

# The Ramblers' Association – Dorset Area Annual Report – 2012/13

## General Overview

In general this has been a mixed year nationally with two notable successes as shown below

### National Forests

The Ramblers along with many other organisations managed to get the Government to scrap the proposed sell off of the National Forests

*The Government has stated once and for all that public forests will not be sold off. The Government has also backed the Panel's aspiration of a future where every person has access to a wood or wooded area close to where they live.*

### Coastal Access

The apparent back tracking by the Government on the plans for an England Coast Path as noted in my brief report in Dorset Footnotes has thankfully been stopped and even reversed as this announcement from Ramblers Headquarters makes clear

*The campaign has been fighting to ensure the inspiring project wasn't side-lined by spending cuts. We spoke out about the importance of the coast path on Newsnight in August and produced a report making The Case for Coast which we delivered to MPs in Westminster from an ice cream van in September.*

*Our supporters have also been instrumental in the Government's turnaround on the England Coast Path, writing to their MP in support of the coast path, signing our One Coast For All petition and making the case for the England Coast Path in local press.*

*Thanks to this determined lobbying, the Government listened to our concerns. "Will be implementing coastal access step by step," Environment Minister Dan Rogerson confirmed in a Commons debate on 10 October, adding "The key issue for us is pushing forward this project".*

*Proposals for a new stretch of the path on the Somerset coast were revealed on 17 October, followed closely by plans for a section of coast path in Kent on 28 October. Natural England has also now produced a map which shows that work will have started on 75% of the coast path by 2016.*

*The Government is also now reconsidering its decision to exclude the Isle of Wight – England's largest island – from the England Coast Path as the result of a determined campaign by the Isle of Wight Ramblers.*

## Chairman's Notes

This year has been a year of contrasts with the weather.

Wet early spring & summer and very hot in July & August has greatly affected the number of Ramblers walking on Led Walks.

We successfully launched the 4050's Group in March which now gives us an even greater range of Groups to walk with in Dorset.

General Council was held in Coventry this year and 2 delegates and 2 Guests from Dorset attended and it had a new format which everyone agreed was a great improvement on previous General Councils. I would like to encourage new members to attend as it is very invigorating to see the Ramblers present and future policies debated.

I recently attended a Area Chairs Forum in Bristol led by CEO of Ramblers Benedict Southworth and Chair of the Trustees Jonathon Kipling.

There were 7 present or future South West Area Chairs from Herefordshire, Somerset, Gloucester, Avon, Oxfordshire and myself representing Dorset

We were informed of ICT updates for late 2014 combining 3 existing databases into 1 to cut costs.

Membership updates with Young Walkers Group retentions being the biggest problem area.

The meeting was very useful and an interesting exchange of ideas on future projects at the Ramblers.

Lastly I would like to thank ALL volunteers for their support in maintaining the Ramblers as the Leading Charity representing all Walkers, and endeavouring to keep the Dorset Rights of Way footpath network and trails as a great place to Walk.

## **General Council 2013**

General Council this year was held at University of Warwick in Coventry and was attended by Keith Seymour and Mike Heckford as delegates from Dorset Area plus Kate Gocher and Jan Wardell as guests.

One motion of interest to some of us in Dorset was the impact of Wind Turbines on our scenic countryside

The motion, which was passed, was briefly as follows

*Council requests the Board of Trustees to develop guidance for countryside volunteers in England to help avoid a gradual increase in the intensity of turbines over a number of planning applications. Council further requests that the Trustees consider for inclusion in such guidance the following criteria:*

- 1) Turbines should not be placed closer than fall-over distance from a public right of way on foot or even greater distances for other highways.*
- 2) An application should be opposed if the turbines have a significant detrimental effect on the beauty of the surrounding countryside.*

*Finally, Council urges the Board of Trustees to ensure the Ramblers takes a leading role in such countryside issues by entering into discussions when appropriate, with government and other bodies and by revising our countryside guidance to provide clearer advice to volunteers*

## **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 and the loss is slightly more than budgeted. This is in keeping with the policy that Areas and Groups should use surplus cash in 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 reserves continue to diminish year on year we have budgeted for approximately £300 to be spent in this way in 2013/14.

The Jubilee Trail Guide Fund continues to remain healthy and although sales of the Jubilee Trail Guide have slowed with donations made during the year the Jubilee Trail Guide Fund is showing a surplus again this year. Contrary to last year's report, no payments have been made to Dorset County Council during the year as it was agreed that all the outstanding work already paid for should be completed before further work was authorised.

Owing to changes in the Wessex Wanderer organisation all monies held by the Dorset Area on behalf this organisation were transferred to the RA Wiltshire Area early in the 2012/13 financial year.

Central Office has again produced 'basic allowances' for Group finance in 2013/14. This has resulted in all but one of the Dorset Groups having to submit budgets, but although budgets were submitted in August, Central Office has not told me to date whether the funding asked for has been agreed.

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**

The total membership in Dorset continues to decline.

A drop of 165 since last year brings the figure down to 1540 (at the end of September), which is lower than at any time in the last ten years.

However, it is perhaps more to the point to ask whether our active members are still enjoying the activities on offer, and are volunteers forthcoming, when there is work to be done? You will know the answers to these questions, but they don't appear in the statistics. We can't do anything about the much older members who decide, with regret, that their walking days are over and they are going to cancel their subscriptions, but we can keep in touch with the members who are enjoying their membership now.

Remember that all our Groups do get new members regularly, even if the total numbers decline. We must continue to welcome them and to make sure they get the message that they are joining an active, thriving organisation.

## **Editor – Dorset Footnotes**

The production and distribution of Footnotes by post and e-mail has gone smoothly but there has been very little extra take-up of E-Footnotes. What has happened to the 'grey surfers'?

Contributions for Footnotes are increasing, a very good sign. This has necessitated the production of 12 page editions throughout 2013. 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.

All in all, everything is going well. Looking forward the only minor concern is the lack of uptake of E-Footnotes. It looks like we will be printing and distributing 1700 copies for a few years to come.

I am still enjoying the editorial role and plan to be influencing your reading for many years to come. Finally any comments and ideas for developing Footnotes are always welcome. The deadline for contributions to the next issue is 1st January 2014.

## **Area Footpath Secretary**

In my report last year, I summarised activities in a year which had included the wettest 'summer' for a hundred years. The weather during the subsequent year has improved noticeably, which in itself has brought its own problems in terms of overgrowth obstructions on public rights of way, and with the drying up of the ground, the appearance of large cracks and fissures in some areas.

The Area Footpath Committee has had to deal with fewer pre-application consultations (PACs) in the last year. These occur when a landowner seeks to change the route of a public right of way, under the Highways Act 1980, by diversion (Section 119) or extinguishment (Section 118). In June 2012, at a DCC Cabinet meeting, it was resolved to increase the cost of an application under the Highways Act to £3,000, plus advertising and associated costs – a total of approximately £5,000. This would be subject to a PAC, and only if the applicant received a positive feedback from the consultees (the Ramblers, BHS, FoDRoW and the local Parish Council), would it be taken forward by the Rights of Way team, who would then prepare the application documents for wider consultation. The Government allows Councils to charge for administrative costs incurred in making an order but not to make any profit. The increase in charges is intended to assist in dealing with the backlog of current cases (between three and five years).

Coastal Access: The Dorset Ramblers draft proposals for the Portland to Lyme Regis Stretch have been submitted to Natural England (NE) and Dorset County Council (DCC). Brian Panton, our Coastal Access Officer has held meetings with the NE & DCC officers (who have changed since the first stretch) dealing with this section. Currently NE & DCC officers are "walking the route" with the relevant landowners.

Rosemary Bramah, the Ramblers Jubilee Trail co-ordinator and her fifteen helpers, continue with the on-going monitoring of the Jubilee Trail. Since last year, three new monitors have taken up the care of their own sections. Improvements planned for the years 2011 to 2013 are still being carried out, and all of the bridges on the Jubilee Trail except those needing replacement or maintenance have now been given non-slip surfaces. Permissions for more improvements, mainly in the west, are beginning to be gathered from landowners with the help of DCC Access Officers.

I reported last year about the restructuring of the Dorset County Council Countryside Access Section and the associated trial of the maintenance of rights of way by two different methods. This was only the beginning and following on from this more changes are taking place. We have yet to discover how the resultant organisation will affect the maintenance of the public rights of way network. The DCC online problem reporting system is almost proving too successful, in that it is now far easier to report problems on paths. However, with fewer resources, those problems such as ploughing and cropping tend to be left to resolve themselves, as the priority system means that they are not dealt with within the season in which they are reported.

Our continuing thanks not only go to Rosemary and her monitors, and Brian, but also to the various Group Footpath Secretaries, who have such a wide range of knowledge, experience and abilities. Their support has been invaluable,

## **Group Reports**

### **East Dorset**

East Dorset Group put on well over 160 walks of various lengths including some by much needed new leaders. The group contributed two walks to the Area Programme of short walks for recruitment purposes. In August, members completed stage 3 of the Chiltern Way in a trek of 41 miles. Sadly the number of members has dropped once again.

Another very successful Purbeck Plod was held in June. After a serious cliff fall on the South West Coast Path, the route had to be changed, but the new route via Kingston and Swyre Head seemed to be enjoyed by participants. Next year, the Purbeck Plod will be on 29th June.

Using members to deliver programmes to addresses in their own post code area, the group now has 75% of its programmes delivered by hand. With second class postage at 50 pence, this produces a substantial saving.

The group has continued to be consulted on proposed Rights of Way changes, vital work done by our five footpath secretaries. Some years ago the footpath secretaries for Poole and Bournemouth surveyed a large area of Poole, where there were no rights of way shown on the definitive map. Some 1500 potential rights of way were identified, although it is accepted that a much smaller number could eventually be added to the

definitive map. However, Poole Council have never allocated resources to even start to resolve this issue. The Rotary Club of Poole Bay (RCPB) are very keen to see the matter resolved and have recently completed their own survey of unrecorded rights of way in the Old Town of Poole, using some of the data previously obtained in the Ramblers' survey mentioned above. As it is unlikely that the local authority will ever find the money to complete the definitive map for the Borough, the RCPB supported by the Ramblers are putting together a bid for heritage lottery grant to help with this work. Our thanks to Mike Heckford and Brian Panton for the work they have put in regarding these rights of way.

## **North Dorset**

We have reason to be pleased with this year's programmes and attendance on walks. The latter has been encouraging, though variable according to weather and seasonal distractions. Our footpath secretary has been exceptionally busy, having to deal with more applications for solar farms, and numerous diversions and modifications, as well as her work on behalf of Area. Our monitor for the Jubilee Trail has carried out regular surveys, and taken appropriate action where necessary. Reporting faults does not always lead to action by County, but all wooden bridges are to be fitted with anti-slip strips. The Trailway was extended in May as far as Blandford and is now continuous for almost ten miles for a variety of users. The Group's bid to provide a bench on the route was pre-empted by offers from elsewhere, but another site has been found and accepted. The A.G.M. lunch last year was, as usual, great fun, and the quiz night in July was successful beyond expectations. The Group has kept within budget, and expects to spend slightly less in the coming year.

## **South Dorset**

We started the year well with a strong Committee, and new post holders taking the roles of Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer as our Constitution now requires. During the year, we appointed a Publicity Officer, following a number of years in which this post was unfilled. She promptly set to work with great enthusiasm to publicise our events on a more systematic basis than hitherto, so that we now have regular mention of our Walks Programme in a number of local periodicals, and have exhibited at a popular Dorchester event, where we generated considerable interest. We trust that these, and similar efforts will be rewarded by an increase in our membership, as well as by a greater local awareness of the Ramblers.

During the year, we have arranged walks in conjunction with the Cheshire Homes, RSPB, Dorchester Strollers, The Powys Society, and the Dorset Naturalists Trust. Of these, all but the last were well supported, and we will be planning to develop this programme of collaborative walks with appropriate organisations during the coming year.

Mention of the Strollers calls to mind the award of the British Empire Medal to our member Sue Blake, for services over many years to Rambling and to the Community. We sincerely congratulate her on her receipt of this well deserved accolade.

The Dorset Naturalists Trust walk, together with our Family Rambling Day, and our contribution to the Area Short Walks Programme was not well supported, and we are inclined to attribute this largely to the uncomfortably hot weather experienced during the Summer. We will, however, try to identify any other lessons which can be drawn from these, and apply them when planning future events of this type. The hot summer, together with the severe weather of the winter, which led to the cancellation of several walks, led to an approximately 20% reduction in the average number of members attending each walk compared with 2012. The Group's membership has again slightly reduced, by about 4%.

We have augmented our Walk Leader numbers following a training day at Portesham in March, which was attended by nine trainees, including one from West Dorset Group, who gave a very positive report of the course. The boost in Walk Leader numbers is easing the task of producing a full programme of walks, and we hope that, in future, the other groups will be prepared to collaborate in providing training courses to mutual advantage. To demonstrate the value which we attach to our Walk Leaders, we also tried the experiment of a Leaders' Walk, also in March, which proved very popular, and provided a forum for informal discussion of best practice in this area. We plan to repeat this next year.

Our 2013 Group Holiday was arranged through HF Holidays. Twelve of us stayed at their location in Alnmouth, Northumberland in late September / early October, where we experienced some fairly strong winds, but (except for the final day) no significant rain. We enjoyed superb walks both inland and along the coast, and also visited Lindisfarne. In the evenings we chose between the diverse activities provided by HF, and the attractions of the local pubs. It was interesting to sample the HF holiday experience, which enabled us to make new friends, and have a thoroughly enjoyable time, to which the helpful and friendly HF staff, the other guests, and the catering contributed to no small extent.

As to next year's holiday, we have booked to walk in Austria with Bath and West travel (with whom we went to Cyprus last year). That holiday generated such acclaim that we have 34 confirmed bookings six months in advance, and have opened a waiting list!

In summary, we have had a successful year in somewhat difficult times. The Committee has worked hard for the Group. We thank them for that, and believe that we are well prepared for whatever next year may bring. Our hopes for 2014 are for a welcome increase in our membership numbers, the easing of restrictions on walking along the Dorset coast caused by the recent record rate of landslips, and, even more hopefully, for weather more conducive to walking.

## **West Dorset**

The group provided a comprehensive and varied programme of walks. Up to the end of October we had put on 96 walks. This was a slight fall on last year's number, partly due to a reduction in walk leaders.

Sixteen new members joined during the year to end September. Despite this, our overall group membership continued to fall from 176 to 168. The rate of attrition is however half that for Dorset area overall.

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

We enjoyed two walking holidays in the year: blustery Long Mynd, Shropshire in April and the beautiful South Hams in October organised by our hard-working Social Secretary. She also investigated the feasibility of a walking holiday abroad, but this failed to materialise because of insufficient take-up.

Other social events included the Christmas walk and lunch, and the skittles evening. We periodically enjoy hospitality from leaders in the form of tea and cakes post-walk.

The Walking Partnership, which is supported by Ramblers Worldwide Holidays, continues to generate commission for the group every time a member books a Ramblers Holiday. This year we have been able to purchase more cutting tools for the maintenance of the Jubilee Trail.

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**

This year has been challenging, with new committee members filling a number of positions and some more experienced members of the group departing. Despite this, the year has been a positive one, with some members organising walks, social events, spreading information about the group and a number of other activities. The group has also got a redesigned website with a number of modern design features and has recently passed its tenth anniversary.

A number of weekend trips were organised to various parts of the country. The first was held during Easter, and involved walking through snow in the Peak district, sharing the countryside with some skiers and photographing interesting ice formations. Another trip was organised by a new member of the group in Shropshire, where it was possible to appreciate the unique landscape and the last of the warm weather. Finally, as has become tradition, a camping trip was held in South East Dorset towards the end of summer.

In terms of walking there have been a fair number of walks held in different parts of Dorset, in areas around Weymouth, Poole, Bridport, Swanage and as far north as Blandford. A majority of the walks were led by experienced leaders, though it was hopeful to see a few new faces leading and attending walks.

The group has also organised a wide variety of social events. The party held to celebrate the group's tenth anniversary was a successful event in Dorchester, with a local band and DJ. Events during the warmer months include a beach picnic near Lulworth Cove, a visit to the Dorset Knob throwing competition and a trip to see a local Shakespeare production on Brownsea Island. As the nights draw in the group has a number of evening events planned, including a Halloween bistro at the Swanage railway, a firework display in Corfe Castle and a skittles evening in Dorchester.

Thanks to all who helped to make the year an enjoyable one. Hopefully we will be able to build on our successes next year and encourage more young people of the benefits and joys of walking as part of a group.

Compiled by Jim Scott  
Area Secretary