



**The Ramblers' Association
Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes and West Middlesex Area**

Annual Report

1 October 2008 - 30 September 2009

Annual General Meeting: 2.00pm on 13 February 2010 at Princes Risborough Community Centre

In the morning, before the meeting, there will be a circular walk starting at 10.00am from The Mount pay-and-display car park (Explorer 181, grid reference SP805034). The Community Centre is opposite the car park. The leader will be Colin Kennedy.

To reach the car park or Community Centre from the railway station walk down Station Approach, cross the main road, turn right and almost immediately left into Manor Park Avenue and follow the road. From the bus stop in Princes Risborough High Street, cross the road and follow Church Street from Market Square.

Please come to the meeting: this is your opportunity to participate in the Association's democratic processes and to discuss any matters that concern you.

**For a selection of the best walks in our Area accessible by public transport visit the Area website:
www.bucks-wmiddx-ramblers.org.uk**

Note that, for data protection reasons, personal contact information has been removed from this version of the Annual Report. For a full version, or for other enquiries, contact the Area Secretary via the appropriate links on this website.

**Agenda for the Annual General Meeting
at 2.00 pm on Saturday 13 February 2010
in the Community Centre, Princes Risborough**

1. Apologies for absence
 2. Minutes of the AGM held on Saturday 14 February 2009 (incorporated in the Annual Report)
 3. Matters arising from the minutes
 4. To receive the Annual Report and Accounts:
 - (a) Chairman's Report
 - (b) Vice Chairman's Report
 - (c) Secretary's Report
 - (d) Treasurer's Report and Accounts
 - (e) Membership Secretary's Report
 - (f) Footpath Secretary's Report
 - (g) Area Access Officer's Report
 - (h) Press Officer's Report
 - (i) News Editor's Report
 - (j) Walks Editor's Report
 - (k) London Forum Report
 - (l) Local Group Reports
 5. To consider any motions of which due notice has been received (in writing, by the Area Secretary, not less than 7 days before the meeting, i.e. by Saturday 6 February 2010)
 6. Election of Officers:
 - (a) *Chairman
 - (b) *Vice-Chairman
 - (c) *Secretary
 - (d) *Treasurer
 - (e) *Footpath Secretary
 - (f) Membership Secretary
 - (g) Press Officer
 - (h) Area Access Officer
 - (i) Area News Editor
 - (j) Countryside Secretary (*vacant*)
 - (k) Publicity Officer (*vacant*)
 - (l) Walks Editor
- Nominations are invited for all posts
Only those marked * are required by the constitution to be elected at the AGM
7. Election of Executive Committee Members not appointed by Local Groups:
 - (a) Not more than 5 representatives of Individual Members
 - (b) Not more than 5 representatives of Local Organisations affiliated to the RA
(In recent years very few of the places in the latter category have been filled)
 8. Appointment of Independent Examiner
 9. Appointment of Area representatives to General Council 2010
 10. Any other business
 11. Speaker: Len Banister, Member of Ramblers' Association Board of Trustees

You may have heard that a meeting of "concerned ramblers", worried by certain recent developments in the Association, took place in Leeds at the end of September. A steering group appointed by that meeting hopes to sponsor a number of motions for consideration by General Council in April 2010. We hope to give you the opportunity to discuss these motions during the AGM.

**Ramblers' Association, Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes and West Middlesex Area
Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held at 2.00 pm on Saturday 14 February 2009
in the White Hill Centre, Chesham, Buckinghamshire**

John Esslemont in the chair and 52 members signed the attendance list.

John Esslemont introduced the Annual General Meeting and welcomed those present including the guest speaker – Tom Franklin, Ramblers' Association Chief Executive. John introduced the current Area officers.

John Elfes reminded members of the 'house-keeping' arrangements such as fire drill, toilets, etc.

1. Apologies for absence were received from Alec Fleming, John Newman, Adele Brazier, Doris Bonwitt, Mike Roe, Donald MacCallum, Buckingham & District Walking Group, John Frankland.

2. The Minutes of the AGM held on Saturday 9 February 2008 were signed as a correct record.

3. Matters arising from the minutes

item 6: our motion was carried at GC. The following progress report was issued in October:

"A survey on the Ramblers' image was printed in the summer edition of Walk Magazine and was also available online. More than 4000 responses were received. Focus groups have also been conducted with non-members and volunteers. Most recently, Areas have been consulted on issues to do with the Board of Trustees, the 75th Anniversary and the draft Code of Conduct for volunteers, trustees and staff."

[The Chairman considers that only the image survey is really relevant to our motion, which was concerned with opinion among the membership at large, as opposed to non-members, volunteers, or Area committees.]

item 9(b): the letter to Affiliated Local Organisations went out with the Annual Report; two out of eleven have replied, both declining to appoint representatives

item 10: Janet Mitchell was, unfortunately, unable to act as Independent Examiner due to unforeseen circumstances, so the Treasurer (with the Chairman's agreement) arranged for Keith Yates, who is also the Independent Examiner for Milton Keynes Group, to do the job instead. The Area Executive Committee approved the change at its last meeting.

4. The Annual Report and Accounts

(a) Chairman's Report

The Chairman thanked all contributors to the Annual Report and, in particular, John Frankland for help with printing and distribution. He appealed for a volunteer to edit the report next year.

He had, to date, received 125 responses to the questionnaire on the report. There seemed to be a fair measure of support for the view that our present practice of sending the report to all members is wasteful. Around 15% of the respondents found the report of no interest whatsoever but that had to be set against a similar proportion who currently take some interest in the report but would not make any positive effort to get hold of it.

A modified version of the Report with, for Data Protection reasons, contact details of individuals removed, had been placed on the Area web site. He was concerned lest Path Checkers might not wish even their names published on the Internet and asked to be notified of any objections.

Asked for show of hands on whether anybody has looked at it online and what they thought. Only a few people responded.

(b) Secretary's Report

No comments or questions. The Secretary thanked John Esslemont for his support.

(c) Membership Secretary's Report

John Wainwright noted the decline in membership over the previous year although he commented that this year's figures may not be totally reliable due to work at RA Central Office on a new membership computer system. He thanked Group membership secretaries for their work. John Esslemont

congratulated Aylesbury on achieving a good increase in membership for the second time in three years.

(d) Footpath Secretary's Report

Kate Ashbrook thanked Group Footpath secretaries and Path Checkers. Kate welcomed the news that the work of the Rights of Way team at BCC would not be contracted out this year and that the budget would remain the same. John Esslemont thanked David Bradnack and Roy Johnson for recent work on notes for Path Checkers.

Kate was asked to comment on the recent BVPI statistics which said that 78% of paths in Bucks were in a 'satisfactory' condition. Kate was asked if 'problem' paths within her report were 'inaccessible'. Kate replied that missing signs, stiles, poor surface conditions, made many paths inaccessible for a lot of people who wanted to walk in the countryside.

Another question to Kate concerned 'permissive' bridleways. Kate replied that landowners can give permission for horse riders to ride on paths over their land. It can be difficult to know the circumstances but if the surface of the path has been affected then this can be reported to BCC Rights of Way team.

(e) Treasurer's Report and Accounts

John Esslemont introduced the accounts in the absence of John Frankland. John commented that responses to the Annual Report questionnaire suggested little interest in the accounts; however it was essential that they should be made available to members for scrutiny.

John noted that we have *finally* paid BCC for Donate-a-Gate (David Bradnack said we had received a letter of thanks from BCC).

He thanked John Frankland, for the large amount of work in a short period of preparation of accounts and budget and thanked Keith Yates for taking over as Independent Examiner on short notice and to tight timescale.

The meeting was asked to accept the accounts. (*Proposed*: Tom Berry, *Seconded* by Martin Harris).

Accepted by all present. It was noted that the Independent Examiner's statement mentioned 'year ending 30 September 2007'. This should have said '2008'. John Esslemont would draw this to the attention of the Area Treasurer.

(f) Area Access Officer's report

John Elfes updated the meeting on the current position with regard to the access land at Grays Lane Bank. John said that the landowner had stated his intention to claim that it is parkland or garden and therefore excepted. This had meant that BCC could not go ahead with installing access gates and had returned the money for this to Natural England. However, from May the land could be legally accessed under the legislation. A comment was made that a small event could be arranged to draw attention to the situation. John mentioned that a sum of money £5713 -50 was available and earmarked to be spent on improving access to five sites.

He mentioned the Quiet Lanes project and reminded members that we had used two of these tracks – being claimed as byways rather than bridleways - during the morning walk.

(g) Press Officer's Report

Kate commented that she put out occasional press releases but was unable to say how much these were taken up by local papers in Bucks. Members present were asked how many took a local paper and if they had seen mention of the ramblers activities. It was suggested that members could send in cuttings to Kate. Kate said she would issue a press release after the meeting.

(h) News Editor's Report

There were no comments or questions.

(i) Walks Editor's Report

David reported how much he enjoyed walking over the routes and drew attention to the need to consider continuing the work in the future. He appealed for volunteers to get in touch with him.

(k) Local Group Reports

There were no comments or suggestions.

John Esslemont commented that a report should have been asked for from our representatives on the RA's London forum. A report would appear next year.

5. To consider any motions of which due notice has been received (in writing, by the Area Secretary, not less than 7 days before the meeting, i.e. by Saturday, 7 February 2009). No motions had been received.

6. Election of Officers:

	<i>Elected</i>	<i>Proposed by</i>	<i>Seconded by</i>
Chairman	John Esslemont	Tom Berry	Kate Ashbrook
Vice-Chairman	John Elfes	Madeleine Moody	Val Burr
Secretary	Tom Berry	John Esslemont	Colin Kennedy
Treasurer	John Frankland	Oliver Statham	Kate Ashbrook
Footpath Secretary	Kate Ashbrook	Hugh Westacott	John Shipley
Membership Sec.	John Wainwright	Tom Berry	Paul Rhodes
Press Officer	Kate Ashbrook	Hugh Westacott	Michele Arnal
Area Access Officer	John Elfes	Jean Bamford	Martin Harris
Area News Editor	Brenda Mothersole	John Esslemont	John Elfes
Countryside Sec.			
Walks Editor	David Bradnack	Colin Kennedy	Hugh Westacott
Publicity Officer			

7. Election of Executive Committee Members not appointed by Local Groups:

(a) Representatives of Individual Members

Mike Roe, David Barnard, Hugh Westacott, and Oliver Statham (*Proposed*: David Bradnack, *Seconded*: Kate Ashbrook) were elected.

(b) There were no nominations for representatives of Local Organisations affiliated to the RA.

8. Appointment of Independent Examiner.

Keith Yates (*Proposed*: John Esslemont, *Seconded*: John Shipley) was elected Independent Examiner.

9. Appointment of representatives to the RA General Council 2009.

John Esslemont gave a brief explanation. The Area is entitled to send two official Area representatives, entitled to speak and vote during formal GC sessions. It has also been Area policy to send up to two visitors at Area expense. Kate Ashbrook and John Esslemont are members of General Council in other capacities.

Proposed: John Elfes, *Seconded*: David Bradnack and agreed by those present at the AGM that the two representatives would be as follows: John Wainwright and Tom Berry. It was noted that the committee had agreed that Chas Pickett should attend as a visitor.

10. Any other business

The Chairman reported that the 25th Anniversary of the formation of the Area on the subdivision of the former Southern Area would be this year. Also, the 75th Anniversary of the Ramblers' Association would be 2010. Ideas on how to celebrate these anniversaries were requested. Tom Franklin said the latter had been discussed at the Board of Trustees and proposals would be forthcoming.

A member raised the topic of Walkers Welcome saying that this would be a good initiative for a town in our Area. The Princes Risborough walking festival was mentioned. Kate Ashbrook agreed to get details.

11. After the interval Kate Ashbrook introduced the guest speaker, Tom Franklin, Chief Executive of the Ramblers' Association, who gave a very good talk outlining aspects of his work, the issues facing the Ramblers' Association at this time, and the direction most likely to achieve success. Tom talked about the present financial climate – the recession – and how this might be an opportunity for us. People's concerns over health, finance, climate change were leading to more interest in walking. It was important for the RA to have the right appeal to members.

Tom recognised that a concern of members currently involved in RA work was the difficulty in getting members to volunteer. Overall RA membership had fallen slightly over the last 5 years and the membership was getting older. It was important to see how people view the ramblers from outside. Recognise the increase in non RA walking clubs, and, the availability of walking information from the web.

Last year the RA General Council voted for a new direction 'Fresh Air, Firm Ground'. Four key things include: a good quality environment for people to walk in; offering a variety of walking experiences to get people to walk; get walking, keep walking – introducing people to the benefits of walking; improving the way we work. Building on the success we have already achieved.

Tom ended with a quote from Charles Darwin 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives. It is the one most adaptable to change'

Tom took questions on the following: inaccessible paths (replied that we have a unique path network and this needs to be accessible to the walking abilities of 'normal' people); democracy within the RA – do people care? (answered from the floor – mostly people do not care. The RA should let the Groups get on with what they want to do!); image – will you be deciding what members must wear? (no); RSPB – has a lot more members than the RA – why successful?(several reasons – suggestion that they have a strong focus on younger members. The RA is looking at this); incentives for introducing new members? (variety of ideas are being considered); balancing act for the RA difficult? (charity, campaigning, membership all demonstrate the RA's being there for the public good).

After a question and answer session the Chairman closed the meeting by thanking Tom Franklin for his talk, John Elfes for making arrangements for the meeting, David and Joyce Wills for leading the morning's walk, Jean Bamford and her team – Madeleine Moody, Peggy Mills and Jean Staveley - for doing the refreshments, and all those volunteers within the Area who give their time to the R.A.

Area Annual Report 1 October 2008 - 30 September 2009

Chairman's Report

The year under report has seen the Association nationally facing financial crisis, with the Board of Trustees being forced to take drastic economy measures. This has led to considerable unrest at various levels (see the Vice Chairman's report, below, for further details). My personal belief is that the Board has acted appropriately in difficult circumstances. While I might agree with some of the complaints of the dissenters I feel that some of their fears for the future are unjustified, and some of their aims unwise.

One of the economy measures has been a reduction in funding available for Areas and Groups for the current year. We have managed to accommodate this by budgeting for reduced reserves, but such an approach cannot be sustained in future years. If Groups are to maintain their programmes of walks and other activities, which I regard as essential to the Association's wellbeing, increased funding **must** be found for 2010-2011.

On a lighter note, I set myself the task during the year of assessing the adequacy of signage on access land in southern Buckinghamshire, and found it distinctly deficient. I have reported defects to the County Council. The access rights we were given by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act will only give full benefit if the public know *what* they can do, and *where* they can do it.

I usually end this report by thanking all those who contribute voluntary work to Ramblers in whatever capacity and whatever level. I do so again but, this year, would particularly single out the Area and Group treasurers, who have had to cope with additional work in difficult circumstances. It has also been another difficult year for the Area and Group Membership Secretaries, with continuing problems with the Central Office computer system; they too deserve special thanks.

Vice Chairman's Report

In August 2009 three officers of the West Riding Area sent out a circular inviting members to a "Concerned Ramblers" meeting in Leeds on 26th September. I attended this meeting as an individual member, not as an Area representative. The meeting was attended by over ninety members from virtually all Areas.

The main theme was general dissatisfaction with the performance of both the Board of Trustees and the management, and with the handling of the financial situation in particular. There was general agreement on this. There was criticism of the Chief Executive, Tom Franklin, some angry and some more measured, and some calls for his dismissal. The Board of Trustees and its Chairman were also heavily criticised. The rebranding exercise was held up as an example of waste, and the CRM (the troubled new membership records system) as proof both of waste and incompetence.

There much emphasis on re-focussing Ramblers' policies and resources on Rights of Way and Access, with the Ramblers' being less involved in national initiatives to promote walking. This view was based on the perceived shift of resources away from Rights of Way in Head Office reorganisation, the decision to abandon funding for legal action on Rights of Way, and scepticism about Get Walking Keep Walking being truly self financing. There were discussions on accountability, and whether the requirements of charitable status were being properly interpreted by the Board.

The meeting rejected a call for an Extraordinary General Meeting of General Council.

A list of aims was agreed-

Immediate Review of the present RA strategy document "Fresh Air Firm Ground"

Rights of Way and Access to be major RA focus

Legal Work to be resumed immediately

Immediate Review of all Rights of Way policy

Immediate Review of Promoting Walking

Details of Substantial Financial Transactions over last two years to be made available

Open Democratic Style of Government

Review of the RA's interpretation of its requirements as a charity

A steering group was formed and I was nominated to it. At the time of writing the group is working on a series of motions to put to General Council 2010.

John Elfes

Secretary's Report

Another fun-filled year has passed! At 60 I believe I am now above the average age of RA members – but not by much! So why not consider relieving me of the burden before I get much older! Oh – and the past year of Area activities? One has to use that famous phrase - all correspondence has been dealt with! The Area continues to function with a regular number of meetings plus contact with all of its local Groups. Officers and committee fulfil their roles extremely ably considering that it is not easy to instil enthusiasm and excitement into a two hour meeting held every three months! I am very grateful to them all!

I spent an enjoyable and sunny couple of days at RA General Council in early April - a lovely campus at Newport in Shropshire. Lots of keen fellow enthusiasts concerned enough to listen, discuss and respond to speakers during arranged sessions. The local RA Area put on some very good walks. Overall, for me it did not have the same 'bite' as the previous year in Winchester where the future of the RA - pre credit crunch - was debated and decided. Also, the bar facilities were much poorer! However, later events have shown with what wisdom Tom Franklin 'warned' that the RA could not rely on its past successes and needed to look to the future if it was to remain at the forefront of walking in this country. Looking round I did feel that the RA has some work to do to be truly representative of our society today. A good weekend and very worthwhile so why not consider representing us next year?

Tom Berry

Treasurer's Report

The accounts are set out to show the amounts spent on the four main charitable objectives of the RA, namely promoting walking, promoting the integrity of the footpath network, securing greater access on foot to the countryside and protecting the outdoor environment.

The accounts and annual return of the Area to Central Office (CO) have been prepared on an accruals basis. Under accruals accounting income and expenditure are recorded in the period to which they relate. Accruals accounting is used to avoid distorting accounts and masking the true asset level.

Area was funded from CO via the budgeting system. The budgeted sum of £8,365[#] was requested from CO and agreed, ([#] this figure was adjusted by CO to take account of reduced distribution costs of South East Walker (SEW) via CO). We only drew £7,280 of the funding from CO because of the reduced cost of our Annual Report: £589 compared with £1,617 for the previous year. Area ended this year with reserves of £3,245 which is virtually as targeted. Groups were provided £4,376 of funding by Area; their aggregated end of year reserves stands at £3,850 which is £536 lower than the previous year. Nevertheless a few Groups have reserve levels that look a bit too healthy and may draw the attention of the CO Finance Team when the review of Area and Group reserves is conducted during January/February 2010.

The year was overshadowed by the financial crisis the RA is suffering:

- The budget and funds required from CO are normally determined from the previous year's income/expenditure and other information to hand at the start of each financial year.
- CO required Area to reduce its funding request for 2009/10 by 25% of that covered by this report.
- As a result for the year to 30 September 2010 the sum of £6,274* has been request from CO, (* 75% of this year's requested £8,365 of funding).
- Area has been able to accommodate this reduced funding by the realised saving in production of the SEW magazine; electronic distribution of the Annual Report adopted as the norm; reduced funding of Groups mainly by utilising about £550 from their reserves and utilising £470 from Area reserves.
- Area's Group Funding Formula (GFF) has now been suspended and isn't likely to be resurrected now that CO have introduced their budgetary funding system across all Areas and Groups.
- This entailed substantial amount of work by the Area Treasurer, Chairman and Group Treasurers and their colleagues.
- CO would do well to remember that first and foremost we are volunteers, who normally give our time willingly and freely.

Buckinghamshire County Council eventually invoiced us for the £2,000 and work completed on the "Donate a Gate" project which was shown as a creditor in last year's accounts.

Area received 11 shares in Ramblers' Association Services Ltd in lieu of interest; making a total holding of 267 shares, valued at £1 each.

Up to date accounts are circulated to Committee Members prior to each Committee Meeting for scrutiny and subsequent approval at the Committee Meeting. Two signatories are required to make any withdrawals by cheque or bank draft from the Area's bank account. Current signatories are David Bradnack, John Elfes, John Esslemont and John Frankland.

I would like to thank all the Group Treasurers and their Auditors for their hard work in getting their end of year accounts and annual returns completed so duteously. I would also like thank those Group Treasurers that submitted budgets for the next financial year to 30 September 2009; I anticipate more doing so in subsequent years.

Finally I thank Keith Yates, our Independent Examiner, for all his invaluable help in scrutinising our accounts once again.

INCOME & EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT FOR THE YEAR ENDED**30-Sep-09**

	<u>Year ended</u>	<u>30.9.2009</u>	<u>30.9.2008</u>
INCOME:			
Funding from Central Office		7,280	9,490
Advertising in Annual Report		0	0
Bank Interest		35	200
Interest in Shares in R.A. Services		11	13
Donation		0	0
	Total Income	7,326	9,703
EXPENDITURE:			
Funding to Groups		4,376	4,833
Funds returned to Central Office		0	0
Rights of Way		92	111
Countryside Protection		0	0
Access		0	0
Promoting Walking			
- South East Walker		3,115	2,990
- Recruitment & Publicity		59	98
Governance			
- Area Committee Meetings		78	94
- Area AGM & National Meetings		272	313
- Annual Report		589	1,617
- Committee Members' Expenses		52	186
- Miscellaneous		0	0
	Total Expenditure	8,632	10,241
SURPLUS / DEFICIT for year		-1,307	-538
Funds Brought Forward from previous year		4,552	5,090
Funds Carried Forward to next year		3,245	4,552

BALANCE SHEET

Assets:			
Shares in R.A. Services Ltd		267	256
Balance in Bank		3,087	6,311
	Total Assets	3,354	6,567
Liabilities:			
Creditors - BCC / RA CO / Treasurer's exps		0	15
Creditors - BCC "Donate A Gate"			2000
Creditors - John Frankland - Treasurer's Expenses		49	
Creditors - Howard Cave - Website Costs		59	
	Total Liabilities	109	2015
	NET ASSETS	£ 3,245	£ 4,552

SIGNED and DATED 07 December 2009

John D. Frankland, Hon. Treasurer

Date

INDEPENDENT EXAMINER'S STATEMENT:

Having carried out procedures in accordance with the Area and Group independent examination Guidelines, I consider the RA Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes and West Middlesex Area accounts to have been properly prepared and give a true and fair view of the Area's finances for the year ending 30 September 2009

SIGNED and DATED 07 December 2009

Keith Yates, Hon. Independent Examiner

Date

Membership Secretary's Report

Membership figures at 30 September 2009

Life 72
Single 2245
Joint 1841
Clubs 11

TOTAL 4158

Group Membership Figures (Last year's figures are shown to indicate level of change.)

	<u>2009</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>% Increase/Decrease</u>
Amersham	637	639	-0.3
Aylesbury	368	367	0.3
Hillingdon	551	585	-5.8
Milton Keynes	451	407	10.8
North-West London	373	384	-2.9
West London	659	700	-5.9
Wycombe	572	585	-2.2
Chilterns 20s & 30s	191	200	-4.5
Hike MK	37	34	8.8
Chilterns Weekend Walkers	134	104	28.8

There has been a small decrease in membership in the Area. Impressive growth has occurred in the Chilterns Weekend Walkers and Milton Keynes & District groups. However, this has been offset by significant losses in the Hillingdon and West London groups.

A great deal of work has taken place in Central Office to deal with the problems caused by the transition to the CRM system. There has been an improvement in the processing of membership subscriptions. However, the monthly membership reports sent to membership secretaries still leave much to be desired. The new and improved monthly membership reports promised for August did not materialise.

During the year, I commenced electronic distribution of monthly membership reports to Group Membership Secretaries in the Area. They now receive the reports much sooner than they did by post and there has been a significant reduction of Area membership expenses. All but one group are accepting the reports in this way.

John Wainwright

Footpath Secretary's Report

Our volunteer path checkers walked many miles, checking the paths in their parishes and reporting problems to the highway authorities. The results were collated by the path check coordinator for each district and borough.

The results show that for Aylesbury Vale District we checked 64 out of 111 parishes and 1509 out of 2180 paths, walking 1022 km and reporting 504 problems. This took at least 861 volunteer hours, where time estimates were given. The most common problems were overgrowth, poor or missing stiles or gates, missing signposts and cropping. In South Bucks District seven of the 12 parishes were checked and 16 problems reported, while in Wycombe District we received returns for 24 parishes and, although not all the paths were checked, there were 61 problems. In Chiltern District 11 parishes out of 19 were checked, and 71 problems were found in 399kms of paths walked.

In Milton Keynes, 26 of 47 parishes (403 paths) were checked, and 218 problems were found. The most common ones were missing waymarks, missing signposts, cropping and poor gates and stiles.

In Brent, one volunteer, John Mann, checked 104 recorded paths and a further 54 unnumbered ones, reporting 111 problems on 76 of the numbered paths; missing signposts were the most common. In Harrow, Graham Wright checked 83 paths, finding 41 problems, again mostly missing signposts. In Hillingdon, Mike Meehan led a team of volunteers who checked 374 paths, 11 of them blocked, four difficult, ten unclear, and 98 missing a signpost at one or both ends. However, 191 were improved on last year.

There were 26 path-change proposals during the year. We objected to six and did not object to 20. We were able to amend some to make them acceptable to us and three applications were withdrawn following our objections. We did not comment on most consultations on applications to alter the status of routes because we had no evidence to offer.

At the end of 2008 we learnt that Bucks County Council was threatening to contract-out its rights-of-way work in 2009-10. We lobbied councillors to resist this as the experience of our colleagues in the Northamptonshire Ramblers is that it is detrimental to the rights-of-way network. We were relieved when the council decided not to follow this route. However, in the autumn of 2009 we learnt that the rights-of-way budget was seriously threatened, due to cuts all round, and we encouraged our members to write to their councillors, arguing for the value of an investment in public paths.

Bucks County Council's rights-of-way liaison groups for the north and south met twice during the year and we were represented at all four meetings. David Bradnack did some further excellent work in identifying anomalies on the definitive map and suggesting improvements to the county council.

I should like to thank, in particular, Roy Johnson, Donald MacCallum, John Elfes, Martin Harris, Mike Meehan, Mike Roe, Jeff Smith, John Mann and Graham Wright for all their help in analysing path check, corresponding with path checkers, checking their own parishes, and generally giving me welcome support and assistance. We are indebted to all our path checkers for their vigilance on paths in their patch and for their advice on path changes. But we still have vacancies, so please look at the list of vacant parishes in this report and volunteer if you can (perhaps on a one-off basis first). If someone is occupying your chosen parish please let us know, as there is always scope for job-sharing.

Please see page 18 of this report for vacancies.

Kate Ashbrook

Access Officer's Report

It seems impossible, but it is nearly ten years since the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) became law, and Open Access was introduced. It is therefore time for the promised decadal review, where we hope to resolve some of the difficulties and inconsistencies of the original Act. In this area the main aim will be to refine the definition of downland so that many areas which meet a commonsense definition of down can be added to the access maps.

Open Access: Grays Lane Banks

The saga has taken a further turn. Despite the Planning Inspector's decision, reported last year, and the reinstatement of this piece of land to the Conclusive Map, the owner has refused to cooperate with Bucks County Council (BCC) on previously agreed access points to the land, and no work has been carried out. The owner is now claiming that the area is his garden, or alternatively parkland. The Bucks Local Access Forum wrote to BCC, urging them to take all necessary steps to gain access. BCC is taking legal advice on how to proceed, but there are very tight limits on legal expenditure at present.

Coastal Access:

At the time of writing, the Marine Bill, which includes the proposal for Coastal Access, is on the point of receiving royal assent, and subsequent implementation.

Bucks Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Actual projects are now being considered, mostly based on improving the bridleway network. We still need suggestions for improvements to the footpath network from Groups, Pathcheckers and individual members.

Local Access Forums:

General: I reported last year on some progress towards the establishment of an England Access Forum (EAF), and a Regional structure, which would provide a means of liaison between Forums, and with Natural England. Progress remains slow. The South East region LAF has met once this year and the second meeting is overdue at the time of writing. There has been little information from either the EAF or Natural England. There is still no progress on setting up a national website, which remains the preferred (and cheapest) option.

Buckinghamshire: The forum continues to deal with all Access matters and with strategic Rights of Way issues. There have again been no applications for long term **closures** in the last twelve months. **BCC budgets** have been squeezed yet again, the money for “on the ground” works by 25% (identical to last year’s proposals). The government funded **Access Management Grant** has reappeared, but in a much reduced form, and bids must now be made for individual projects. The proposed **Parish Conference** has been deferred yet again for financial reasons. There has been no progress on **Quiet Lanes**. There has been a marked increase in the number of applications for new **Village Greens**. BCC is considering how to extend the Chiltern Society **Donate-a-Gate** scheme to Aylesbury Vale. They are not proposing matched funding, however, and are looking for someone to run the scheme on a volunteer basis. BCC is still in the process of **Outsourcing** a number of its departments. Last year’s BCC cabinet decision to exclude Rights of Way and Access from the proposals was welcome, but the threat is still there. In short, the outlook is gloomy, and there is no prospect at all of improvement in the financial position.

Milton Keynes: I shall give a verbal report on the Milton Keynes Local Access Forum at the AGM.

John Elfes

Press Officer's Report

We publicised the results of our path check to coincide with the AGM in February. At the end of the year we won publicity for our 25th anniversary walk on Beacon Hill with articles in three local newspapers.

Kate Ashbrook

News Editor's Report

The change in appearance of the South East Walker does not appear to have discouraged the regular contributors, although now with the digital age there seems to be more scope for photographs. The editors are grateful to those who do contribute. Of the different area groups, Milton Keynes and District are the most enthusiastic contributors although regular contributions also come from Aylesbury and District, Hillingdon and Wycombe. News items and other features would be welcome from other groups. John Esslemont provides comprehensive area reports. The usual procedure for submitting items is that I collect and collate the written material, whereas photographs can be sent direct to the Editor, Les Douglas, with an appropriate caption (group etc). The regular deadlines are around 8-12th of January; April, July and October.

Brenda Mothersole

Walks Editor's Report

We still have very little idea how many people are using our routes, though I met someone from outside our Area who said he had enjoyed several, and I know that a Group from another Area use some for their Group walks.

We have statistics for the number of times walks descriptions have been opened and read. In total this averages more than 5,000 a month. Of those, it is not known how many were because someone wanted a walk in that location, and how many arose from a Google search for something that just happened to be mentioned in the walks description.

Of the fully described walks, the ten that were most looked at were the walks from Denham, Aylesbury (to Wendover), Gerrards Cross, Wolverton, Amersham, Marlow, Pinner, West Wycombe, Haddenham and Lane End and the three least were from: West Drayton, Little Kimble (to Saunderton) and Saunderton.

We might tentatively conclude that people are interested in walks routes throughout our territory, not just in the tourist honey pots.

We also know that there were an average of over 2,000 downloads a month, indicating that people were sufficiently interested in what we have said about a route to want to save it and/or print it. We can assume that if people are going to walk the route they will print or copy it, but not necessarily the reverse.

The item most often downloaded was the Map Reading Exercise, followed by the Thame Valley DIY route. Of the fully described routes, the top ten were: Aylesbury (to Wendover), Northwood, Oving, Pinner, Leighton Buzzard, West Wycombe, Wendover, Wolverton, Marlow and Beaconsfield and the bottom three: Taplow, Burnham (to Langley) and Monks Risborough (ignoring the West Ruislip walk, which we had to close because of pipeline works).

Also of interest is the ratio of downloads to readings. All the DIY walks were at or near the top of the list. Of the described routes, the top ten were: West Drayton, Leighton Buzzard, Saunderton, Northwood, Little Kimble (to Saunderton), Steeple Claydon, Oving, Tring, Monks Risborough and Pinner and the bottom three: Haddenham, Burnham (to Langley), and Denham.

The West Drayton walk is undoubtedly a nice walk – otherwise it would not be on the website – but it is not obvious why it is top of the list. I had considered reversing it, because of better refreshment opportunities at the West Drayton end, but will now probably not do so. A year or two ago the Saunderton walk was new and the Leighton Buzzard one was extended. The Oving walk was reversed this year, previously starting at Granborough.

It is startling that the Denham walk was top of the first list and bottom of the third. Part of the trouble may have been the dual carriageway crossing, which we have now avoided. It is unfortunate that the pub about half way on the Haddenham walk has very limited opening hours – but it does a nice Sunday roast. Both these walks descriptions include a number of alternatives, which may be confusing and a disincentive, though we have recently eliminated some in the Denham walk. We admit to more road walking on the Burnham walk than we would ideally like.

We have changed the Chesham walk to eliminate some road walking, and made minor tweaks to many of the others. All routes have been checked within about a year, by Howard Cave, Donald MacCallum or me, and our thanks are again due to Howard for maintaining the website. As I said in my last report, with increasing age I would welcome the opportunity to share some of the checking of routes in the north and the south-west of our area.

David Bradnack

Ramblers' Greater London Forum

The Forum includes representatives of each Area which has territory including London boroughs. Our representatives have been Tom Berry and myself; I took over from Michele Arnal during the year. In its third year the Forum now has: an approved letter head; a web site - as yet unpopulated; an initial promotional package with an estimated production cost of £1000 - there is no funding available from Central Office.

The lead proposal for the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the RA is the presentation of a cake, bearing 75 candles, to Mayor Boris Johnson.

The Forum will invite Sustrans to a Central Office meeting to discuss their 2007 Greater London Greenways proposal.

Forum Chairman, Len Banister, is confident that any extra volunteers needed for the various 'outreach' proposals tabled by central office can be recruited from outside the RA.

The Forum's progress and lack of funding was discussed at the 25th August Area committee meeting and the Area representatives at the October meeting of the Forum were advised to suggest that the activities of the Forum should be limited until such time as adequate financial support could be offered by Central Office.

Charles Pickett

Reports from Local Groups

Amersham and District Group

A programme of 214 walks during the year proved popular with the Group's members who were joined by members from other groups and potential members attracted through the Ramblers' Walks finder.

Our leaders excelled themselves putting on seven walks for the Festival of Winter Walks. These were publicised locally and had a good turn out with some new faces. The Get Walking Day in May, with perfect weather, proved popular with the leader giving a varied and interesting walk to encourage new members.

An icy February snowdrop walk was joined, whilst on the move, by an interviewer from local radio. A very relaxed style was adopted by both sides which, when broadcast, highlighted the attractions of winter walking.

Walking holidays were organised in the Isle of Wight and Whitby and good weather made these particularly enjoyable. A second winter walking the Shakespeare Way was less muddy than previously and was particularly interesting as the trail took the Group through both Blenheim and Oxford.

Madeleine Moody, Secretary

Aylesbury and District Group

At the Group - Annual General Meeting - a new Chairman (Dan Sullivan) was elected. Speaking passionately about the current situation and the future opportunities available, he said he looked forward to serving the Group. Two additional new Committee members were also elected in what proved to be a very successful evening.

2009 has seen Group Membership remain steady. An additional type of walk has been added to the walks programme, affectionately called "Amblers" and welcomed by those unable to complete our normal walks.

Social events were well attended. A special mention should be made about our Summer Solstice Walk along the Norfolk Coastal Path, well organised by Julia Drummond.

All in all: another good year for the Group.

Jim Cornwell, Secretary

Chilterns 20s – 30s Walking Group

The Chilterns 20-30s group has had another successful year with membership growth of about 20% if we are to believe the latest figures from Central Office which have not always added up thorough the year. We have also received a lot of enquiries about the group. Maintaining our frequency of walks and social events is a constant challenge for our group, as regular organisers are constantly moving on from the group and we have done well to recruit many new walk leaders throughout the year. Next year, in the Ramblers 75th year, we celebrate our tenth as a group. We are planning our largest party yet in January with spaces for 150.

It has been an exciting first year as chair, with the group trying some slightly different ideas, like offering longer walks on Saturdays and trialling an interactive social network style website.

Paul Rhodes, Chair

Chilterns Weekend Walkers

Over the last year membership of the group has continued to grow at a good rate, helped in no small part by new people being made to feel welcome on their first walk with us and our social events. We participated in Get Walking Day for the first time this year and attracted a lot of new walkers.

In the 12 months since November 2008 we have put on a total of 129 walks. This represents a 51% increase on last year. In addition to our all day walks, we continue to run short walks to attract new people to walking. We've also concluded walking the London Loop series of walks.

This year we've had weekend trips to Cornwall, Skipton in Yorkshire, Alfriston in the South Downs National Park and the Brecon Beacons. We have also ventured overseas to Austria and Munich.

We've been proactive in increasing the number of walk leaders by running walk leader training days. A first for this year is that we have a Footpath Secretary and are responsible for path checking in Great Missenden East Parish.

Our website and weekly emails to members and prospective members are very popular and we will continue to operate as a paperless group, with very little expenditure.

Lucia Contrino, Secretary

Hike MK

During 2009 Hike MK has remained a small but stable walking group. It has been difficult to reconcile the membership, this is ongoing, currently thought to be 37 members. Most weekends have been supported with walks, there have been 2 long weekend events, Exmoor and Yorkshire, and a trip to Switzerland. The summer Stowe walk had a record turnout of 26. Ann's mid-week walks are also proving very popular. Many thanks to the walk leaders and organisers of these.

The AGM was held on Nov 15th. Six committee members had volunteered for re-election, leaving 3 open positions, webmaster, membership secretary and social secretary. Many thanks to James and Leanne who were stepping down, for their valued work over the last 4 years. The committee has met quarterly through 2009. Additionally, walk planning meetings at local pubs have been very successful in keeping the program active - thanks to Sue. Thanks also to Tracey for her continued efforts regarding publicity.

Other activities have been comedy nights, birthday meals, pub quiz, theatre and a couple of barbecues.

Simon Breen, Secretary

Hillingdon and District Group

Hillingdon Group have had another good year, continuing to provide a diverse programme of walks, holiday opportunities (Slovenia, Lake District, etc.) and social events; all tailored around the declared needs of the membership. There has been a slight fall in Group numbers but walk turnouts are up with 'new faces' coming in from personal contact and our annual recruiting promotion at the Ruislip Woods Open Day in May. Two of our lady members received certificates recording our thanks and congratulation on their each having led one hundred walks for the Group. The web site has been refined into a solid information and recruiting tool. Members have responded in a positive manner to the Association's cash crisis and our internal financial management means we are able to meet the budget strictures set by central office and Area organisation. We are pledged to raise the numbers receiving their programmes and annual reports electronically. At our AGM on 14th November it was pleasing to note that all committee and ex-officio positions had been filled with experienced and energetic members. We pride ourselves on the high morale and friendliness of the Group.

Charles Pickett, Chairman

Milton Keynes and District Group

We had 3 events during 2009 to celebrate our 30th anniversary, this culminated in a recruitment day in the form of a Quiz Walk, which attracted interest from some non members of the RA. We are talking to MK Parks Trust and the Bedford and MK Waterways Trust who both supported our Quiz Walk with a view to gaining more local awareness.

Our membership has risen by 11% this year and we attracted some new leaders during this period. We had a full and varied programme at weekends and on some weekdays, as well as many trips away from Cornwall to Lake District, and a couple of overseas trips to Germany and France.

Two of our members completed the way-marking of the Milton Keynes boundary walk. Footpath issues continue to be reported to MK Council but response is minimal due to budget constraints.

The blog is well established and we are embarking on a campaign to encourage people to receive their programmes and newsletters electronically thereby reducing our distribution costs.

Penny Jamieson, Chairman

North West London Group

Our group meets every Sunday for a day's walk and, thanks to the efforts of our walks organiser, we are able to offer a full programme. We have introduced a few shorter walks but it is very hard to find leaders. Our acting chairman is standing down at the next AGM in January and we are urgently seeking a replacement. Our thanks to Marian Trim, our acting chairman, for all her past efforts. Our AGM is on Saturday 30th January.

Carole Swithern, Secretary

West London Group

‘the walk starts from the destination station at 10.30am’ This phrase or something similar in the programme records the fact that almost all of the Groups walks use public transport. Further details mention distance, difficulty, map, leaders name, etc. Osterley Park and Perivale Wood saw the Group meet the public, local libraries have our programme, members are involved in path checking both in the countryside and in urban areas, indoor meetings are held for members and the public, advice on walks and clubs is given to people who phone write, use email or just ask. So, here is a big thank you to all of our walk leaders who give freely of their time, expertise and enthusiasm, to provide endless opportunities for members to enjoy the countryside in and around London. A final thank you to all who support the walks, talks, and help run the West London Group!

Tom Berry, Secretary

Wycombe District Group

Another successful year – personal milestones, packed and varied walking programme, increased social activities, holidays, etc. Whilst the overall Group membership has fallen a little this year from 594 to 569, this headline hides the fact that the group has attracted 60 new members many of whom are walking members.

The classic Wednesday walks, (6 to 7 miles), are increasingly popular with over 30 members becoming the norm. Equally a new format that has been tried this year, 8 miles with a picnic lunch stop after 5 miles has also proved very successful, giving members a chance to mix in groups at the lunch break. In contrast the longer Sunday walks, (11 miles plus), are less well supported and it is proving more difficult to get leaders, as it is for the short walks.

Our holidays continue to be successful with both the week in Menorca and the long weekend at HF Abingworth being fully subscribed. An innovation this year that proved especially popular was to extend the weekend to include the Sunday night rather than rushing away after the Sunday walk.

A number of milestones this year both for walking and leading. John Esslemont clocked up his 1000th walk with the Group and another 5 members passed the 500 mark. When it comes to leading both John Esslemont and Joy Payne each passed the 200 mark and Colin Kennedy the 100 mark – all fantastic achievements.

Finally on a more social note we have had a few away days outside the normal programme – Tring, Cropredy, etc. so if you would like to be included for the future please tell Barbara Brooksbank.

John Shipley, Secretary

Path Checkers and Co-ordinators

In previous years we have included in the Annual Report a complete list, by parish, of our Path Checkers. Partly because changes are frequent, and partly for data protection reasons we have decided, this year, to omit the list. If you wish to discuss path problems please contact us using the links on the website.

Path checkers are asked to walk all the paths in their parishes at least once a year and to report problems. They will also be consulted about any proposals for path changes. New volunteers are always welcome and should discuss what is involved with one of the people listed below. A list of vacant parishes in early December 2009 follows but if you are interested in a particular parish which is not listed please get in touch: the current Checker may be happy to share, or change, responsibilities.

Vacant parishes

Aylesbury Vale District: Akeley, Aston Sandford, Barton Hartshorn, Biddlesden, Boarstall, Calvert Green, Charndon, Chetwode, Creslow, East Claydon, Edgcott, Foscott, Gawcott with Lenborough, Granborough, Great Brickhill, Great Horwood, Grendon Underwood, Hardwick, Hillesden, Hoggston, Hogshaw, Kingswood, Leckhampstead, Lillingstone Dayrell with Luffield Abbey, Lillingstone Lovell, Little Horwood, Ludgershall, Marsh Gibbon, Middle Claydon, Nash, Oakley, Padbury, Pitchcott, Poundon, Preston Bissett, Quainton, Shalstone, Steeple Claydon, Stewkley, Swanbourne, Thornton, Tingewick, Radclive cum Chackmore, Soulbury, Stoke Hammond, Stowe, Turweston, Twyford, Upper Winchendon, Waddesdon, Water Stratford, Westbury, Westcott, Whaddon, Whitechurch, Winslow, Woodham, Worminghall, Wotton Underwood

Chiltern District: Little Chalfont, Penn

Wycombe District: Hazlemere

London Borough of Hounslow

Group Secretaries

Amersham & District Group	Madeleine Moody
Aylesbury & District Group	Jim Cornwell
Chilterns 20s-30s Walking Group	Cathy Casey
Chilterns Weekend Walkers	Lucia Contrino
Hike MK	Simon Breen
Hillingdon & District Group	Vivien Kermath
Milton Keynes & District Group	Penny Jamieson (<i>acting Secretary</i>)
North West London Group	Carole Swithern
West London Group	Tom Berry
Wycombe District Group	John Shipley

Group Web Sites

Chilterns 20-30s Walking Group	chilterns2030s.ning.com
Chilterns Weekend Walkers	www.chilternswalkers.co.uk
Hike MK	www.mk-northbucks2030s.org.uk
Hillingdon & District Group	www.hillingdonramblers.org.uk
Milton Keynes & District Group	www.mkramblers.org.uk
West London Group	www.btinternet.com/~westlondongroup

Additionally, some of the Area's Groups publicise details of some or all of their walks on the Walks Finder database on the Ramblers' Association central web site. These can be found by following appropriate links to the detailed search page of Walks Finder from the main Ramblers' Association web site, www.ramblers.org.uk; alternatively, the following address will go directly to forthcoming walks for a particular Group:

www.ramblers.co.uk/walksfinder/search.php?advanced=1&group=BUnn&zoomLevel=1

substituting	01 for <i>nn</i> for	Amersham & District Group
	02 for <i>nn</i> for	Chilterns Weekend Walkers
	03 for <i>nn</i> for	Aylesbury & District Group
	04 for <i>nn</i> for	Hillingdon & District Group
	07 for <i>nn</i> for	West London Group
	09 for <i>nn</i> for	Wycombe District Group
	10 for <i>nn</i> for	Chilterns 20-30s Walking Group

Area Executive Committee October 2007 - November 2008

Chairman	John Esslemont
Vice-Chairman	John Elfes
Secretary	Tom Berry
Treasurer	John Frankland
Footpath Secretary	Kate Ashbrook
Membership Secretary	John Wainwright
Countryside Secretary	<i>vacant</i>
News Editor	Brenda Mothersole
Publicity Officer	<i>vacant</i>
Walks Editor	David Bradnack
Press Officer	Kate Ashbrook
Access Officer	John Elfes
Representatives of Individual Members	
	David Barnard
	Mike Roe
	Oliver Statham
	Hugh Westacott
Representatives of Affiliated Local Organisations	
	<i>vacant</i>
Group Representatives	
Amersham	Jean Bamford, Geoff Willcocks (<i>to Nov 2009</i>)
Aylesbury	Jim Cornwell, Dan Sullivan (<i>from Nov 2009</i>)
Chilterns 20s-30s	Ed Pritchard, Paul Rhodes
Chilterns Weekend	Karen Ruthven, Mick Hill
Hike MK	Simon Breen
Hillingdon	Michele Arnal (<i>to May 2009</i>), Chas Pickett
Milton Keynes	Sue Garrett (<i>from Nov 2009</i>)
North West London	Roger Southgate (<i>from Sep 2009</i>)
West London	Martin Harris
Wycombe	Colin Kennedy, John Shipley

Area website: www.bucks-wmiddx-ramblers.org.uk

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