

## **Ramblers Somerset Area**

### **45<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting**

**Shipham Village Hall - Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2019**

#### **Minutes**

26 members signed the attendance sheet.

Also present: Peter Carr, Ramblers Trustee

1. Apologies: Mike Plaskett, Rod Carne, Peggy Fortunati, Carl Earl.
2. Minutes of the AGM held on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February, 2018 at Holford Village Hall  
  
These were approved (proposed: Peter Gatenby, seconded: Michael Benison).
3. Matters Arising – there were none.
4. Chairman's Annual Report 2018-19

The Chair, Les Stather, presented his report for the year, copies of which had been made available at the meeting. His report is attached below.

In response to the issue of how much it costs to join Ramblers, Les observed that this was less than the price of one pint of beer per month.

Regarding Les's observation of Gift Aid, Peter Carr noted that Somerset Area is about average for the proportion of members signed up for this.

Les stressed the importance of a pro-active approach to the media.

Les felt that Ramblers could do more to maintain and improve Rights of Way if Somerset County Council could find more resources with which to manage us. David Thompson pointed out that North Somerset Council had three excellent footpath officers, and many thanks were due to them.

## 5. Receipt and adoption of the audited Statement of Accounts

The Treasurer, Robin Downton, presented the Statement of Accounts which had been circulated at the meeting (copy attached below). This was agreed (proposed: Peter Gatenby, seconded: Pat Toft).

In response to questions, Robin explained that to date we had spent less than half of the grant received from Head Office for a Somerset Walkabout Fund. He also asked the meeting to approve a donation of £100 to the Wessex Wanderer Railway Walks (jointly funded by the Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership and the four Ramblers Areas along the railway route), which – after an explanation of what this was about – the meeting duly did.

## 6. Election of Honorary Officers

The Chair, Secretary and Treasurer had all agreed to stand for a further year. This was agreed by the meeting (proposed: David Thompson, seconded: Peter Gatenby).

## 7. Election of two individual members

There were no nominations received. The Chair pointed out that the last individual member to serve on the Area Council had been Mary Henry. He said that for 2020 there was a need to invite nominations from the wider membership across the Area.

## 8. Appointment of a Deputy Chairman

The Chair expressed the view that there was no need for a specific individual to act as Deputy Chair. It was agreed that a person to perform such a role would not be sought at the 2020 AGM.

## 9. Appointment of an independent Examiner

Tony Sheehan had indicated that he was willing to continue for a further year. This was agreed by the meeting (proposed: David Thompson, seconded: Ed Levy).

## 10. Nominations to General Council

Maggie Thompson (Woodspring) and Phil Bisatt (Taunton Deane) had offered to act as delegates from Somerset Area to Ramblers General Council (to be held in Manchester on 13/14 April). David Thompson (Woodspring) had agreed to be a reserve. This was agreed by the meeting (proposed: Ed Levy, seconded: Michael Benison).

## 11. Directions to Area Council

The meeting agreed that the two Area delegates to General Council should act on the basis agreed by the Area Council.

## 12. Presentation by Les Davies, President of the Mendip Society

Les Davies gave an excellent presentation about the Mendip Hills. He congratulated Ramblers for the work we do to protect the Rights of Way network and educating people in our walking Groups about the countryside.

Les observed that the Mendip landscape didn't just happen – it's essentially man-made, extending back to the arrival of agriculture prior to 4000BC, followed by the Iron Age (e.g. Dolebury Warren), the Romans (e.g. at Charterhouse), the Carthusians around 1180, enclosure via drystone walls in the 1700s/1800s, and the agricultural revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. There have been many other influences and features, such as reservoir construction and quarrying.

Access to the countryside brings with it responsibilities as well as rights. 'How to enjoy but not destroy'. Cars, for example – traffic 'creeps up us, like old age and myopia'. There are also issues, sadly, with rural crime and irresponsible dog owners.

The meeting showed their appreciation to Les with generous applause.

### 13. Tea/Coffee and Cakes

These had been prepared by host Group members and were very much appreciated.

### 14. Presentation by Peter Carr, Ramblers Trustee, and Discussion

Peter picked up a number of points that the Chair had raised in his report. There seemed to be no easy solution to the problem of the long-term decline in Ramblers membership, but it was an issue which was receiving focussed attention by Head Office. Ramblers' membership was actually increasing in some areas, particularly in cities where there were also more younger members. Emphasis also needed to be placed on what Ramblers do for walkers – we don't just lead walks! No other non-governmental organisation devotes as much effort as does Ramblers to defending the Rights of Way network.

After taking questions from the audience, Peter thanked all those members who were in attendance and the sponsoring Group, Woodspring, for their organisation of the venue, refreshments, and excellent morning walk. He also expressed appreciation to the wider membership, who contribute much to running the Groups and carrying out voluntary work on the Rights of Way network.

Philip Bisatt

Area Secretary

## Chairman's Report 2018 - 2019

I would like thank everyone here for attending the AGM

The format of this meeting is that after the formal AGM, Les Davis, President of The Mendip Society, will give a talk. We will then break for tea and cakes and then Peter Carr, a ramblers Trustee will bring us up to date with some of the ramblers' key initiatives. There will also be an opportunity to ask Peter questions.

I thought I would start with sharing some information about Somerset Ramblers that I have obtained from the ramblers new membership database.

We have 1,483 members down 2% on last year

54% are female

57% are between 60 and 80 and this is likely to be a big underestimate as we do not know the age of 14%

Our retention rate is 88.5%

Only 60% are signed up for Gift aid

Only 38% of given us consent to contact them by email.

These figures reflect very closely the national membership for the ramblers.

I would like to thank especially the members of Area Council for the work they do.

Thanks to Carl Earl for his work as Area Footpath Officer. He coordinates the work of the group footpath officers and provides a single point of contact with the Somerset County Rights of Way Team. His knowledge of footpath law and his contacts at head office are invaluable to this Area. His tenacity of ensuring the county is addressing the major faults on the network is appreciated by all groups. We are very fortunate to have some extremely active footpath maintenance teams that doing everything from clearance to complex bridge building. Carl ensures that Somerset County Council makes maximum use of these.

Thanks to Robin Downton, our Treasurer, without him groups would find it much more difficult to get their funding from head office and paying for our annual Area holiday would be a nightmare.

Thanks to Mavis Monahan for editing the Somerset Rambler. This is our only way we can get our message out to our 1,483 members, apart from our website. We are unable to email all our members as only 38% have given email consent and if even if they had all given consent we have no way of mass emailing them.

Thanks to Phil Bisatt, our secretary for the work he does taking minutes and organising meetings.

And also thanks to Rod Carne and Peggy Fortunati, who, although are not members of Area Council, organise our Area annual holiday. This holiday is not only great fun it also helps foster cohesion amongst the groups.

Many ramblers members often ask what is the purpose of area? Well I hope I have answered some of this already but to reiterate

1. We co-ordinate all footpath matters for those groups whose footpaths are looked after by Somerset County Council. I have already explained Carl's role in this.
2. We are the conduit between groups and head office for all financial matters.
3. We try, through our newsletter Somerset Rambler to keep groups informed of key issues
4. We enable the Area Holiday
5. We represent the groups at General Council

David Thompson stated in his address at the AGM last year

*Over the years Somerset Council members have discussed many ways to make Area more accountable to the groups within Somerset. Previous chairs and secretaries have held workshops and spent numerous hours discussing the issues and have tried to integrate area council into the groups. A number of initiatives have been put forward but they have been mainly in vain and Somerset continues with 6 groups working to their own agendas.*

Little has changed over the last year but does it need to?

I have asked, yet again for group representatives at Area Council to ask at their group meetings if they are happy with what Area is doing and do they think there are things that can be improved however, in the past, this has not resulted in much feedback. We considered Area walks but the county is so large people are not prepared to drive 90 mins each way for a short walk.

There is one area in which I think we could do more if we had the resources and that is the media / publicity. Most of the publicity I see in Somerset is through the local papers advertising our walks and social events with some articles on the footpath improvement work we do and the benefits to health and well being of walking. We do not have an Area Media Strategy that states the key messages we are trying to push this year.

As I have already stated, membership is down 2% on the year in our Area and this reflects the trend across the country Over the last five years we have lost 114 members (7%) and the ramblers 5,485 (5%). Just to put this into context, the RSPB have a million members, ten times that of the ramblers and their annual membership is £48 compared to the ramblers £36. According to the Active Lives Survey November 2017 the majority of local authorities had more than 60% of their adult population walking at least once a week So I think this shows that there are more people who walk regularly than go bird watching.

The ramblers cannot continue to keep losing members at this rate and remain to be the national voice of walkers.

So what should our media message be.?

Should we be encouraging people who do not walk regularly to walk and so improve their health?

Should we be trying to persuade the millions of people who already walk to join the ramblers? Do we know why they do not join? For some it will be the cost but one million RSPB members pay a higher membership fee.

Mendip Ramblers, for example, have two walks on a Thursday one a little further and faster than the other. These walks in total are attracting over 70 people a week. So do we want more people walking on a Thursday? Perhaps we could cope if we had more walk leaders but we have more gaps on our programme than we have ever had. It is getting more and more difficult to get people to lead walks. We have tried walk leader training and a walk leader buddy system with no success. We have over one hundred written up walks on our web site that people could lead. When I have pressed people and told them about the gaps in the programme they are not too bothered as they can find another walk on walkfinder and walk with another group.

When I talk to other groups they say they have a similar problem with finding walk leaders.

I do not have a solution to these problems and have asked Peter Carr to give us his views from a national perspective, as part of his talk.