections of the Trail.

Many members would like there to be more events and opportunities to meet and to celebrate our common interest in The Ridgeway and its environment. The length of the Trail makes it difficult to organise events which appeal to the whole membership, and it may be that greater emphasis should be placed on events with local relevance, organised closer to the local community. Greater awareness and use of The Ridgeway within the local communities along its length is its best protection.

With this in mind, a proposal has been floated, which the Chairman mentioned at the recent AGM, to encourage the formation of local groups within the membership. The purpose of these groups would be to

- involve supporters in their areas in social activities and events,
- assess their views and interests and represent these to the Committee,
- monitor the condition of the Trail locally, and liaise with NTO and its Volunteers,
- increase the local membership, and
- raise the level of support within the community for FoTR's activities and for The Ridgeway as a precious asset and facility for local people to use.

The Committee has yet to consider how such groups should operate, but it is clear that they must be initiated and driven by you the members, and by people willing to give a bit of time and take a little trouble to be a real Friend of The Ridgeway. How nice it would be if some of our readers would volunteer to play their part in such an initiative, without waiting to be asked!

Jeff Goddard

NATURAL ENGLAND REVIEW OF NATIONAL TRAILS

We recently received a letter from Dr Helen Phillips, Chief Executive of Natural England (NE), which is of course the Government Agency now responsible for the National Trail network (NTN). Her letter states that NE has instituted a fundamental review of the NTN, and intends to involve partners in this work. She notes that constraints on public spending and budget limitations have led to delays in planned extensions of NTN (eg, the Pennine Bridleway), and a focus on routine maintenance instead of improvement of standards. She also notes the lack of integration of NTN, either as a linked network or with the wider Rights of Way network. NE, she says, now needs to decide between the alternatives of new Trail creation, improving linkages, raising standards or maintenance. The aim of the review is to provide more long term certainty for all those involved in work on NTN and to establish a stable future for long distance walking and riding routes in England.

We were invited to reply promptly to the project team set up to conduct the review, who invited feed-back, initially on the questions to be addressed. After consulting as widely as possible in the limited time available we responded along the following lines:-

We welcome the review and believe it is opportune to examine both the role and importance of NTN and the way they are funded and managed. We would like to be involved at all stages of the review. Our suggested questions and views are as follows:-

- **What are National Trails For?**

This is the fundamental question, which needs to be answered first. NTN should be at the heart of a strategy to encourage greater use by the public at large of their rights to peacefully enjoy the countryside. A gateway for access to the countryside and the main skeleton for the whole, integrated

network of walking routes; exemplars of best practice; accessible easily and preferably by public transport; well mapped with good guidebooks. NTN needs to be kept relevant and up to date, with standards rising to accord with rising expectations. A clear commitment from Government is needed to the importance of NTN.

- **Why are National Trails important?**

We listed the wide range of benefits, which we feel are too little observed.

- **What are the Opportunities for National Trails?**

Most Trails are underused, as shown by NE's own usage figures and public awareness of the network in the UK and overseas is low. More effective promotion, improved access and services, and better linkages to the overall rights of way network, and with tourist centres such as Stonehenge, can boost visitor numbers.

- **What are the Threats to National Trails?**

The lack of funding resources. NTN is an easy target when budget constraints bite.

- **What are the Priorities for Investment in National Trails?**

Decisions between Trail extensions, better linkages, standards improvement and maintenance cannot possibly be made by the review. All these investment alternatives are important, but the ranking will vary between situations and over time. NTN needs improvement, both by extension and integration with other paths and the RoW network at large, and in the facilities and services provided. Public and visitor expectations are rising, and if these are not met usage will fall. Choices must be made in the context of local community development plans. Standards should be set only in very general terms at the control level, with investment priorities, timing and funding being settled locally.

How should the National Trails be Financed?

A radical new approach is needed to mobilise new sources of funding supplementing public sector budgets. The idea of National Trails Trusts (NTT) put forward in 2001 was received cautiously, and shelved, but we hope that it will be back on the agenda in this review.

How can National Trails be most Effectively Managed?

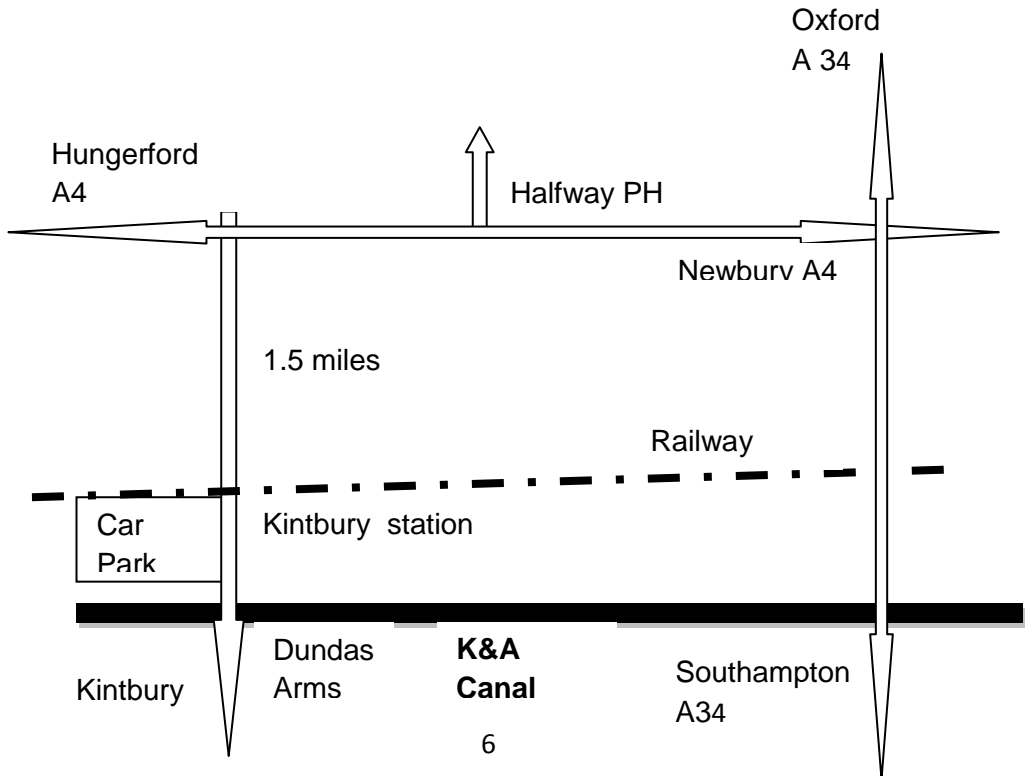
National Trails Officers and their staffs are dedicated and experienced, and achieve much with limited resources. The Ridgeway Management Group, with its representatives from all the Highway Authorities along the Trail naturally focuses on the state of the Trail surface and technical

Rights of Way issues, and not on developing usage. Better mechanisms for supporting management and strengthening local community involvement and participation could prove more cost effective.

What should be the Role of the Friends Organisations?

We have been concerned mainly with the damage caused to The Ridgeway by motor vehicles, and with supporting management by advice and feed-back. Other similar organisations undertake many other functions, including volunteer work, fundraising and promotion, and we would be open to considering an enhanced role, and recruiting a larger and fitter membership for the purpose, provided that we could be reassured that public funding and commitment would not thereby be reduced.

We hope that these suggestions, made under time pressure, correctly reflect the views of the majority of our members, although there will always be dissenters. We would welcome any comments and suggestions for future rounds of consultation.



HORSE DRAWN BARGE TRIP

Wednesday 13th August 13:45 hrs

Cost £10.00 per person

(A homemade cream tea is included in the cost.)

BOOKING FORM OVERLEAF

This is an opportunity for a leisurely afternoon on the Kennet and Avon Canal on a horse-drawn barge.

The barge starts from Kintbury, a village 5 miles west of Newbury and is easily reached from the A4. There is parking adjacent to the embarkation point. See map opposite

The trip will end at approximately 17.00 hrs

This visit will be shared with members of Newbury Retired Teachers.

Return with SAE no later than August 1st to

**Jane Ebbutt, 8 Windmill Close, Aldbourne,
Marlborough ,SN8 2DN**

Dr Gary Lock of Oxford Institute of Archaeology has agreed to conduct a tour for FoR members round the Marcham/Frilford excavation site 10 miles outside of Oxford on the A338, behind the former Noah's Ark Pub).".on Wednesday 23 July 2008 at 11.00

BARGE TRIP BOOKING FORM

Name

Name

Address

.....

.....Post Code

Tel No

I/We enclose a cheque for £ made payable to KVNT

and a SAE for return of tickets

SignedDate

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

Mud-free photos, sketches, cartoons would be appreciated

Peter Gould, 18, Hampton Park, Bristol BS6 6LH

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