

Bristol Ramblers Annual Report 2010/11

Walks programme

During the year, the Group's programme included 292 walks (280 last year). This included Avon Area walks and Wessex Wanderer walks. In addition, there were trips to Stow on the Wold, the Western Lakes, the Yorkshire Dales, the Shropshire Hills, a return journey to Lucca and a GR5/52 circuit in the Alpes-Maritime.

Thanks are due to Walk Coordinators, nearly 100 walk leaders and the organisers of the trips for maintaining this outstanding programme. It would be invidious to highlight specific walks: no doubt all members will have specific memories.

As agreed at last year's AGM, Sunday half-day walks were arranged during the summer. Attendances were not enormous, but were enough to suggest that there is a market for such walks, so it is intended to do the same in 2012.

The Group participated in the Ramblers national Get Walking Day, Walk in the Woods Week and Festival of Winter Walks, gaining useful publicity and some new members.

A training course for walk leaders was arranged. Eleven people participated, and six completed the full course.

Footpaths issues

The role of the Footpaths Secretary is about influencing Council decisions regarding changes to the rights of way network and getting the Council to ensure that the network is properly maintained. The principal issues during the year were:

- The City Council's plan to sell off some public open space, though not strictly a Rights of Way matter, precipitated some requests for help. Usually, complainants were referred to the Open Spaces Society, but advice was given to a group at Lodge Hill which had a strong claim for a footpath.

- Whether the new Bristol City Stadium should be built at all was a question for the Planning Committee to consider. However, there was a meeting to consider the Council's scheme of PRoW mitigation. It was concluded that the officer responsible had done a very good job.
- The Riverside Paths, the Severn Way Link and the Monarch's Way at Netham, have been the Council's two great achievements this year, despite prolonged legal hassle and an unfortunate riparian collapse. The story is not yet ended, but lengths of these routes have been legally established, cleared and physically consolidated.
- The Council put forward a proposal to realign the Severn Way Link at Smoke Lane. A better route was suggested to them. Technically, this is not a PRoW diversion so the more interesting route must be maintained.
- An HA56 order was threatened in respect of the riverside path at Hanham Abbots. Some money was then found to put the path in order without legal intervention.
- We actually served an HA56 order in respect of a missing non-vehicular bridge over the M5 at Lawrence Weston. As it was served on the Secretary of State for Transport, the Highway Authority for Motorways, this is probably a first, worth a footnote in legal history. Practically, it did not cause the bridge to be replaced, but it did elicit a clear statement of when this would be done. The bridge is now in place.
- Bristol's Golf Courses can be relied on to make work. At Shirehampton, the way-marking is in order, but the terms of the National Trust ownership remain undetermined. At Henbury, a scheme of footpath diversion is still in abeyance since the council officer involved departed, leaving no "paper trail". There has been a complaint this year – it is surprising that there has only been one. At Filton, a rant from the club has been received.
- The obstructed route at Dundry Hill Farm is now open to the satisfaction of local users, following a change of landowner.
- Regrettably, the Council department responsible for parks disregarded representations concerning the tarmac cycle speedway between Blackberry Hill and Wickham Bridge. It

was decided, with regret, not to waste time and public money on prolonged formal opposition.

- The gating problem in Bristol is unresolved. At the end of the Ramblers year, a few paths were still illegally gated and a review of the legally gated path in Fishponds was overdue. No policy had been adopted, so by custom and practice paths could be closed at the whim of the Council. Fortunately, money for these schemes ran short and the police official whose duty it was to close paths has been redeployed.

Peter Gould has been elected chair of the Public Rights of Way Liaison Group. His first duty was to express the extreme disquiet of the Group at the disproportionate level of funding cuts being applied to the Rights of Way Team. Cllr Tim Kent (Cabinet member for Transport) courteously attended the next PRowL Group to explain there may be other sources of funding.

An Area Footpaths Sub-Committee has been established, to share information and coordinate work across Bristol, B&NES and South Gloucestershire. Peter Gould and Keith Budd have attended from Bristol. The Area has an aspiration to establish a group of trained volunteers to undertake footpath maintenance and improvement works. This aspiration has been supported, including the offer of funding subject to final budget allocations for the year.

In the meantime, Keith has arranged some informal path clearance work.

Planning and Environmental issues

Susan Carter has been kept busy, particularly by Bristol City Council's proposals in response to new Government policies. There was more information-gathering than concrete action.

Major *transport* developments included:

- *Bristol Rapid Transit*. All three stages were cleared for further development and a series of consultation meetings held. The Group submitted objections to BRT2 (Ashton Gate to Temple Meads) last year. The inquiry expected this year was delayed by a shortage of Inspectors.

- *Local Sustainable Transport Fund*. Another series of meetings about the joint bids by Bristol and three other local authorities. The initial bid (relating to key commuter routes) succeeded and includes some funding to improve the walking environment. A larger bid is being made in December.
- *Walking Strategy*. Published in November, incorporating many of the Group's comments. These earned us an invitation to the launch. The Strategy's more ambitious proposals are dependent on the success of the Local Sustainable Transport Fund bid.
- *A Living Heart for Bristol*. We supported a declaration and campaign by a group of voluntary organisations to pedestrianise more of the City Centre.

On *green spaces*, we maintained a 'watching brief' on:

- *Bristol City Council's Green Spaces Strategy*. Highly controversial, with vocal opposition to proposed sales balanced by concerns about funding improvements. We reviewed the comments we had made last year and decided to continue to support a strategic approach while opposing any proposals that would clearly have an adverse effect on walking.
- *Town and Village Green Registration*. In April the Council was forced to withdraw proposals to end independent decision-making on town and village green registration. We are currently considering their revised proposals.

On *planning*, participation in the Neighbourhood Planning Network helped us keep abreast of changes including:

- *the proposed National Planning Policy Framework*.
- *the approved Bristol Local Development Framework Core Strategy*.
- *proposals for major sites*. Most proposals for major housing schemes in and around Bristol were withdrawn following the Government's abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies. The future of Filton Airfield is now under consideration: we are keen to protect and enhance walking routes.

Membership and publicity

Membership was 825 at the end of the year (908 last year). The decline is disappointing, but is broadly in line with the rest of the Avon Area and appears to reflect the national picture. We have surveyed leavers. The (limited number of) responses were generally positive about the Group, and cited financial pressures, pressure on time and failing health as reasons for leaving.

Activity to promote the Group has included:

- Attendance at Redland May Fair, the Festival of Nature, Walk4Life, a John Muir Trust gathering, and a Stanfords event;
- Local publicity linked to national Ramblers events;
- Appearances on Radio Bristol's Summer Saturday programme and a feature in Venue;
- Maintenance of the website;
- Publicity material at local libraries and Cotswold Outdoor, Taunton Leisure and Nomad;
- Inclusion of (updated) Bristol Backs walks on the new Local Access Forum website;
- Inclusion on the Active Bristol website.

Thanks are due to all who contributed to this.

Sadly, John Maher died in June. John patiently and cheerfully built the current website. Working with him was always a pleasure: he is greatly missed. Peter Gould has stepped into the breach to manage the website for the time being, and it is a measure of the quality of John's work that this has been relatively straightforward. Visits average about 1,000 a month, and major changes are not planned. Tony Kerr continues to manage the photographs: there have been more than 50,000 views of pictures on the Flickr site.

The eBoot has been established, and monthly editions were produced. Following the discussion at last year's AGM, circulation was initially restricted to members who receive their programme electronically, but it has now been decided to provide the newsletter to any member who requests it. Circulation is currently about 200.

However, it is clear that more could be done, and we hope to be able to devote more time to communication and publicity in 2011/12.

Finance

The annual accounts are elsewhere on the agenda. Administrative costs have been reduced by measures such as holding meetings in premises that do not charge. Postage costs, in particular, have been substantially reduced by the fact that approximately 25% of programmes are now circulated electronically, and 40% are hand delivered by volunteers whose help is much appreciated.

Conclusion

The Group's core activities are in good health, although the continuing decline in membership is a cause of concern. There has been progress in the areas identified as priorities at the start of the year (electronic communication; footpath works; experimental Sunday half-day walks), but there are other potential areas for development.