



The Ramblers' Association – Dorset Area Annual Report – 2011/12

General Overview

As can be seen from this report the membership of Dorset Area regrettably continues to decline steadily and your Chairman is taking steps towards remedying this.

As previously noted in Dorset Footnotes the Ramblers have a new president and, in a change from the previous practice, the appointment was made from within the Ramblers rather than a "celebrity". It will be interesting to see how this works but given that Kate Ashbrook is, and always has been, very active in the Ramblers organisation I am really optimistic as to the result.

As you will have seen from the announcement in Dorset Footnotes and the agenda for the AGM I have decided to stand down from Area Council as I consider that it is time for a new and energetic secretary given that I have carried out the role for over 6 years and am, as was unkindly pointed out while I was leading a walk, now a septuagenarian

Chairman's Notes

After my article in Winter Issue of Footnotes, I have started to implement some of the initiatives to increase Membership across the Dorset Area.

I am hoping to set in motion at our next meeting, with Area Council's approval, the formation of a New 40's + Group this hopefully will increase the Membership as this is an area nationally where membership has increased the most.

We have made steady progress with the New Group with 24 on a mailing list and a Dorset 4050 Group Facebook page. We have organised 2 events with a good response and are planning an early Xmas walk on the 1st December. I am planning the official formation of the Group in the spring.

With the SDG's help we have recently raised the Ramblers profile at the WPNSA 's Outdoor Show at Portland on March 31st 2012, which was a great success.

We particularly had a good response from Families for short walks. This leads me onto my next venture in the South Dorset area where I will be resurrecting the Family Rambling Fun Day on the 1st July in Thorncombe Woods near Dorchester.

This walk is aimed to encourage families to enjoy the many benefits of walking with Parents, Children and Grandparents etc. joining in to have a Fun Day, with possibly a Quiz or Treasure Hunt.

This is part of my ethos for The Ramblers in Dorset to encourage all ages and abilities to enjoy the many benefits of Walking.

On July 6th the Ramblers, with Natural England, and DCC Ranger Service and with Kate Ashbrook the new President officially opened the first Part of the new Coastal Trail from Rufus Castle to Lulworth Cove. Many thanks to Brian Panton who was presented with a small gift from Kate Ashbrook on behalf of the Ramblers for his efforts in organising the event. There was a coffee stop organised by the Ramblers Central Office at Furzy Cliff followed by lunch at "The Smugglers" at Osmington where Scott Titt of the British Mountaineering Council & Mary Creagh Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment spoke of the need for continued access to all our coastline for everyone. For the final leg all the dampened walkers were rewarded with a "Cream Tea" to greet them all at Lulworth Cove.

The Area Walk on the Purbecks was well supported with 80 ramblers, where we all met at Mary Baxter Memorial stones for a Picnic Lunch. Many thanks to the Organisers and leaders for making this event a great success.

During the Olympics the SDG were asked to escort spectators to the Sailing Events.

Unfortunately the initiative was not well supported in the Olympics but improved slightly during the Paralympics due in part to the confusion in Registration at CO and the lack of publicity.

General Council 2012

General Council this year was attended by Laurie Fairhurst (EDG) and Kate Gocher (SDG) as representatives. It was held at the Gilbert Murray Conference Venue in Leicester.

Two interesting motions were debated – one related to the agreement with HF Holidays and one to the agreement with BUPA. Both were critical of the decisions of the Board of Trustees and were passed.

Treasurer

The finances in the Dorset Area remain healthy even though the Area's general funding is showing a loss at the end of this financial year. This is in keeping with the policy that Areas and Groups should use surplus cash reserves to contribute to budget funding by Central Office rather than claim the full amount estimated

to run the Area and all the Dorset Groups for the following year, although the amount that we are able to contribute in this way gets smaller year on year as our reserves diminish.

The £1000 repaid to the Dorset Area from Ramblers Association Services (Ramblers' Holidays) in 2010/11 financial year has been transferred to the Jubilee Trail Guide Fund to finance improvements on the Trail during the year. The Jubilee Trail Guide Fund shows a balance of £3168 this is up on last year mainly due to contributions from the Area and Groups, which have funded most of the improvement work this year. All payments made to Dorset County Council for improvements are matched by the Council so the money is well spent. £1200 is already allocated for improvements for the forthcoming year.

Owing to changes in the Wessex Wanderer organisation, which runs walks throughout the summer using train services on the Weymouth to Bristol line, this is likely to be the last year that I will be reporting on their finances.

Central Office has again produced 'basic allowances' for Group finance in 2012/13. This has resulted in Groups having to submit budgets again. I am, however, pleased to report that the Area and all Group budgets for 2012/13 have been agreed without alteration.

In closing may I thank all the Treasurers for their help during the year in submitting their Group's financial details and returns to me on time.

Membership Secretary

Dorset's membership continues to decline gently. This year the net loss was 99 (last year, 163) giving a total of 1705 members. This figure is the same as the total for February 1994, but at that time, membership was increasing and it continued to grow until December 2004. It has been declining ever since.

Over the past year, North Dorset has stood still and all other Groups have seen a slight fall-off in membership.

Membership Services are now sending weekly updates of new or reinstated members directly to Group Membership Secretaries (where email is available). However, I would urge those concerned to check the monthly membership updates carefully for the coming months, to make sure no new members have been missed, until we can be confident that the system is operating correctly!

Increasingly, new members' details include an email address, which must surely make for easier communication with our members. Whilst observing best practice in the safeguarding of personal information, we need to make the best use we can of electronic communication to keep our members informed and interested in the activities and work of the Ramblers.

Editor – Dorset Footnotes

Help and Support

Three years into the job, or is it a vocation? - I still enjoy being Footnotes Editor and hope to be doing it for several years to come.

Producing Footnotes is, however, a team effort. First of all there are the contributors who have been many and varied. I have had great support from the regular contributors, Keith Seymour, Jim Scott, Jan Wardell and Mike Heckford; timely and varied reports from the Area Group Secretaries, and many one-offs from contributors with specialist interests ranging from beach cleaning to collecting 'Hardies'.

Footnotes Content

Contributions for Footnotes are gradually increasing, a very good sign. We are also getting more requests for advertising space. The net result is that my own contributions are being squeezed out, possibly another benefit to the readership. I take full responsibility for the headings used in Footnotes; part of the fun is conjuring up a 'headline' that will catch the eye.

Historically the quantity of reports received has nicely balanced the space available in Footnotes, leaving room for the occasional feature article, my front page piece and a full colour feature on the back page.

This year Area Council agreed to occasionally increasing the size of Footnotes to 12 pages, the usual size is 8 pages. At present we only do this for the current Winter Edition, to accommodate notices for the AGM. This increased flexibility means that when I get a lot of contributions, and they are increasing, I will be able to include them. The downside is that you may have to read more 'fillers' from me.

Footnotes and the Web

In 2010 Area Council decided to make Footnotes available by e-mail. Two years on and I only send E-Footnotes to some 20 individuals. Dorset Young Walkers distribute E-Footnotes to all their members and I am hopeful that the new, and establishing, over 40's group will also take-up E-Footnotes. It looks like we will be printing and distributing 1700 copies for a few years to come.

Derek Watkinson, our Webmaster is looking through some of the back copies of Footnotes for interesting pieces that he can include on the Website. These will only be used with the authors consent and be made anonymous as appropriate. On this subject, if anyone wishes to write a piece for the Website, Derek would love to hear from you.

Finally any comments and ideas for developing Footnotes are always welcome. The official deadline for contributions to the next issue is 1st January 2013. It usually takes about 5 days to put Footnotes together and so you can enjoy New Year and still make it.

Area Footpath Secretary

In this, my first report as Dorset Area Footpath Secretary, I shall try to summarise activities in the year that has included the wettest 'summer' for a hundred years.

Following on from this, it is perhaps appropriate to note that there has been a predominance of BOAT applications coming before Dorset County Council's Roads and Rights of Way Committee for decisions. (This is the procedure when there are objections to an application.) There were fewer Path Orders overall confirmed in 2012, compared with 2011.

In his last report my predecessor was disappointed that the long-awaited Dorset Rights of Way Improvement Plan had yet to materialise, albeit having been 'signed off' by Dorset County Council. I can report that our patience has now been rewarded - it has finally been published, but for the majority of people it can be viewed on-line only. For those who have yet to read this tour de force, it can be found at: <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/footpaths/improvementplan>, or if you would like a copy in pdf format, please contact me, giving your e-mail address.

Possibly the most noteworthy event in the calendar for Dorset Ramblers this year was the opening of the first stretch of the England Coast Path (ECP), from Rufus Castle (Portland) to Lulworth Cove. This was celebrated by an inaugural walk on July 6th, jointly organised by the Dorset Ramblers - volunteers from East and South Groups, who had worked hard on negotiations for the route – and Ramblers Central Office. Our thanks go to Brian Panton in particular, ably abetted by Kate Gocher and other members of the Area Footpaths Committee from the South and East Groups. Being in the North of the County, I personally do not have the opportunity to become involved in work on Coastal Access, but the ongoing involvement of Brian Panton is very welcome.

Having had the first stretch of the ECP opened in time for the Olympics, the impetus is now on to the next stretch in Dorset programmed by Natural England – between Rufus Castle and the County Boundary at Lyme Regis. However, this stretch includes three sections that have already been legally closed, because of landslips and cliff falls, for some ten years. It now also includes the stretch which suffered significant cliff falls in this summer and had to be closed in the interests of public safety, with an inland diversion on existing rights of way. There are some interesting challenges ahead in order to get a suitable Coast Path.

Continuing thanks go to Rosemary Bramah, the Ramblers Jubilee Trail co-ordinator and her band of helpers, for the on-going monitoring of the Jubilee Trail. Rosemary reports that DCC continue to match fund the improvements project and to do 'furniture' installations free of charge. The 2011/12 budget was £2,500 and that for 2012/13 will be £2,400 with a small overspend that DCC will pick up. RADA is very appreciative of DCC's continuing support. When the Trail was opened in 1995, there were 146 stiles along the route, which it is hoped will be down to 39 in 2013. Many of those still remaining are there because the land-owners are reluctant to agree to the installation of gates that they will have to maintain thereafter.

The restructuring the Dorset County Council Countryside Access Section prompted a trial of the maintenance of rights of way by two different methods – the North Dorset District area to be managed by the Rangers and everywhere else in Dorset by Dorset Highways – Ground Services. At the time of writing we are awaiting the results of this trial. The DCC online problem reporting system has seen a marked increase in reports in the past year – up by 38% from 2011. This does not necessarily indicate an increase in path problems, more so the wider use of the online system.

Webmaster

As of the 19th of September there have only been a few minor tweaks to the Dorset Area web site and the site statistics are much the same. I.e. most visitors stay less than 30 seconds and there are indications that most of the site traffic is from robots looking for updates for search engines (good guys) or the spammers (and other bad guys). Our area chairman and Footnotes editor have been looking for ideas to add more content that could interest human visitors however the ideas they have come up with mostly require some sort of input from members. Although we have a significant number of members in Dorset numbers are falling and our web sites can help to find new members. Have you got anything to say that could fit under any of the banners of 'What I get out of being a Ramblers member in Dorset', 'Why go On A Ramblers led walk', 'Why I wish I had joined the Ramblers Years Ago' or something else positive that could attract new member please let us know. Ideas of how to get more human visitors to our area site are also welcome.

Group Reports

East Dorset

East Dorset Group provided a comprehensive walks programme with 176 walks ranging from 4.5 miles to 18 miles. Most walks have been well supported. To cope with a lack of leaders, this year we successfully introduced some impromptu walks, where a date, time, distance and start point were provided in our programme. A leader would then be chosen from the walkers who turned up.

Another successful Purbeck Plod was run this year with some 150 entrants. Taking into account the bad weather on the Saturday night before the event, this was a good number. Once again, we received kind and encouraging feedback.

Membership is still of concern due to numbers again falling for this year. The group continued to be consulted on proposed rights of way changes which were actioned by our various footpath secretaries. The group again encouraged members to participate in path clearing across our area. Socially, we have also arranged two skittles evenings and our winter meal.

This summer, 3 of our leaders ran 9 linear walks along the Jubilee Trail, going east to west. These walks were a great success with an average of 16 people over all the walks.

With our group funds we have managed to fund some 'kissing gates' for the East Dorset end of the Jubilee Trail and also made a donation towards way marks for the Poole Harbour Trails Community Group to install.

North Dorset

This year may be memorable for cancelled walks and a jungle of undergrowth, but that is not the whole story. . BVPI surveys were carried out as usual, with 65 rights of way covered in the North Dorset area; and several planning applications have also been dealt with. The Jubilee Trail has been monitored on a regular basis: some extra maintenance and clearing has been needed. The 14-mile Three Trails Walk from Durweston (from the "Ramblers' Best Walks Britain") was repeated, and we hope this will become an annual tradition. What may perhaps be a centennial walk met the Olympic torch at Stourpaine. We contributed a ramble to join the Inter Group Picnic, and had representatives at the official opening of the first section of the English Coastal Path. Our social events include a fully attended lunch for our AGM at the Bull Tavern, the hosting of the Area AGM at Durweston, a quiz night at which personal donations raised £70 for the poppy appeal, and a coach outing to complete the Dorset section of the South West Coast Path.

South Dorset

We started this year with quite a strong committee including some new additions – e.g. a new programme secretary and new walks programme coordinator. As a result our walks programme has undergone a complete overhaul and we have even introduced colour pages. The intention is to make the programme more interesting for our members and for it to become more of a magazine rather than just a list of walks. This may take a little while to achieve but the process has started and we are grateful for the effort our volunteers have made.

This year's Group Holiday was in Cyprus and 17 of us spent an enjoyable week walking in the sunshine. For those of you who have not been abroad this year the sun was that big orange thing we used to get in the summer in the UK. In fact going in the spring was ideal since the temperature was just right for walking and the spring flowers were in evidence. The trip was organised through a local family business (Bath & West) and was extremely well run with an excellent hotel, good food and fine walks. We would thoroughly recommend them to other groups thinking of planning group holidays abroad or in the UK.

Once again our core activity of walking has not been neglected and we have put on a full programme of walks throughout the year. This is thanks to the good support we have received from our leaders and it is pleasing to see new leaders coming through to take up the challenge. We will be running another "Leader Training Day" in March next year and, once the details have been finalised, we will extend an invitation to other Groups in the area. In the last course we ran (September 2009) over 25% of the attendees came from other groups and whilst we are happy to organise the event again this time we feel it would be appropriate if other groups took it in turns to arrange leader training. It is an on-going need and if each group did it once every five years we would have continuity of training. Perhaps someone else would like to start planning for 2014!

Apart from the usual walks and events (e.g. the Festival of Winter Walks, "Get Walking Day" the Area Walk and the Wessex Wanderer Railway Walks) we have tried to introduce greater variety into our programme. In June we held a Summer Solstice Walk (starting at 4.30am) with the intention of seeing sunrise over Maiden Castle – unfortunately the weather did not play ball. We also had a very interesting farm walk where we met that rare breed of animal, a farmer who encourages people to walk on his land. He also devotes much of his acreage to encouraging wildlife (habitat for skylarks, corn buntings and bees etc) and was keen to show us what he was doing for the environment. Other events included a Family Rambling Day, complete with children's quiz, and the introduction of a regular short walk to encourage new members and to entice older members back into walking. The take-up is slow but it is early days. We also arranged a lunchtime meeting of senior members who, for various reasons, no longer walk with the group. Some 25 people attended and

it was so successful that follow up lunches have been arranged and held. Finally we ran a series of walks to support the Olympics and Paralympics in Weymouth – but the least said about that the better.

As you can see we have not had an idle year! As always all the Officers and committee members have worked very hard for the Group and I'm pleased to report that we go into our AGM with nominations for all the major posts and a committee larger than ever before. Who knows, we may even get a publicity officer one day!

West Dorset

Once again the group provided a comprehensive and varied programme of walks. Up to the end of October we had put on 111 walks, an average of just over two a week, stretching from Kimmeridge to Sidmouth.

Fifteen new members joined during the year but, despite this, our overall group membership fell by nine from 185 to 176. This decline reflects current trends in Dorset area membership and indeed national member numbers.

Our walks were promoted on the Ramblers website, the Lyme Regis and Bridport Town websites, in tourist information centres, and in Marshwood Vale Magazine, all of which helped to generate new members.

We were pleased to see new walk leaders coming forward during the year and would encourage other members to have a go.

We enjoyed two walking holidays in the year: blustery Dartmoor in April and glorious Gower in October organised by our ever-energetic Social Secretary. Other social events included the Christmas walk and lunch, and the skittles evening. We often enjoy hospitality from leaders in the form of tea and cakes post walk.

The group registered with the Walking Partnership, which is supported by Ramblers Worldwide Holidays. This generates commission for the group every time a member books a Ramblers Holiday. The income will be used for the maintenance of local trails.

Our Footpath Secretary has reviewed and commented on various orders affecting changes to rights of way, long term diversions and closures like the coast path at Burton Bradstock following the landslip. He also assisted the Dorset County Council team with repair and installation work.

We look forward to another year of good walking, good company and to welcoming new members.

Dorset Young Walkers' Group

2012 has seen membership of the Dorset Young Walkers Group increase slightly to just over 80 active members.

The programme this year has been quite full although it has tapered off now the summer is over. We are also continuing with the also national initiatives, including A Walk in the Woods and the Festival of Winter Walks.

In other news the Group AGM saw a new Chair and Secretary elected and the Facebook group appears to be a useful feeder to the main group as people join and take a look at photos that are uploaded and available.

2013 marks 10 years of the Dorset Young Walkers and we hope to have a 'themed' year with a party, walks and maybe a trip away to mark the occasion. We hope to get some good publicity from this. Many thanks once again to all volunteers, past and present, who have made this year such a success

Compiled by Jim Scott
Area Secretary