



Kent Area

Minutes of Annual General Meeting held on 6 February 2010 at Shorne Village Hall, The Street, Shorne, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 3EA

Present

Peter Skipp (Chairman), David Law (Vice Chairman), Les Preston (Vice Chairman), Ray Lawrence (Treasurer), Robert Peel (Secretary) and about 100 members

Welcome from the Hosting Group

Tony Faulkner, Chairman of Medway Group, welcomed members on behalf of the Group. Although a small group, it has made a regular contribution to the Medway Walking Festival, now the North Kent Walking Festival. Medium walks (around five miles) and local walks tend to be best attended. Members are less inclined always to walk with their own group and choose whichever group is offering the most attractive walk. The Group organises a range of social events including an annual dinner and an annual walking holiday.

Apologies for Absence

Leslie Oliver, Colin Bridge, George Chappel, Peter Royall, Glynis Clifton and Richard West were unable to attend the meeting and had sent their apologies.

Minutes of AGM held on 7 February 2009

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 7 February 2009 in Headcorn were agreed to be a true record.

Annual Report

Peter Skipp, introducing the Report, said that 2009 had been a good year for Kent. In addition to the continuing progress on public rights of way work, we were trying to raise the profile of the Ramblers in Kent and had bought new kit for taking to events. We were keen to attend local shows and would appreciate feedback from members with ideas for suitable venues. Or would Groups like to borrow the kit for their own use?

For the Ramblers as a whole it had been a difficult year and the presence of Rodney Whittaker, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, was appreciated.

Formal approval of the annual report was proposed, seconded and agreed.

Annual Accounts and Treasurer's Report

Ray Lawrence presented the Treasurer's report and accounts for the year ended 30 September 2009. Because of significant financial problems for the Ramblers nationally and a vigorous drive to reduce costs, funding from Central Office was down. The changes to the expenses headings imposed by Central Office made year on year comparisons difficult so the old headings had been used this year.

Over the last year or two, Area had consulted with groups on funding arrangements but these were on hold at the moment because of the financial difficulties at Central Office.

The bottom line was that the Area was worth £24,174 at the end of the year. The current year's budget of around £19,000 is much the same as last year but income will be down. We plan to earmark a substantial part of our reserves for Bayham Abbey legal costs to bring the remaining reserves down to the lowest level that we think acceptable.

In answer to a question from the floor, Ray said that the minimum acceptable level of reserves had not been decided but that it could be in the region of £10,000 bearing in mind guidance from Central Office for a level equal to 40% of annual expenditure.

David Law asked whether the heads of charitable expenditure chosen by Central Office meant that it would no longer be possible to say how much has been spent on public rights of way work compared with promoting walking. Or will we be able to separate them out? Ray said that it would be possible but because we had allocated expenditure to the Central Office heads it would be necessary to go through every item and separate them all out.

Formal approval of the annual report, the accounts and Treasurer's report was proposed, seconded and agreed.

Motions

Geoff King proposed the following motion:

That Kent Area adopts a project to collect evidence of the extent of the problem of barbed wire on or near to stiles. Report sheets to collect details of cases, including photographs, should be made available to Groups and when completed collected by Area. The evidence collected should either be used to support an Area project or be presented to Central Office to seek a national campaign for a change in the law and/or enforcement of relevant existing laws.

Geoff referred to the case of a lady who grabbed barbed wire while negotiating a stile and required 17 stitches in her hand. This was a common risk. He therefore proposed a campaign to introduce new laws. He had designed some report sheets which were available for inspection and which would accommodate both narrative and photographs. These should be completed, collected and sent to Central Office or Kent County Council.

John Smout said that these ideas were already encompassed in the relevant British Standards – no barbed wire within one metre of a stile – what was needed was to have them made a legal requirement.

In response to a question from the floor, asking whether walkers could take snippers and just remove any offending barbed wire, Geoff said that great care would have to be taken to ensure that such action was legal.

Andy Taylor seconded the motion and it was passed overwhelmingly.

Peter Skipp said that while on the subject of public rights of way he would like to pay tribute to Pat Wilson who had been fighting unstintingly to protect paths since 1952 and he hoped she would feature in the Local Heroes section of the Area web site that we were creating to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Ramblers' Association.

Robert Peel proposed the following motion to be put forward to General Council:

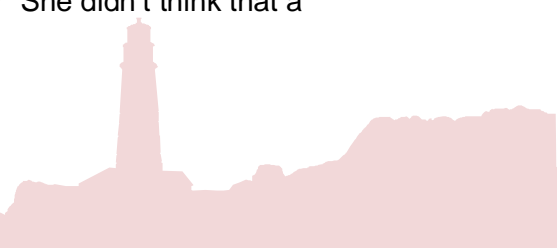
This General Council expresses concern over the financial management and general running of the Ramblers Association in the last two years. Without prejudice to the generality of its concerns, General Council specifically regrets:

- The failure of the Board of Trustees and Senior Management Team to be aware in early 2009 of a developing financial crisis so severe that by May 2009 they would be announcing a significant programme of redundancies and the closure of offices in Scotland and Wales, and the failure to ensure the General Council was properly notified of the financial situation;
- The mismanagement of the introduction of a new membership system, the inordinate time it has taken to remedy problems and the substantial cost to the organisation in terms of both cash and the goodwill of members and volunteers;
- The untimely communication between the Board of Trustees and Central Office on the one hand, and members in Areas, Groups, and General Council on the other, including slow, confused, and limited explanations of the many problems that have faced the Ramblers;
- The failure of the Board of Trustees to honour Article 17.3 of the Articles of Association by including in Fresh Air Firm Ground only vague aspirations and relegating almost all specific objectives to a business plan on which there was no consultation.

The Board of Trustees are asked to produce a report on how these issues are to be remedied and circulate it to Areas no later than 31 July 2010.

Robert reminded the meeting of the motion that had been passed at Kent Area's 2009 AGM. This had asked the Officers to raise certain concerns about the running and direction of the Association with Central Office. This they had done, but without a satisfactory response. Then the Association's major financial problems had come to light. These had not been debated at General Council in April 2009 because delegates had not been aware of them. Kent Area's Officers had sought a special meeting of General Council in the Autumn but the request had been rejected by the Board of Trustees. So General Council 2010 would be the first opportunity for the serious problems of the last year to be raised within the Association's democratic processes. For this to happen, appropriate motions were necessary. This motion would allow many of the key issues to be addressed.

Beverley Callaghan, Canterbury Group, said that she had been dismayed to see the motion. Whether or not the criticisms were justified, she felt that the motion was fundamentally flawed in terms of what it was trying to achieve and what was written in it. It was full of criticism but what was actually to be done about it? She didn't think that a report by July 2010 would help everyone to move on.



Peter Skipp, who used to be on the Board of Trustees, said that he had long felt the need for team building between Areas and Central Office. He had been very concerned at the way events had unfolded over the last year or so. There was a tremendous amount of concern across the country. He felt very sorry for the treatment of Scotland and Wales. There had been a missed opportunity to get together in the Autumn to nip people's concerns in the bud. It was not possible to say in detail what needed doing – the crucial thing was to build a team. It was no reflection on Rodney Whittaker, but there was a lack of leadership. This may not be the ideal motion but it would get the debate going. There may well be motions from other Areas and there would be a process of compositing, amendments and amendments to amendments before the final agenda for General Council emerged.

Peter went on to say that he would like all members to be able to unite behind a common cause but that common cause seemed to have been lost. The debate has diverted energy from traditional work and needs to be resolved. The debate now needs to be brought to a head, the key issues need to be debated at General Council and the Board of Trustees needs to say how we are going to move forward.

Neville Machin said that these issues had a long history. Some of the problems at Central Office started nearly five years ago. There were computer problems. We offered to help. Our expertise and offers were ignored. Membership has been falling. There has been creeping incompetence. There are concerns about the direction of the Association. There are plenty of walking clubs that people can join more cheaply than the Ramblers if that is all they want. But our charitable objectives, especially public rights of way protection, make us unique. Without that we would not be special – but the significance of this work had been lost in the verbiage about other stuff, including campaigning which is something different. We have approached Central Office. Progress has not been adequate. Financially things have gone backward. If we don't put the issues forward they will not be discussed. We must have that debate.

Les Preston referred to the need for transparency in the organisation. There is a lack of that. The membership system needed fixing and it wasn't fixed. We raised the matter time and again but were not listened to. On finance, it had taken great persistence to obtain a true description of the problems. As for Fresh Air, Firm Ground, what is it? And what of the focus on youth – there is nothing wrong with that but most of our new members and money are likely to come from the over 50s.

Roy Barry of Sevenoaks offered support for the motion. He also complained that he had not received Footpath Worker for the past year.

Chris Baker from North West Kent said that he had looked in detail at last year's accounts and felt that the motion was not just important but essential. He asked whether other Areas would be putting similar motions. Robert Peel responded, explaining that following a meeting in Leeds in September attended by 90 "Concerned Ramblers" from all over the country, he had joined a group tasked with producing a suite of motions for General Council. This motion was based on a draft produced by the group but had been substantially modified by the Kent Area Management Team and Area Council. At least one other Area had started from the same draft but had substantially modified it in other ways. So it would be interesting to see what the Agenda Committee would do by way of consolidating all the motions.

Rodney Whittaker responded. He said that no doubt a lot that had been going on in the Ramblers had come to a head in the last year. However, Footpath Worker is alive and well! It is absolutely right that the matters be discussed at General Council, so he was not too worried about the exact wording of the motion. However, there was already a

report on the financial problems from the Treasurer – what more could be added? There will be a report on the CRM but now is not the right time while the staff are still labouring to put it right. A detailed programme of work on the CRM has just been published on the web site. On communication, a lot has been done over the last year. There is now regular contact between Areas and Trustees. Four letters have gone out. There have been eleven regional meetings, including two in London at which Kent was well represented. Rodney felt that it was because of concern over other issues that people had turned on the strategy – much work had gone into Fresh Air, Firm Ground which had been passed unanimously.

It was agreed that the motion be put forward to General Council with four votes against and one abstention.

Len Faulkner proposed a vote of thanks to the Officers for all their time and effort.

David Law said that he had felt very uncomfortable over the last couple of years. Everybody, including the Area Management Team and Rodney, are doing their best for the Ramblers. It is right that we should have differences. One of the things that has troubled David has been the lack of honesty. Now things are out and can be discussed. He hopes things will be better next year.

Election of Honorary Officers

Neville Machin was elected Chairman

David Law and Peter Skipp were elected Vice Chairmen

Robert Peel was elected Secretary

Ray Lawrence was elected Treasurer

There were no nominations to serve as Area Council Representatives for Affiliated Clubs

Ken Neville and Les Preston were elected Area Council Representatives for Individual Members

Peter paid tribute to the contribution that Les had made as Vice President.

Appointment of Auditor

Keith Miles was reappointed to a round of applause.

Address by Rodney Whittaker

Rodney said that it was good to see a flourishing Area and to visit such a good venue for an AGM. It was also good to see all Officer posts filled and regular turnover – this was not the case in all Areas. And to see the Area offering a robust and democratic contribution to Association matters.

Rodney had been a member for over 30 years during which walking had been his main leisure pursuit. The UK's wealth of walking opportunities was a wonderful thing and he had become Surrey's Footpath Secretary six or seven years ago because he wanted to contribute to its protection. Volunteers are important to the Association but so are the

members. He took over as Chairman of the Board of Trustees last year and many have commented on the poor timing!

On finances, the Association had traditionally budgeted for a deficit and this had worked well for years. The new Treasurer, Jonathan Kipling, was offering a level of financial advice and input better than ever before. Last year £1m had to be cut from the budget, causing a lot of unhappiness. He suggested that anyone who had not read Jonathan Kipling's report into the financial difficulties should do so.

On communications, moving to electronic communications had saved £100K towards the £1m savings target. There is no wish to leave anyone behind but a lot of Areas work well on purely electronic communications.

On the CRM, this had been badly managed. There had not been adequate expertise at Central Office or on the Board of Trustees. They were now much more aware of the skills needed. Rodney apologised in particular to membership secretaries. The first redesigned reports from the system came out in December – the proof of their success will be in membership secretaries' responses. The problems had caused them a lot of work and this was regrettable.

On strategy, the new strategic plan was adopted two years ago. It included a focus on projects and grants. The Association had previously relied on membership income and legacies and it was felt that they were missing a trick when promoting something so healthy as walking. Contributing to this establishes a community of interest with politicians, something on which we trail behind some other organisations. Current issues are getting the detail right on coastal access and the forthcoming review of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

Finally, Rodney commented that other organisations would give their right arms for the army of volunteers that we have available.

Open Forum

The following points were raised:

- Gordon Sencicle complained of a general lack of responsiveness from Kent County Council on rights of way matters. And they seem happy to allow farmers to get away year after year with taking down waymarks. Gordon had been doing rights of way work for 25 years but wondered how much longer he can continue being ignored by KCC.
- Roy Barry agreed saying that there were dozens of examples in his area and wondering if we were giving KCC too easy a time.
- Neville Machin responded that he had become aware over the last three years of KCC not doing basic tasks such as acknowledging every complaint and of footpath work not being done in certain areas because of prioritisation. He was hoping that the Countryside Footpath Wardens would soon be doing some of the work but that was still 18 months away. He thought that perhaps we had been giving KCC an easy ride and now was the time to start toughening up.
- Alan Smith raised the issue of concerns about coastal access through nature reserves. He suggested that the case of Sheppey offered an interesting scientific experiment because there were no paths on the Sheppey side of the estuary and

there were paths on the opposite side. Rodney added that there would be extensive consultation on the detail arrangements for coastal access and that volunteers in Kent would be needed to look after our interests.

- John Hill of Maidstone and Tonbridge & Malling Groups regretted the loss of the old handbook including the bed & breakfast guide. Rodney explained that there had been three problems with that book – it constituted a benefit that jeopardised our charitable tax status, advertising was drying up as B&B accommodation moved to on-line promotion and in a survey of membership 60% of respondents said they wanted something different. So they tried the book of walks which a lot of people liked and a lot didn't but that was axed as one of this year's economies.
- Rodney also addressed the issue of KCC not doing enough – something he expected to be a big problem generally with council budgets being cut. So he called on all members to write to their councillors stressing the benefits of walking.
- Peter invited expressions of interest in the role of Minute Secretary for Area Council to enable minutes to be prepared sooner and Officer time to be freed up for other work.
- Robert encouraged everyone to look at the Area web site which he and Margaret Lubbock were in the process of updating. They would appreciate suggestions for additional content.

Next Annual General Meeting

The 2011 AGM will be hosted by North West Kent Group and held on Saturday 5 February 2011 at St John Fisher Church Hall, Bexley.

