



SOMERSET RAMBLER



Sierra Aracena: A Gem of South West Spain By Tony Strange



West Mendip Walkers' walking holiday in the Sierra de Aracena in Huelva province, south west Spain last October was hosted by Sasha and Craig at Posada del Castaño: a guesthouse retaining much of the original rustic features and rural charm that typifies this most attractive region. Situated in the village of Castaño del Robledo at the centre of an impressive network of cobbled paths and ancient mule tracks that criss-cross the Parque Natural de la Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche: a UNESCO biosphere reserve where few foreigners visit and the opportunities for appreciating the more authentic aspects of rural Andalusian life and its rich Moorish heritage are boundless.

Craig had put together a tailor-made package of challenging walks for us ranging in length from 13kms to 25.8kms and imparted some of his knowledge about the geology of the region, its history and eco-systems to us which made walks even more interesting. The wooded hillsides support a number of small whitewashed villages with rural economies reliant on the production of quality cured hams, chestnuts and cork. In springtime there's said to be an incredible profusion of wildflowers and the woodlands play host to over 85 species of birds who reside or migrate through the sierra, and in autumn the chestnut trees are full of colour, the orchards are laden with fruit and the forests provide a rich harvest of delicious, wild mushrooms.

Our walks took us through villages and towns such as Aracena, Fuenteheridos, Navahermosa, and Alájar. We had long gentle climbs of 160 to 200m and on occasions steep climbs of 200m, and descents of 200/220m. We walked along rugged trails before descending through pine forest, through undulating pastureland and along river valleys. On the penultimate day we had a long gradual ascent round the Sierra Silladilla to the famous ham village of Jabugo. The Sierra is home to the renowned cured ham delicacy, jamón ibérico. This comes from the black Iberian pigs that feed on acorns underneath the holm oak trees.

The area's main town, Aracena, has a distinctive hilltop ruined fortress and a Knights' Templar church. Deep underground in the hillside are some spectacular

There were two stand-out walks in the week one being a circular, delightful route crossing hills to the historic village of Almonaster. We climbed from the village

of Castaño del Robledo before reaching a long ridge with views to the villages of Jabugo and Cortegana with its 13th century Moorish castle outlined against the horizon. Once on the top we descended (partly on ancient Roman cobbles) to the quaint village of Almonaster situated below a 10th-century former mosque, which has an arched interior reminiscent of the mezquita in Cordoba. The return to Castaño involved a 1 1/2 hour climb, initially steep, past the small hamlet of La Presa. The track was a mixture of cobbles, dirt and concrete between dry stone-walled fields generally under the shade of over-hanging Holm Oaks. A total of 28kms

The other memorable walk was Castaño/Rio Santa Ana/Rio Alajar/Alájar/Calabacino/Castaño once again starting from the Posada. We had a steep descent to reach the valley of the Santa Ana river and seeing the local library, a metal box, housed in rocks where locals exchange their books. In the gorge we followed the river which could be heard flowing deep below the path which was strewn with boulders, gorse and bushes. The humidity rose as we proceeded while a heavy mist hung overhead. The scenery was spectacular: rugged, covered in bush and boulders with steep sides above and below. The valley is a rich pasture land where cattle graze in fields littered with trees. We passed a number of farms and circumnavigated a farm which rears fighting bulls.

We ate our picnic lunch adjacent to the river, water flowing close to the boulders on which we were perched. After lunch we climbed a path heading north back along the valley at one time taking advantage of a spectacular rock observation point following the Alájar river towards the village of the same name. Along the way we passed the site of an old mill now a dwelling. Alájar is set in a deep valley, and this pretty village is famous for the imposing 17th century shrine of Arias Montano which stands on a rocky promontory high above. An annual pilgrimage here attracts thousands of people - many on horseback or in horse-drawn carts. We rested a while in a local bar before commencing our return ascent via the "Hippy" village of El Calabacino to Castaño. The initial climb was steep rising 190m (a climb of 1 1/2 hours) covering paths which were a mixture of well laid cobbles, concrete paving and gravel and generally covered by trees giving plenty of shade. We reached Castaño for a well earned cup of tea having covered 22 kms in the day.

On the hot days we were thankful our walks were through forested areas, and we often either called in for a drink or were able to have our lunch in one of the many villages we passed through. The Iberian pigs, donkeys and dogs were very tolerant of our passing, and on one occasion a deer was grateful for being saved when it was cornered by a dog. Evenings were spent in the village of Castaño del Robledo where we were made most welcome by the bar keepers and restaurateurs. Sierra Aracena is a hidden gem, and with a walk leader like Craig at Posada del Castaño, a walking holiday in the south west of Spain is well worth considering.

A) **Influencing post Brexit Farming policy**

In an important speech at the annual Oxford Farming Conference, Environment Secretary Michael Gove spoke of the need **to invest** - as part of the reform to agricultural payments - **in public access for the public good post-Brexit**. Since the General Election in 2017 Ramblers' have been busy making the case to ministers, civil servants and MPs that improving the path network needs to be one of the outcomes secured through payments to landowners and farmers. We will continue our efforts to influence the forthcoming Agriculture White Paper and Agriculture Bill. If you have further questions, please email policy@ramblers.org.uk.

B) **Walking for Health**. To enable continuation of this programme beyond 31 March 2018, Ramblers have been conducting a consultation on a proposed WfH staff structure from 1 April. The continuation funding and our staff team will enable us to provide a core level of support to short group walk providers in 2018 whilst the Ramblers explore how they can transition to a more integrated model - subject to funding. Short group walks would become an integral part of the Ramblers' offer across the country. We are also currently reviewing our WfH data processing procedures (including the walker registration form) to ensure that the new General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) will be met. If you have any queries please contact rob.wallis@ramblers.org.uk.

C) Tansy Miller is the **new Area Support Officer for Southern England** and will work alongside Diane Simcoe, who covers Northern England. Both Tansy and Diane report to Richard Sharp, our Area Support Manager. Ramblers' now have full cover for the 44 English areas, as well as complementary area support in Scotland and Wales.

Tansy has worked for several large volunteer-based charities in similar roles. In her spare time she is a keen hiker; both around her home in East Anglia and recently across the national parks of the USA and in the Himalayas. She can be contacted on tansy.miller@ramblers.org.uk.

D) If you know of any countryside protection volunteers who don't receive emails from us but would like to receive a copy of the survey by post, please let Alison know via alison.hallas@ramblers.org.uk

E) Does your group or you have a **'Hidden Gem'** on one of your walks?

The summer walking festival: **Walk About** is back. **From 26 May – 3 June 2018** we'll be inviting the nation to step out for a walk and discover some of Britain's hidden gems. Groups can share as many 'hidden gem' walks as they wish - but please only showcase one gem per walk. If you feel you have a 'Gem' in one of your walks, please contact your group secretary or chair so that it can be forwarded for the Festival. If you have any questions, please contact volunteersupport@ramblers.zendesk.com or call on 020 7339 8537.!

F) **In Case of Emergency (ICE) cards** allow walkers to fill in emergency contact details and important medical information. They should keep ICE cards in an accessible place so that if something should happen on a walk, the walk leader or emergency services know about any medical conditions and who to contact. To order a batch of editable, durable and waterproof hard copies: email volunteersupport@ramblers.zendesk.com or ask your group Chair who should have some.

Group Reports

Sedgemoor Ramblers

The group's AGM took place at the end of October at a new venue of the Church Centre Nether Stowey. The meeting was preceded with a walk across the lower slopes of the Quantocks. Our chairman Tony Fawle stood down after serving for 8 years in the post and I was appointed as his successor.

It has been a quiet period with our weekly Sunday and twice monthly Saturday walks taking place. Our footpath working team have met monthly to carry out maintenance work on paths and we have also completed our quarterly survey of paths as allocated by Somerset County Council.

The Christmas and New Year period saw our usual festive annual events of a Christmas meal on 1st December, our Mince Pie walk on 17th December and our New Year's Eve walk with mulled wine on 31st December.

In addition to our usual weekly walks our plans for 2018 include a day trip to London for a walk around the city, A one week holiday to South West Ireland in early June, our summer outing to North Devon in early July and our summer lunch also in July.

Edward Levy Chairman

South Somerset Ramblers

Although membership declined slightly, by offering two walks of short to medium lengths on Thursday mornings, numbers attending have been very good despite atrocious wet and muddy weather. Shorter walks are attracting greater numbers as the average age increases.

We again held our Christmas meal at the Muddled Man, West Chinnock where it was felt the standard of food and service was better than ever. A very interesting and enjoyable walk was led by Gerry Ellis beforehand.

Jean Verkroost, with the help of Les Stather, has updated our web site so it is now partly interactive. Measures to put Thursday walks on the site to be interactive are being progressed.

John Oliver has arranged the annual rambling holiday run by Saga to the Costa Brava in early April with 12 participants. John has had to cope with the added problem of Monarch Airlines going bust and flights having to be rescheduled.

Our working parties, led by Roger Cripps, have recently undertaken clearance work but are looking forward to doing more footpath maintenance work in the future.

Expense issues are still to be settled with County. The Survey Group, coordinated by Roger Cripps, continues with the quarterly surveys of footpaths on behalf of Somerset County Council.

Linda Fawthrop

West Somerset Ramblers

Against the National and local trends the group continues to increase in numbers. The majority of these are those retiring from homes in the south east of England

and either transferring their membership or beginning a leisure pursuit in their retirement. Our Christmas walks were well supported and so too was the annual Christmas lunch with 63 members attending.

We are hosting the Area AGM on the 17 February at Holford Village Hall with a walk in the morning and meeting at 2.00pm with speaker Dan Barnett from Ex-moor National Park.

2018 is the Groups' 40th year and we are marking the occasion with a series of 'favourite' walks throughout the year including a repeat of our first ever walk from Horner on 16 June finishing with tea at Allerford Village Hall. We are also having a celebration lunch with speaker at the Northfield Hotel Minehead on 7th March.

The closing of a much used footpath at Blue Anchor has caused considerable controversy and gained publicity on the front page of the Free Press four times. Following local BBC and ITV television news reports it has even been reported in the Times. Footpath Secretary Ivor Sutton has managed the application to the Somerset CC well and included over 150 declarations of use. Unfortunately the application is over 300th in the queue which is likely to take 16 years for the SCC to deal with. Jim Butterworth, a Blue Anchor resident, is leading the campaign to reopen the path and has recently joined our Group.

Gerald Swayne

Taunton Deane Group

The 2017 AGM was held in November at the Princess Royal, Taunton, with an afternoon walk and subsidised meal beforehand. It was hoped that would boost attendance, but whilst a successful event, numbers attending were not very different from 2016. Mike Whitmore stood down as Treasurer at the AGM after holding this post for a number of years. His successor is Gill Lee (anvilee@gmail.com). Other members of the Committee were re-elected.

As in previous years, a Christmas Dinner was organised by Mike Whitmore, this year at the Harvest Moon, North Newton. A very successful 'Post-Christmas Lunch' was held at Somerset County Cricket Club on Sunday 7th January, preceded by a well-attended walk through Longrun Meadow to Bishops Hull. Both the meal and walk were organised by Daphne Hayden, to whom many thanks are due. It was nice to meet Joan Gubbin, former Group activist and previously Area Newsletter editor, once again at this event.

2018 is the 25th anniversary of the Group, and a number of special events are being planned – see the Group's programme!

Philip Bisatt

Mendip Group

We had an excellent Christmas walk and meal at Orchardleigh, Frome. We were very lucky to be upgraded from the Golf Club to the ballroom in the main house which is used for some of the top weddings in the country.

At the 1st of January 2018 our membership is 331: up by 10 from this time last year

The working party remains very active and is out virtually every week.

We erected 33 Kissing Gates, 12 gates, 35 Stiles, 11 Stile Repairs, 24 new stile steps, 13 bridges, 6 handrails, 6 general Repairs, 75 Signposts, 62 clearances. Each person did an average of 169 hours work!

This year's free festival of walking (25th/26th/27th August) will be based in the village of **Ditcheat**, near Shepton Mallet. According to the Domesday survey of 1086 Ditcheat was quite a large settlement consisting of 21 households and paid a significant amount of tax. It formed part of the land owned by Glastonbury Abbey. The Church of St Mary Magdalene, founded more than 700 years ago, is a Grade I listed building. Other fine buildings include the Abbey and the Manor House. Today Ditcheat is known for its cheese making, its racehorses, and, for some, its proximity to the Glastonbury Festival! Surrounded by attractive, easily accessible countryside it offers fine walking.

There will be 4 walks each day. The short morning walk, 3 to 5 miles, can be extended after lunch by joining the short afternoon walk of similar length. (New and inexperienced walkers and non-Ramblers are welcome). The medium walk will be 7 to 8 miles in length, and the long 11- 12 miles.

Walks will start from: Ditcheat Jubilee Hall, Wraxall Road, Ditcheat, Shepton Mallet, Somerset

BA4 6RB Explorer Map 142, Grid Ref. 625363 Detailed information:

www.mendipramblers.co.uk

Tea and cake available after each walk. Please make a donation!

Any queries: Martyn on 01761 471891, martyn@mendipramblers.co.uk

We are looking forward to a week in Torquay in March; walking the Melton Round at the end of April; the second half of the dales Way in June and a week in Brittany in September.

West Mendip Ramblers Tony Strange organises a group of Mendip Ramblers who wish to walk a little faster and further than our main Thursday group. Tony puts on a half day walk one week and full days walk the next week. This has become a very popular group; they had about 30 people at their Christmas lunch. They also had a very successful holiday in Spain last year. Mike Plaskitt

Woodspring Ramblers

It has been a quiet period for Woodspring since the last report but the programme remains full with two walks per week. The annual pre-Christmas walk in Priddy saw 32 members on the walk and nearly 50 joining in for the lunch at The Queen Victoria in Priddy. This is an overwhelming number and our thanks go to the landlord and his staff, for managing to serve everyone: also to Mike Newing for organising the lunchtime. The walk was exceptionally muddy but what can one expect after almost a month of rain. 35 members enjoyed the mulled wine and mince pie walk after Christmas. This walk, led by Robin Downton for a number of years, has experienced all kinds of weather from glorious sunshine to blizzards on the top of Wavering Down. This year saw a little snow on the ground but the mulled wine soon warmed everyone. Long may the walks continue.

As we plod through the mud of winter we look forward to the spring and our holidays and coach trip. The latter is to the Malverns in mid-April and at the end of April we have a week of high level walking in the Lakes, based in Glenridding and Paterdale. 10 members will be braving the dizzy heights of Striding Edge and all the peaks and fells within that area. In mid May we have a return trip to Dartmoor Lodge for a long weekend of walking on Dartmoor. The main holiday of the year will be one or two weeks in St. Anton, Austria during August and September. Finally, for those who have not had enough holidays we join up with the area holiday to Gwbert in October. I hope everyone from Area going on this holiday have as much pleasure as Woodspring had when we stayed there a few years ago.

Membership has been static for the last year or so. However, what is surprising is that we have had 26 new members join in the last 12 months so, with the numbers staying the same, we must be losing quite a few who have joined and now left Ramblers'. Members leaving are people who have not actually walked out with the group. This must be something we as a group or area should explore and advise central office to try to encourage members to try to come along and enjoy some of the walks and many social events we have throughout the year.

I would very much like to give a huge thank you to Eddy Hicks who, at the AGM, stood down from the post of Footpath Secretary. Eddy has held this post more or less since North Somerset became a unitary authority in 1996. I believe this post goes mainly unnoticed by most people but it is probably the hardest and most time consuming task for any committee member. The job requires hours or days pondering over diversion orders, building plans, footpath closures and so on. There are many days sitting in at judicial hearings while battle goes on between councils and land owners, etc. At the end of the day we, and members of the public, continue to walk along our public rights of way which have been given to us for hundreds of years. There are many, many people out there doing everything they can to close our rights of way and it is people like Eddy and our Area Footpath Secretary, Carlton Earle, who continue to do battle to keep them open.

Pete Mason has been following Eddy for the last year and I can say that Eddy has done such a splendid job showing Pete the 'merits' of a footpath secretary that Pete has agreed to take on the post. We wish him all the success.

David Thompson, Chairman

RETIRING AFTER 25 YEARS VOLUNTARY WORK

Sedgemoor Rambler, Charles Gorton, started the Voluntary Working Party 25 years ago and has now retired at the age of 81. Charles was the organiser for 5 years and has continued to be an active and dedicated member of the Team since then, joining the other Ramblers' volunteers who meet once a month to clear footpaths and undertake repairs to stiles, gates etc. so that our wonderful network of paths can be maintained for all to enjoy.

Charles told Tony Fawle, Sedgemoor Ramblers' current Organiser, that when the team was formed 25 years ago working with Somerset County Council and land owners was not easy and there seemed to be many difficulties to overcome. Walking was not the popular leisure activity that it is today. Over the years, past and present Organisers have built a good relationship with Somerset County Council Rights of Way Team and it is rewarding



On his last Working Party on Wednesday, 15th November, Tony Fawle, on the left of the photo, presented Charles with a special cake and was joined by fellow members of the Team, Mike Zobell and Mike Aldridge, on the right.

Tracey Sutton from the Somerset County Council Rights Of Way Team presented Charles with a framed certificate recognising the excellent voluntary contribution made by Charles.



If you would like to become involved in maintaining footpaths in Sedgemoor, we can be contacted by email -sedgemoor.ramblers@gmail.com. The Footpaths Working Party meets for approximately 3-4 hours monthly.

Tony Fawle

The Ramblers website can be found at:
www.ramblers.org.uk

Report of Area Footpath Secretary – January 2018

- I. *Use of Ramblers Volunteers in Somerset County* – The issue of expenses payments for the three Group working parties in Somerset County remains unresolved. When Mendip set up their working party working for Mendip District Council there was no formal written agreement and no expenses were claimed. However they did have use of a council Landrover. When Mendip DC passed the responsibility for RoW back to Somerset CC Mendip Ramblers' Working party were asked to sign a volunteer agreement written by SCC. This agreement made no mention of expenses and none were claimed. South Somerset and Sedgemoor set up working parties and were not asked to sign a volunteer agreement but were paid mileage expenses for their volunteers. Andy Stevenson, the SCC volunteer coordinator suggested to Mendip that they should claim mileage and they did.

It came to light that, after Andy Stevenson resigned and Tracy Sutton took over as volunteer coordinator, that the expenses agreement was never approved by Peter Hobley, head of the ROW team for when the expenses were presented they were refused.

SCC RoW team wished to have a common working agreement and expenses policy with all Somerset Ramblers' working parties. They came up with a proposal which I passed on the Ramblers' Head Office for their review. Apparently Ramblers' already have a less complicated model agreement that has been drawn up with help from the national body for RoW officers. A copy of this agreement was sent to SCC and their view is awaited.

The Ramblers model agreement does not mention expenses.

Although all three working parties should be able to agree on the model agreement, there remains a difference of opinion on expenses. SCC suggested a standard rate each time a working party went out plus extra expenses if a special journey needs to be made. Mendip are OK with this but South Somerset and Sedgemoor are not and want to be paid actual mileage expenses incurred.

Until a formal agreement can be agreed, we have pointed out to SCC that, in the meantime, they should honour pre-existing arrangements over payment.

We have also pointed out that Ramblers' volunteers undertaking annual checks on RoW receive a reasonable mileage payment. In view of the failure to pay mileage expenses incurred both South Somerset and Sedgemoor working party organisers have been advised to complain to their County Councillors. It is understood that the County's present Volunteer Officer will be leaving shortly and the post has been advertised, so I will continue to press for an early resolution of this issue

2. *Claim for path at Blue Anchor* – following the decision of the County Council not to bring forward the consideration of our claim West Somerset's FPS has been keeping this issue 'high profile' locally. This should help our application to the Secretary of State which we can make 12 months after submitting the claim to request him to require the County to consider the claim within a set timescale, otherwise the claim could take over 10 years to be considered.

3. *High Ham Appeal* – following counsel's advice to Ramblers' it was decided not to appeal the decision to delete this path. Counsel felt there was only a 50% chance of success in the High Court and there was the risk that, if we lost, a dangerous precedent for removing long-established paths would arise. I will be investigating the possibility of negotiating an alternative (possibly permissive) route.

4. *Path Dedication on Mendip* – following a request from a community group in Frome who have acquired an area of land, on establishing a new footpath, I have given them advice on the option of creating a permissive path or on dedicating a public path for all time (i.e. adding it to the definitive map).

5. *Changes to the definitive map* – we continue to receive consultations on changes to RoW which are sent to the relevant Group FPS for consideration. This provides the opportunity, if we do not object to the proposal outright (which may result in the application being withdrawn), to suggest alternatives which the highway authority can put to the applicant.

6. *Sedgemoor FPS* – Alan Chick has stood down from the post and Helen Boxer, with assistance of a colleague, has taken over the role.

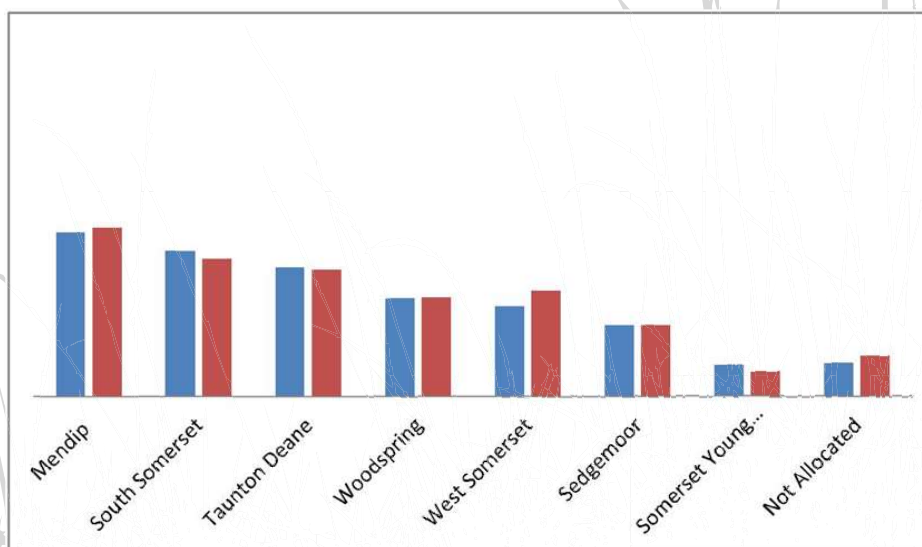
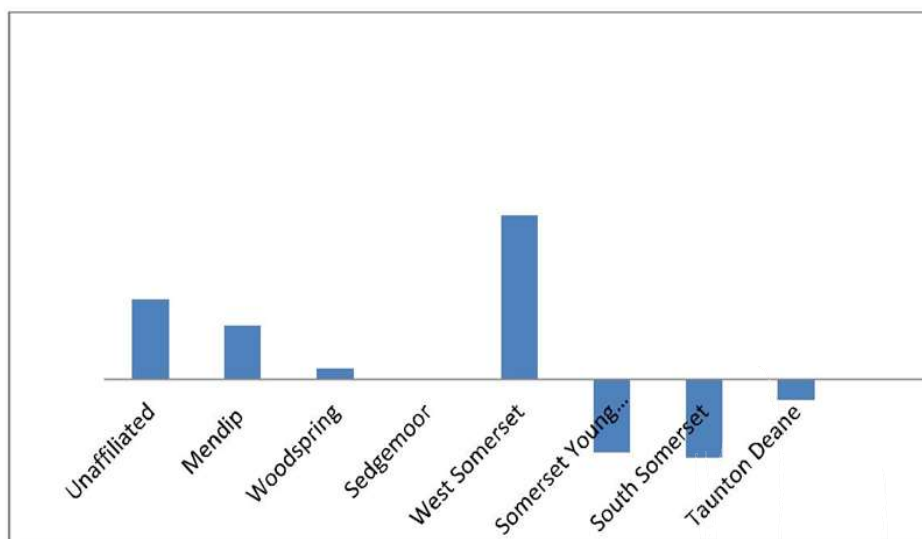
7. *Cropping of Paths* – don't forget to report problems of paths obstructed by crops on the relevant council's web-site. Persistent offenders should be monitored and then approached by the relevant highway authority.

Carl Earle

Area Membership Report

Ramblers' Membership 104,617 Down 1% from Last year

Area Membership up 2% on last year



THE SOMERSET WALKING CLUB

2017 was a busy and successful year for the club. We embarked on a new venture to complete the Two Moors Way: over beautiful countryside from Ivy-bridge on the south coast, across Dartmoor and Exmoor, to end at Lynmouth on the north coast. Despite days of over 12-13 miles each, this proved very popular. Having walked the first half over two weekends during the summer of



2017, plans are in place to complete the Exmoor section in 2018. Members also enjoyed two very successful walking weekends away. In April in St Ives, Cornwall, we covered some challenging sections of the SW coast path in perfect weather and enjoying the spectacular views and historical mining remains. In October we had less clement conditions in Crickhowell, Wales, but still completed some demanding walks, rewarded with intermit-

tent views as the mist parted. For a gallery of photos from our walks, please visit our website www.somersetwalkingclub.co.uk or our Facebook page.

Cherry Bird, Programmes Secretary

The Quantock Hills Walking Festival

30th June-1st July 2018

Further information and to book, contact

Stowey Walking at: enquiries@stoweywalking.co.uk

Area Holiday 2018

The Area Holiday 2018 will be held at The Cliff Hotel & Spa in Gwbert, Cardigan, on the weekend of

Friday 5th to Monday 8th October 2018.

please email Peggy at pm.fortunati@seabreeze2.plus.com or telephone Rod or Peggy on 01278 783270.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

If you have any news that you feel would be of interest to Somerset members or would like to comment on any current issue then please send them to me. Entries for the next issue before 31st May please to:

Mavis Monahan, 7 Westaway Park, Yatton, BS49 4JU 01934 709512 or mavis@monahan.co.uk

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