Happy New Year to all the West Riding Ramblers;

We hope you’ve enjoyed a pleasant festive period and taken the opportunity to enjoy many good strolls with both friends and family.

This year we hope to see positive developments in our efforts to attract new members, whilst maintaining our friendly and welcoming appearance to all newcomers on walks. As you know a large group met in July to ‘brainstorm’ what could be done to increase uptake of membership and currently each local group is devising their own strategies to employ at a local level. We will have the AGM being held on Saturday February 1st at the Clarke Foley Centre in Ilkley, open to all members to attend. We encourage all groups to send representatives to the Area Council meetings held once a quarter (January 6th, May 2nd, July 6th and October 22nd) as this is an opportunity to have your opinions heard and discussed. If you cannot attend in person, please do send your thoughts via email to us here at WRR in advance of the meetings.

May’s Area Council meeting is to be held at a different venue and on a Saturday to encourage more people to attend; the reason is that the meeting’s main topic of the agenda is to discuss the progress of all initiatives being followed from the brainstorming session last year and the role that the Area Council can play in supporting efforts across the West Riding Area.

We have secured a large number of leaflets from Central Office for the purpose of placing these alongside our individual group walks programmes in local venues where prospective members might take an interest. These will be distributed to Group Secretaries.

As always, this edition features the Annual Report to provide an update on all groups’ activities in the past twelve months, as well as the Treasurer and Chairman’s reports.

Caroline Spalding
The Ramblers PR & Media Team pay a visit

Take A Hike welcomed members of the Ramblers PR & Media Team to the area in November. The purpose of the visit was for group members Nikki and Rich Hall to share their experiences on camera. The Ramblers had picked up the story when Nikki had responded to a Ramblers’ social media post on World Friendship Day.

After a morning of being interviewed in the grounds of the Calverley Arms, Nikki and Rich joined other members of the group for a short walk. Attendees had consented in advance to their images being used for publicity. The intention was to mainly capture natural images and video so filming was fairly discreet, with occasional pauses to enable the videographer to run ahead for a good shot. During the lunch break members were invited to take part in vox pop interviews about the benefits of walking and being in a Ramblers group.

Group Secretary Susan Wilkinson said “It was fun welcoming Deborah and Matthew to Leeds, supporting Nikki and Rich and sharing our enthusiasm for walking, Take A Hike and the Ramblers. It was interesting to learn about how filming works too. The glorious autumnal colours of Calverley Woods provided a great backdrop and the team seemed very happy with the material. We hope it will help to promote the Ramblers nationally and at a local level.”

The end product is due to be used in the promotion of the Ramblers Festival of Winter Walks.

Susan Wilkinson

In case you missed it...

West Riding Ramblers' Group Lower Wharfedale enjoyed a piece of national publicity in the winter edition of Walk in the article entitled “A Picture of Our Paths” (pages 26-30). Within the article, Richard Smith, formerly Footpath Officer for Lower Wharfedale whom we featured in our April 2019 edition of WRR, suggests that local authorities could look beyond government grants to maintain our footpath network; accessing funds intended, for example, to preserve Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

The article also quotes Elaine Webb, a local advocacy manager for the Ramblers who has some good ideas we could apply here in the West Riding. She suggests “We could be talking to other local groups like residents’ associations (and) faith groups... asking them to get involved in protecting paths... It’s a way of showing your MP and councillors why they should listen.”

This is supported by Richard Smith, who disagrees with the thought that local authorities are happy to relinquish their responsibilities to volunteers. He says in the article “They see that volunteers strengthen that service and therefore they support it more.”
The proposed route of the A59 realignment at Kex Gill on Blubberhouses Moor has now been finalised, and in constructive discussions with North Yorkshire County Council, the revised rights of way network has been agreed by user groups. On the basis of broad equivalence to the existing rights of way affected by the realignment, representatives from the Ramblers and other user groups regard it as a reasonable deal and give it their support.

The need for the A59 realignment has arisen because of geological problems to the existing route on the southern side of the Hall Beck valley near Blubberhouses. On several occasions in recent years the A59 has been closed for a lengthy period because of cracks in its surface as the hillside has slipped downwards. The A59 is a busy road not only because of local traffic but as an important route between Yorkshire and Lancashire. When it has been closed, the diversion has caused serious traffic congestion in Otley and Ilkley. North Yorkshire County Council decided that recurrent repairs will not solve the problem, and proposed a realignment of the A59 to the north of the Hall Beck valley.

The two-and-a-half-mile proposed realignment leaves the existing route on Blubberhouses Moor at Raven’s Peak SE 136 552 (approx.) and re-joins it at Blubberhouses by the car park at the top end of Fewston Reservoir. Much of the realigned route is on the bridleway which forms the eastern extension of Kex Gill Road. This is the original route of the former turnpike road between Harrogate and Skipton. Ironically, because the Kex Gill route was prone to bad weather in winter, it was replaced in the 1820s by a new turnpike in the Hall Beck valley and this is the route that became the A59. No one of course could have foreseen that in the future the unstable hillside would render it unsuitable for vast numbers of heavy motorised vehicles. When the A59 realignment is completed, the western end of the existing bridleway will be retained for a few yards, then a new bridleway will turn right and go under the “western underpass” of the new road. Here it will be joined by the footpath from Raven’s Peak extended for a further 100 yards. The new bridleway will continue towards Blubberhouses on a route just to the south of the realigned A59. It will be a modest distance from the new road, and there will be attractive views of the Hall Beck valley. At SE 160 554 (approx.) the bridleway will turn south to connect with the former A59 to reach Blubberhouses. The road junction of the A59 with Shepherd Hill (the road to Otley) will be reconstructed and this will provide a safer junction which will also benefit the adjacent car park users. A refuge in the A59 to provide a safer crossing for walkers using the Six Dales Trail towards Thruscross has been suggested. There will be a further underpass beneath the new road, the “eastern underpass”, at SE 158 555 (approx.), and this will provide a route to the UUR (unclassified unsealed road) that goes northwards from Limekiln Hill. The continuation of the UUR south to the former A59 will be extinguished, but the new bridleway provides a satisfactory replacement nearby. The former A59 will be closed as a right of way except for the short section near Blubberhouses that overlaps the new bridleway.

All in all, it is a reasonable equivalent deal for the rights of way network. The new bridleway is a satisfactory route and will be pleasant walking. A proposal to divert the bridleway to a line immediately to the north of and very close to the realignment was successfully rejected by the user groups, strong pressure from the Ramblers to retain the footpath from Raven’s Peak was successful, and links with the existing rights of way network have been retained. Further details can be found on the North Yorkshire County Council website. Work on the new road is expected to start in Spring 2020 and be completed in Summer 2021.

Keith Wadd
Solo Walking
The Ramblers provides walking groups as well as actively campaigning; members may value one more than the other but almost everyone walks, whether alone or in company.

Walking in led groups is a popular choice, offering a safe and sociable shared experience which is particularly suitable for novices. The advantages of walking with a partner or with children rather than in a walking group are manifold, including shared intimacies.

There are, however, definite benefits to accrue from walking by yourself which also deserve to be highlighted. Solo walking can give a great boost to confidence: with no-one else to rely on, total dependence on yourself is often a positive learning experience and may reveal unsuspected inner strengths. Judging risks carefully and successfully (for example, when crossing a fast-moving stream) may foster a real sense of personal achievement; critical decisions such as changing course or turning back are simply up to you.

As there is no need to conform to outside control, stopping whenever you wish, whether for refreshment or simply to enjoy a welcome rest, is no problem. Going at your own natural speed should be more comfortable than following one set by a group leader; and setting targets, whether to increase staying power or to tick off summits, is a personal matter.

Inner peace may be difficult to find with others around, even if the chatter is welcome rather than distracting. A more profound connection with the countryside is achievable alone, given the freedom to concentrate at length on whatever arises, including views and wildlife.

A common experience when walking unaccompanied is a sort of relaxed reflectiveness which can even help with problem-solving. As Bill Bryson says in A Walk in the Woods: "... most of the time you don’t think. No point. Instead, you exist in a kind of mobile Zen mode, your brain like a balloon tethered with string, accompanying but not actually part of the body below. Walking for hours and miles becomes as automatic, as unremarkable, as breathing."

Other walkers encountered en route will often stop to chat with an individual person, so solitary walking can turn out to be just as convivial as with groups of acquaintances. Despite commonly expressed fears, solo walkers (women as well as men) are very rarely at risk from others when walking in the countryside -- although groups obviously offer the safest protection. I have never felt at risk from other walkers, only from their dogs! Some less-rural areas might warrant extra caution, however, particularly at dusk.

Building up experience certainly helps with solo walking, since it is empowering to be mentally prepared for any surprise setbacks. Without the assistance and guidance of others, the practicalities also take on a greater significance: there is an increased need to plan ahead regarding route, equipment, food, and especially emergency aids such as phone and whistle. Navigation skills relevant to the terrain are vital, and if venturing into wilderness it is definitely advisable to let others know your route before setting out.

In conclusion, the attractions of walking alone should be fully appreciated alongside those of walking in groups. Both are at the heart of the Ramblers’ mission.

Jim Vickery

Jerry Pearlman the Campaigner

In all the various tributes paid to Jerry Pearlman, as CPRE’s John Mordy has reminded us, there has been little mention of Jerry’s outstanding work as Chairman of PUDMAG - the Pudsey-Dishforth Motorway Action Group.

At a time when Leeds marketed itself as “The Motorway City of the Seventies” there was a highly ambitious plan to provide a short cut between the M62 west of Leeds through to the A1. Not only would this road slice through the precious Green Belts of both Leeds and Bradford, but devastate many of the remaining rural parts of Airedale through areas of fine countryside in Lower Wharfedale, Nidderdale west of Harrogate and across the Vale of York to Dishforth and the A1(M).

Jerry had the vision to realise that this was an issue that would not only result in the closure or diversion of many popular footpaths but produce huge visual blight and corridors of traffic noise through otherwise unspoiled countryside popular with walkers. West Riding Ramblers joined forces with CPRE and local protest groups in what was one of the UK’s first successful campaigns to frustrate a major motorway proposal.

This was not just a matter of safeguarded footpaths but the countryside through which the footpaths passed. A decade or so later we managed to get the Ilkley by-pass prevented. This would have meant a five-lane highway through magnificent Middleton Woods, one of the finest, most-loved bluebell woods in Yorkshire. It would have been part of what CPRE’s Jim Burton was to describe as a “motorway by stealth” through the
Wharfe Valley.

This is all part of an on-going debate within the Ramblers. Should we oppose road schemes which might reduce delay and congestion and bring regional economic benefit? What about major new rail schemes such as HS2?

Evidence shows however that the more we expand the road network the more traffic grows to fill the space created which in turn leads to even more traffic congestion and parking demand. Air pollution in our cities and even small towns is now at dangerous levels. And not everyone is convinced of the value of HS2.

But when schemes do go ahead, highway authorities and Network Rail are now much more aware of the need to protect pedestrian access and amenity. West Riding RA Footpath Committee have been heavily involved in negotiations with Leeds City Council, over, for example the new East Leeds Orbital Road proposals, in order to safeguard key footpath routes. If HS2 does get the go-ahead to Leeds, detailed consultations with WR Area Footpath Committee have in most cases resulted in good solutions. A recent proposal discussed with Lower Wharfedale Group over removing a dangerous crossing at Burley-in Wharfedale has resulted in a cattle creep being brought into use, but also additional paths to improve the local footpath network.

There are even greater longer-term issues to be faced. Should Ramblers get involved in the wider climate crisis? One of our members recently grumbled that he didn’t join the Ramblers to support Extinction Rebellion. Given the average age of RA members is approaching their 70s, it is easy for us to be more relaxed about the future than young people in their 20s and 30s. Winter floods blocking and damaging footpaths are already a regular occurrence, as are moorland fires in summer. Both threaten access and amenity, let alone the many greater impacts of climate change yet to come.

Yet many of us are hostile even to the simple idea of occasionally using public transport even say once a month for a trip into the countryside, despite the extra carbon emissions our journey causes and frequent parking chaos and gridlock in places like Bolton Abbey and Malham.

In the longer term this is why the campaigning work of West Riding Area Footpath and Countryside Committees is now, more than ever before, increasingly vital, both locally and globally. To safeguard our footpaths, and the countryside they enable us to access, we need to engage with other environmental bodies, and in so doing attract a younger audience. That’s something that Jerry Pearlman, as an environmentalist and rambler, fully understood.

Colin Speakman

A day in the life of a Footpath Officer

What does a Footpath officer get up to on a reasonably active day? I’ll try to give a brief narrative of the footpath issues which turned up during Friday, November 22nd, 2019.

Looked first at the emails. I remember that a footpath officer colleague in Doncaster asked me for help with using Assemble, a new computing contact system which Ramblers Central Office is using to send out the papers for footpath diversions, so I send him a picture of what my screen looks like when I get a new job so that he could compare it with what he sees. Like all new systems it will take some time for it to fit in with the way that officers have been managing their tasks in the era when order papers were sent out by post. It will help to give CO a much better idea of what officers get up to if we all learn to use it, but we are having to ask the team who are
managing the launch of the new system how we should deal with jobs which we do but which the team haven’t given us a method for.

One kind of job that I have to deal with quite often in urban Leeds is to keep an eye on planning applications which affect rights of way. Just recently, with Mike Willison my Countryside colleague, we revived consultee status with the Planning department of Leeds City Council. We are notified of relevant applications as they come in, which is a great help, as scanning through 200 to 300 applications each week to spot the ones we need to know about was laborious and frankly I often missed weeks. I was notified about a planning application on a site next to a path between Gildersome and Upper Moor Side, so I have to print off a copy of the Leeds footpath map showing the path in order to walk it and check out the possible effects of the application later that day. The map tells you where the stiles, kissing gates etc are on the path (or were at one time?) as I’ll want to report on the state of the path to Rights of Way. Another reason I want to look at the path is that in the Gildersome area lots of farms have converted to riding stables and sometimes they put up electric fences to keep horses apart which get in the way of footpaths. It’s not a path I’ve walked before, so I ought to get to know it. That’s for the afternoon, if the rain holds off.

I’ve been negotiating with the Planning department how to ensure that developers who need to get a footpath diversion order to accommodate new buildings start consulting user groups in good time. I’ve had a string of cases in the past few months where I have received a consultation notice, only to find that when I got to the site the new roads were already built and the houses well on the way to completion. There is nothing left to consult about in such cases. I’ve been trying to persuade the Planners to devise some kind of strong advice which would mean that developers started to consult before the earth moving equipment has moved in and eradicated the path. They have agreed it would be a good idea and are are looking at ways it can be done within the strict set of rules planning operates under. If we get something worked out in Leeds which improves the consultation mechanisms it will be an advance in what is a national problem. I copy the email series about this to the Footpath Committee Chair as we have a meeting coming up next week.

Just a few seconds to send round a link to a press story about the new tick-borne disease to my usual list of footpath contacts in the West Riding Area.

Off to Gildersome in the afternoon. I get boots and gaiters on at the end of the path, noting that the footpath sign is in place and in a good state. The path is farm track for a bit, but that fades out and the field section turns out to be very wet indeed. When I get to the site of the planning application I find that there is a ruinous stile and luxuriant vegetation to photograph for a report to Rights of Way. I was ready for loose dogs, but the ones I could hear were all confined. Shortly afterwards I missed where the definitive line left the farm track and had to back-track. Another broken stile was half hidden by an open gate. The remainder of the path to Whitehall Road was more or less OK, though there was a waymark on a rotten post and the signage at the end was in a poor state. Then back to my starting point at Gildersome by another path which I hadn’t walked before. For once there were no problems apart from quite deep mud as the path is confined between a hedge and a fence.

Back home I get the photos uploaded and compile a report on the stiles for Rights of Way. And so to eat.

Lee Davidson
Footpath Officer, Leeds Group

THE FOOTPATHS OF BRADFORD
NEED YOUR HELP!

Do you want to help protect and improve footpaths in the Bradford District? If so, we would like to hear from you! Our longstanding Bradford Footpath Officer is standing down later this year and we would like to hear from anyone who is interested in protecting footpaths in Bradford, Keighley, Bingley, Haworth, Silsden and Denholme. Do you want to get involved in investigating and reporting footpath issues and monitoring plans for development and footpath diversions in this area? We need to ensure that issues with blocked footpaths are resolved and the footpath network stays open for future generations of walkers. If you have an interest, please contact the Area Footpath Officer Steve Fleming using the address sfleming.fieldview@gmail.com.

Publicity opportunity

As you will have read, we are trying to extend the use of meetup.com to publicise our walks online. This website is used successfully by Take a Hike and the intention is to invite all groups to publicise their walks in this manner.

In addition; following a suggestion from a member at July’s brainstorming event, I contacted The Yorkshire Times (https://yorkshiretimes.co.uk/) to enquire whether we could publicise our walks in the What’s On section.

An article was published in December about the West Riding Ramblers (https://yorkshiretimes.co.uk/article/Love-Walking-Why-Not-Take-A-Saunter-With-The-West-Riding-Ramblers) and walks coordinators and leaders should have been contacted to invite them to submit their walks details for publication. Due to GDPR rules and the need to attach a contact number for each “event” I have asked for individual walk leaders to consider sending their walks details to Jan at the Yorkshire Times.

With over 40,000 regular visitors to the site, the Yorkshire Times offers us a free way to further publicise our varied walks programme so I invite all walks leaders to seize this opportunity! Any queries – please email me.
RAMPANT VEGETATION THREAT
TO WALKING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

What are we to do about all the vegetation obstructing our paths? I’ve done much countryside walking this year, mainly close to the edge of built-up Harrogate, but also in the Washburn Valley and Nidderdale, and I think the problem is getting worse. Sections of the Harrogate Ringway are becoming completely overgrown, so is the direct path from Blubberhouses to Timble in Beecroft Moor Plantation, also the delightful Nidderdale path that drops to Summerbridge from Highfield Farm.

Long grass dies back in winter, so do the nettles, the bracken and the Himalayan balsam. But the brambles don’t die back, nor does the hawthorn, and the holly and the blackthorn and the gorse, and the many other twigs and branches that obstruct our right of way.

What I call “enclosed paths” are a particularly serious problem because they are attacked by vegetation from both sides and unfortunately soon the two actually do meet. A similar problem and a not infrequent occurrence is where a farmer puts the path behind a barbed wire fence close to a hedge, presumably with the intention of separating livestock from walkers. But the hedge grows outwards and self-setting brambles and holly become established near the barbed wire, and soon a pleasant field edge path becomes impassable (see photo).

I fear that the network of 140,000 legally protected rights of way in England and Wales is effectively becoming divided into two. One half is composed of the honeypot paths, popular local paths (particularly for dog walkers) and long-distance trails; these are generally well maintained and easy to use. The other half of the path network are the country paths, sparsely trodden and in many cases increasingly difficult to use. We are in danger of losing many of them as walkable paths.

So, what are we to do? Over recent years we have used several strategies. One approach has been to include some lightly used paths in the walks programmes organised by the Ramblers and affiliated groups. This has ensured many of these paths are walked once or twice a year. Even better if walkers bring secateurs and clip the overgrowth as they pass. Another strategy is reporting the vegetation obstruction to the local authority. The odds are that the problem will go to the bottom of a very long list, and if the path is considered low priority (which is likely) it will stay at the bottom of the list for a long time. However, at least the local authority knows about it. Ramblers’ working parties are another useful strategy. They clear the vegetation, get the job done and perhaps with some local publicity. However, the 170 Ramblers “maintenance teams” throughout England and Wales are far from enough and in effect only peck at the problem. The combined effect of these strategies is unable by some distance to keep pace with the vegetation.

I do not think we use the law enough. Landowners have a legal duty to clear the overgrowth on public paths. Perhaps we could put much more pressure on local authorities to remind landowners of this. I am also reminded of an important comment that Jerry Pearlman made in an article he wrote in the West Riding Rambler (January 2011). It was entitled “Law: a tool designed for Ramblers” and Jerry commented: “Our period of great aggression especially when we were able to use the law as a tool to gain access and better paths for the public were the very times of our great success and expansion”. Perhaps it is time for us to make much greater use of the law as a tool designed for ramblers, particularly Section 130A of the 1980 Highway Act, and much more frequently serve notice on the local highway authority to remove an obstruction. I can well understand the reluctance to do this, and I am as guilty as anybody - it’s a lot of work and trouble. But I don’t think we should hold back out of cautiousness. It is unlikely that such legal action will prejudice our valued good relationship with local authority Rights of Way staff - they may well appreciate our taking this initiative. Furthermore, cuts in local authority funding are not directly our problem. We’re in the business of protecting paths. As a practical suggestion, it might be useful if Area Footpath Committee formed a small team to acquire the expertise to become Section 130A specialists. The Groups could supply the relevant details of the obstructions (after other means of resolving the problem had been exhausted) and the

Enclosed path on the Harrogate Ringway – Keith Wadd
team could issue the notices efficiently and speedily. That would be a useful facility that Area could provide and make a significant contribution to controlling vegetation on our rights of way.

Keith Wadd

"If you are a walk leader, or planning to become so, Keith's suggestion of walking the less-trodden paths is an excellent way of making a USP of the Ramblers. The message to newcomers: Not only do we take you off the beaten track, allowing you to discover previously unknown routes, but each step you take contributes to protecting the rights of way for future use. (CS)"

WHAT AFFILIATED CLUBS CAN DO - AND WE TOO!

This is what I said, give and take ad libs, at the recent AGM of Harrogate Rambling Club when I agreed to speak on what affiliated clubs can do to help the Ramblers' Association. Most comments are equally applicable to Ramblers' Association walks leaders and members – it's "We Too!"

Many thanks to Harrogate Rambling Club for asking me. Some of the Rambling Club members, like me, are also members of the Ramblers' Association, and there is a strong case for joining both.

The Ramblers' Association is a charity, and one of its charitable objects is to protect paths. This is where I think an affiliated club can be of most help. In Britain our extensive footpath network is a marvellous asset for the whole walking community. However, in these times of austerity an increasing number are getting very overgrown with vegetation and becoming impassable.

To counteract this problem, a walking club can do several things, some of which clubs like Harrogate Rambling Club are doing already. Firstly - it's use them or lose them; in led walks perhaps include a few sections of difficult but not impossible paths; regardless of the grumbles walk leaders might receive from participants! It's a matter of getting the balance right. We all walk for enjoyment, but at the same time perhaps there is a wider responsibility. Walks leaders should report footpath problems (with a photograph of the problem if possible) to the local authority and chase them up and keep chasing them up. The Ramblers’ Association will help if contacted. Walkers should carry secateurs – if everyone does a bit of snipping during a walk, every snip helps in keeping a path clear of vegetation.

Club members might wish to try to claim some "Historic Paths" as rights of way. The cut-off date is 2026 which isn’t far away. It’s basically historical research and it’s time-consuming but interesting and rewarding. It involves going to the local records office (Northallerton in North Yorkshire) to examine maps and documents. The Records Office staff are very helpful.

We owe it to the Ramblers’ Association that there is a Right to Roam. As a result of the CROW Act of 2000, walkers now have access to mountain, moorland, heath and downland throughout the country. It’s there to use. Walks leaders could try to include a bit of it in some of their walks. I’m not advocating heather-bashing or bracken bashing, but maybe using right to roam land as a link between footpaths and also to visit virtually secret places that are not on rights of way.

The footpath officers of the local group of the Ramblers’ Association do an important job checking proposed footpath diversions and making sure that the eventual outcome is in the best interests of the walking community. They also scrutinise planning applications, particularly important in present times when large scale housing developments are being proposed. However, to ensure that the whole footpath network is used, the help of all walkers is needed.

At the end of the club’s AGM, a member who had moved from Shropshire chatted with me, and said in Shropshire members of affiliated groups worked with Ramblers’ Association members on working parties doing practical footpath work. Maybe we could try to make this happen in West Riding Area. North Yorkshire is becoming much more supportive of practical footpath work undertaken by volunteer groups, and it is likely that this is the case with other local authorities in our Area.

Keith Wadd

We want to hear from you!

Have you a favourite route you’d like to share with fellow readers? Have you been on a fantastic walking holiday you’d like to tell us about? Has walking helped you to overcome a health problem or allowed you to form a brilliant new friendship?

We would love to have reader contributions so please do send your suggestions to the Editor editors@ramblersyorkshire.org

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