



Kent Area

Minutes of Annual General Meeting held on 4 February 2012 at Brockhill Performing Arts College, Sandling Road, Saltwood, Hythe, Kent, CT21 4HL

Present

Neville Machin (Chairman), David Law (Vice Chairman), Peter Skipp (Vice Chairman), Ray Lawrence (Treasurer), Robert Peel (Secretary) and about 120 members

Welcome and Introduction

Neville Machin extended a warm welcome to the many members who had defied the forecast of severe weather to attend the meeting. He said that never had the efforts of the Ramblers been in greater need, a need met of course by the members and volunteers. So he was pleased to pay tribute to all our hard-working volunteers. Although it was not always obvious, Kent has some of the best-kept paths in the UK – although the waymarking could perhaps be better.

Neville also extended a warm welcome to Benedict Southworth, the Ramblers' new Chief Executive.

Other members paid tribute to Michael Stokes and Fred Goad, two former Area Chairmen who had died since the last meeting. Michael had been active both in Kent and Europe and had played important roles in establishing both the Greensand Way and the Royal Military Canal Path.

Welcome from the Hosting Group

Margaret Lubbock, Chairman of White Cliffs Group, welcomed members on behalf of the Group. She advised members that the Group had offered 150 walks during the past year. Members of the Group had also visited Morocco where they had climbed in the Atlas Mountains reaching the summit of the highest peak in North Africa at 4167 metres.

Margaret thanked the members of the Group who had worked to hard preparing for today's meeting.

Apologies for Absence

Gerti O'Connor and David Thornewell.

Minutes of AGM held on 5 February 2011

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 5 February 2011 in Bexley were agreed to be a true record.

Annual Report

Neville Machin asked the meeting to approve the Annual Report, thanking Robert Peel for his hard work putting it together. The meeting approved the Report.

Annual Accounts and Treasurer's Report

Ray Lawrence invited question on the accounts and Treasurer's Report. There were no questions and the meeting approved the documents.

Election of Honorary Officers

Alison Hargreaves introduced herself to the meeting and was elected Chairman

Margaret Lubbock and Neville Machin 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

Les Preston, David Law and Peter Skipp were elected Area Council Representatives for Individual Members

Appointment of Auditor

Keith Miles was reappointed.

Address by Benedict Southworth

Benedict explained that he was in his first week as Chief Executive of the Ramblers, having started the previous Wednesday. So, rather than tell people what they already know about the organisation, he proposed to say a little about himself.

He said that it was walking in Kent that had most influenced his thinking about walking and would continue to do so. He was pleased to thank volunteers in the Area for all their work looking after the paths, even though he hadn't known it at the time. He could walk from his front door to the Greensand Way but for many years hadn't realised the contribution of the Ramblers to his experience. He appreciated it now, all the more so after the last three days learning how much is going on in the organisation.

Benedict once set off from his front door and walked to Canterbury. He had been amazed how empty the paths were – although he could see London he could walk for hours without meeting anyone. Although people would walk close to their own locality, their range was really quite limited.



He wanted to make it clear that he is the Chief Executive of the Ramblers, not of Central Office. He is there to facilitate what goes on right across Great Britain. He intends to get out and about and that members will see a lot of him.

Benedict is astonished by the scale of the work that is done to keep the footpath network open. But this is largely invisible to people outside the Ramblers. It is his ambition that no one should go walking without knowing the contribution we make.

He acknowledged that he does not yet have all the answers. What he does have is a lot of experience running organisations and being a troublemaker. He argued that we need a vision, we need love, we need to know where we are going and what we are trying to do. You don't get that sitting in an office in London.

Members of the audience made the following points:

- There is a tendency for Central Office to focus on campaigns and forget that the Group members drive the Ramblers and provide the volunteers and that most people walk in groups.
- Central Office might be better located outside London – how about Tonbridge?
- The Ramblers sometimes makes enemies unnecessarily by being inflexible about footpath closures and diversions – a more conciliatory approach would win friends.
- There is currently contention with KCC about the use of volunteers to do footpath work such as installing stiles and gates – Benedict could get the details from Ed Wilson at Central office.

Benedict responded that he could not yet offer a view on the best location for Central Office, that we should adopt a pragmatic approach to footpath closures and diversions but we must not allow it to be thought that access is something that can be given up in hard times and that he will talk to Ed about footpath volunteer work.

Topical Issues

Robert Peel used PowerPoint slides to illustrate a number of topical issues as follows:

Appeal for Help

Robert explained that although all the Area posts for which the AGM was responsible had been filled for the coming year, there was still an urgent need for more help from members. His own role was overloaded, especially as he was being nominated for election as national Treasurer in April, but more importantly David Gatward had vacated the role of Public Rights of Way Manager and no successor had yet been found. Although the role was a substantial one, it was not essential that all the work be done by one person. He therefore appealed for anyone willing to help with any part of the work to come forward so that the team could consider how best to use their skills. Neville Machin gave a brief description of the role.

Capel Battery Site

Continuing, Robert updated the meeting on action being taken to restore public access to the Access Land at the Capel Battery Site. The Annual Review had

outlined the saga up to the date the Review had gone to the printers and at that stage a hearing by Magistrates of an application by Kent County Council for obstructions to be removed from three access points had been adjourned to the end of January. The hearing had resumed earlier that week and the order granted, allowing 60 days for compliance to enable the landowner to discuss an application to exclude certain areas where excavation of World War II underground structures was taking place. White Cliffs Group were to be congratulated on their vigilance and continuing efforts to strengthen KCC's resolve in tackling the issue; and on this occasion KCC had done a thoroughly good job for which we were all grateful.

Bayham Abbey

Robert reported the sad result of the public inquiry into the Ramblers' claim to establish two paths across the Bayham Abbey estate as rights of way. At the time of the last AGM, the outcome was being awaited and when it came on 1 April it held that although the paths had been well walked they had been obstructed on sufficient occasions to prevent the necessary 20 years of continuous use being established. Robert was nevertheless very impressed with the work that members of the Tunbridge Wells Group had put into the case and hoped that people would not be discouraged from tackling difficult cases in future.

Membership Trends

Robert then showed some graphs indicating how membership had declined over the past couple of years. However, the last three months had shown an upturn and he hoped that this trend would continue. He raised a number of issues around why people join and remain member of the Ramblers and suggested that the campaigning work we do (using the term broadly to include all our public rights of way work) is not well understood by many of our members or the public at large. Nevertheless, many of our members do not join Group walks so presumably want to support our other work. There is a contradiction here that needs to be resolved but clearly we do need to improve the publicity that we give to our rights of way work.

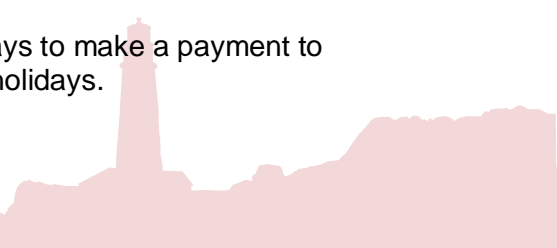
Web Site

Finally Robert said that the updating of our website a year ago had increased visitor traffic but not by as much as he had hoped. He noted that since the publication of this year's Annual Review there had been a significant jump in visitors, particularly to the pages offering walking routes for people to download and print out. He invited members to contribute more routes, especially in East Kent as the routes available at present were biased towards West Kent.

Open Forum

A member advised that an application had been made for the registration of a village green at Sandgate and sought the support of the Ramblers. Robert Peel said that the Open Spaces Society was better able to assist with such matters but invited the member to send full details for consideration by Area Council. Pat Wilson feared that the Government would be seeking to weaken the legislation protecting village greens and urged the Rambler and the Open Spaces Society to make joint representations.

Michael Collins drew attention to an offer from Ramblers Holidays to make a payment to any Ramblers Group for every member that takes one of their holidays.



Roy Barry invited members to sign a petition he had with him asking Kent County Council to create a new path to complete what is currently a cul-de-sac path near Brands Hatch (number SD200).

Alan Smith expressed pleasure with the outcome of the Capel Battery Site case because if the landowner had been allowed to exclude the public from Access land on grounds of safety it would have driven a coach and horses through the legislation.

Dave Wetton appealed for an urgent meeting of all public rights of way volunteers in Kent to map out a strategy for the future.

Neville Machin noted that for many years he had been offering to KCC that the Ramblers should take over waymarking in return for credit in the form of our name on the waymarks. KCC had always refused this yet there were waymarks in Kent bearing the names of other organisation such as Shepherd Neame Brewery. He asked members to report any other instances to him. He also reported the news that the KCC budget for rights of way work was being cut by a third.

Robert Peel drew attention to the two amounts of £7000 in the reserves in the balance sheet which have been set aside for any necessary legal action to force KCC to meet its obligations to keep paths open.

Next Annual General Meeting

The 2013 AGM will be hosted by Ashford Group – date and venue to be advised.

