

Bristol Ramblers Annual Report 2009/10

Walks programme

During the year, the Group's programme included 280 walks (262 last year). This included Avon Area walks, Wessex Wanderer walks, and joint walks with other groups. In addition, there were trips to Welsh Bicknor, the Yorkshire Dales, Coniston, Stow on the Wold, St Ives, and even Camina Santiago. Thanks are due to Walk Coordinators, walk leaders and the organisers of trips for maintaining this outstanding programme.

In particular, Clive Richardson's contribution should be noted. Clive is standing down after seven years as B/C Walks Coordinator, and the programme has thrived during his watch. Having cut her teeth on the evening walks, Gwyneth Littlejohn has kindly offered to step into Clive's king-sized boots.

This year also saw the successful visit by CAI Lucca, ably managed by Martin Summerell.

The Group participated in the Ramblers national Get Walking Day and Festival of Winter Walks, gaining useful publicity and some new members. Neil Burlton has done sterling work updating 11 of the Bristol Backs walks. These have been published in two attractive booklets, and the walks were included in the programme over the summer.

Nick Wilkes gallantly persevered with shorter Sunday walks within the city, but take up has been disappointing. Developing some half-day Sunday walks outside the city is a planned priority for 2010/11.

Tony Parsons arranged a very successful first aid training session, at which 11 members were trained. This was partially funded by money generously donated by Alan Burton.

Footpaths issues

There is a full report from the Avon Footpath Sub-committee in the Area Annual Report. In summary:

- The most important and time consuming issue has been "alleygating". To date, Bristol City Council's (BCC)

- procedure is still with the RA's solicitor;
- BCC is developing a new Walking Strategy;
 - There has been a useful meeting with two sections of BCC that develop the City's estate asking them to make connections with the Public Rights of Way Network;
 - Progress on Dundry has stalled because the landowner died;
 - On the riverside paths at Shirehampton and Netham there has been undramatic progress towards dedication;
 - We have kept pressure on BCC about the state of the towpath downstream of the Chequers, and furnished information on the arcane subject of "willow spiling";
 - A complaint about a path at Ashton Vale should lead to general improvement to the network;
 - Across Ashton Vale, we consider the BCC scheme to ameliorate the impact of the proposed Bristol City Stadium to be the best that might be achieved;
 - The Ramblers' representative on a regional Highways Agency Committee is asking questions about the time it will take to replace a Motorway overbridge at Lawrence Weston;
 - An over-engineered cycleway near the Frome at Blackberry Hill has been opposed;
 - Advice was offered to local residents' groups wishing to claim rights of way;
 - BCC was alerted to two outbreaks of Japanese Knotweed.

Now for the dog that did not bark: despite Bristol Group's venture into practical works last year, no-one came forward at the AGM to act as Group Footpath Officer to organise working parties in and around Bristol. As *bona fide* users, Bristol Group members do more footpath clearance with secateurs and sticks than we give ourselves credit for; nevertheless, more might be achieved. "Why", you may ask, "doesn't your Footpath Secretary set this up?" The answer is that Area Footpath Secretaries revel in the legal and bureaucratic briar patch. Group Footpath Officers persuade people to wield sharp tools and shed real blood.

Planning and Environmental issues

Susan Carter has continued to pursue environment and planning issues, acting on behalf of the Bristol Group and/or the Avon Area as

appropriate. She has joined a number of consultative groups: the City Council's Neighbourhood Planning Network; the local transport forum for the old Avon area; and Bristol Civic Society's new Public Spaces Group. The Ramblers' involvement is appreciated.

Comments have been made on the following issues:

- ***Zoo parking on the Downs.*** Objected to proposals by the Zoo to continue parking 660 cars on the Downs for 60 days a year for a further 5 years. Permission given in February for 3 years.
- ***Bristol Local Development Framework (BLDF): draft core strategy.*** A key planning document. Expressed concerns in January about proposed extent and density of housing, while welcoming pro-walking policies. Regional housing targets subsequently abandoned. Public inquiry held. Outcome not yet known.
- ***BLDF site allocation proposals and ideas for development management.*** Expressed concerns in October about number of open spaces proposed for development while again supporting pro-walking and environmental policies.
- ***Bristol Green Spaces Plans.*** Suggested 2008 strategy of selling 'low value' green space to fund improvements elsewhere required review. Some of the green space identified in the 14 plans as 'low value' was clearly highly prized. The Council is due to take decisions on sales in late December, while consultation on individual green spaces will continue.
- ***West of England Rapid Transit: Ashton Vale to Temple Meads and Bristol City Centre.*** Could not support proposals wholeheartedly in the absence of traffic management measures, and made detailed comments on the route. Scheme now put 'on hold' because of funding uncertainties.
- ***West of England Draft Joint Local Transport Plan.*** Welcomed recognition of the value of walking. Criticised lack of targets, costed proposals and data, and the lack of priority for walking.

Campaigning

In addition to local planning issues, the Group has contributed to national Ramblers consultation on led walks and to local budget consultation.

Membership and publicity

Membership was 908 at the end of the year (estimated 965 last year). The decline may be overstated because of a change in the basis of the count,

but any decline is disappointing, although perhaps not surprising in these difficult times. Activity to promote the Group has included:

- Attendance at Redland May Fair, the Festival of Nature, Walk4Life and a University Hospitals' Environmental Event;
- Participation in national events, including the offer of deeply-discounted membership on Get Walking Day (18 new members);
- Publication of the Walking Bristol booklets;
- Redevelopment of the website, which is now averaging 1,000 visits a month;
- Publicity material at Cotswold Outdoor, Taunton Leisure and Nomad;
- Publicity material in local libraries;
- Inclusion on the Active Bristol website.

Thanks are due to all who contributed to this. In particular, John Maher undertook the redevelopment of the website, with Tony Kerr managing the photographs. The new site has had very positive feedback, and the number of views on the Flickr photogallery recently exceeded 10,000. This will provide a platform for improvements to communication and publicity.

A number of opportunities, however, were missed – for example, Bike and Walk to Work Day. Planned priorities for 2010/11 are: further development of electronic communication; further promotional work with local retailers; and enhanced capacity to participate in national and local events.

Finance

The annual accounts are elsewhere on the agenda. All in all, the financial position is better than had been feared.

Conclusion

The Group's core activities are in good health, although the apparent decline in membership is a cause of concern. There are a number of areas where there is room for further development, and additional capacity in the form of Vice Chair, Footpaths Officer, Communications Officer and Sunday Half-Day Walks Coordinator would be very helpful.