

talking walking

Oxfordshire Ramblers Issue 61, July 2024



Town and countryside are the new gym

Going to the gym was never my thing. Even the 'going' bit seemed too much trouble, let alone the frantic, sweaty torture that followed (I imagine).

These days you can't go long before reading an article extolling the virtues of walking. In her article for the *Sunday Times* magazine, Yasmin Choudhury wrote "Take note you triathlon nutters, walking is the new way to get your endorphin hit and it has significant benefits, whatever your age." She might have added that you can talk with your fellow walkers, surely a bonus that contributes to the feeling of wellbeing.

Yasmin had gone for a leisurely evening walk in London, after work, with the Metropolitan Walkers, a Ramblers group aimed at those in their twenties and thirties. Most weren't wearing walking gear and some had rucksacks to carry their work laptops. London is blessed with parks and other green spaces and woodland, so a city walk doesn't just mean pavements.

Whilst any walking is good for you it occurs to me that one of the advantages of walking on unmetalled or unpaved surfaces is that no two steps are alike. Even your front foot will be experiencing something different from the trailing foot, due to the unevenness of natural surfaces, such as a cross-field footpath or a trail through a wood. This results in a proper, though still relatively benign, workout for the myriad bones, tendons etc. in your foot and up your legs. Your brain will be working overtime as well, though you'll hardly be aware of it. The cerebellum controls, amongst other things, movement and balance. It does this in collaboration with the inner ear, home to the vestibular system, a sensory system that informs the brain about balance and motion. All this and we can talk at the same time.



20 June, a warm sunny day at last. Members on the Downs above the Letcombes. Photo Dave Cavanagh



Socialising can continue at a pub, of course. Photo Carolyn Blackmoor

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Unless otherwise stated, items were written by the editor.
Back issues www.ramblers-oxon.org.uk/magazine.html



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Weight watching on the White Horse

Dave Cavanagh

Last summer I reported on a gathering of archaeologists on Whitehorse Hill. They were there to examine the Uffington White Horse, which has been losing weight. Their prognosis? Fatten it up.

Photos taken recently from a drone by [Hedley Thorne](#), a lover and great photographer of the North Wessex Downs, had been compared with those taken several decades earlier. Careful analysis indicated that the Horse had shrunk. Young archaeologists i.e. those able to kneel down for hours at a time, had, last year, peeled back the turf at selected places on the head and neck of the Horse, which remained still throughout. This confirmed what aerial photography had suggested: the visible part of the Horse was shrinking - about 40% of its area in just the last 30 years or so. This had been caused by soil movement and

encroachment of the turf over the exposed chalk.

Following last year's analysis on the ground it was agreed to make adjustments to the White Horse, essentially to take it back to its dimensions of the 1990s, when the last major survey of the Horse was done. Money was raised, including a generous donation from lovers of the White Horse who live in Australia, and the restoration work was scheduled for the week beginning 1 July.



The restoration site, archaeologists at work. Photo Dave Cavanagh

This is what the Uffington White Horse looked like in 1965:



And this is what it looked like in 2021:



(Photo courtesy of Hedley Thorne)

I went up to help out in a non-skilled way on the second day. It was chilly and very windy. My hearing is not good at the best of times but the wind made it worse. As far as I can make out there were representatives from Hysterical England, English Heretics and National Truss (the mind boggles with what they do with the rest of their time). The digging and recording were done mostly by Oxford Archaeopteryx. As I intimated, I may have misheard from time to time.

Preservation or conservation?

From talking to the archaeologists present I learned that some leaned towards leaving the Horse as it is (preservation) – on the grounds that the Horse has been evolving for over 2,000 years and its current appearance is but the latest iteration, fashioned by people and nature, and that its form will no doubt change again. Others would like to see the Horse returned to something more like its appearance hundreds of years ago, which perhaps is conservation. That is tricky.

Win Scutt, of English Heritage, got down into a trench that had been dug the day previously adjacent to one of the beaks of the Horse (yes, the Horse was given a beak, not a muzzle, 2000-odd years ago). I saw just different shades of grey (though not 50). He pointed out that some of what I was seeing was indeed chalk, and that the archaeologists could discern several beaks at different heights in the trench. Some were separated by thick layers of silt, suggesting, perhaps, that the Horse had been neglected for some substantial periods of time and naturally covered in silt that had run down the slope. They had evidence that some of the earlier beaks were not in line with the ones that we see today. Indeed, some ancient reconstructions may have been well off the line of the current edges of the Horse and still buried from view.



Win Scutt, of English Heritage, pointing out layers of chalk that were beaks of bygone days, separated by layers of silt.

So, which version of the Horse should one aim to restore? In the event, there has been a compromise: the Horse is being uncovered – turf removed and the soil-contaminated chalk beneath it removed – to take it back to what the archaeologists observed and recorded some thirty years ago, then more good quality chalk added to even-up the surface.

Transplants

Over time the slope of the Horse has lessened, one result of which has been to reduce its profile when seen from the Vale of White Horse, as well as to take it away from how the original Horse would have been seen. So, in addition to widening the head and neck by removal of turf, two strong members of Oxford Archaeology used spades to take off several centimetres of the belly of the Horse, thereby

steepening the main body. The removed chalk was not discarded. Instead, it was put into lots of buckets which were then moved by a chain gang of volunteers up to the top of the Horse, where it was used to thicken the head and neck where turf had been removed.



Top, shovelling off some chalk from the belly of the horse to steepen the slope, and, bottom, loading it into buckets to be taken up to the neck and head.



Passing buckets of chalk from the belly of the horse along a chain gang, then depositing it in the newly widened neck.
Photo Dave Cavanagh

Leg surgery

A combination of comparison of recent with old photos and portrayals of the Horse with shallow exploratory trenches dug last year revealed that the legs had 'shrunk' in length in recent years. So, on Thursday 4 July, when I returned to the site, the archaeologists had extended the legs to the length that they were some 30 years ago. This was done by removing some of the turf and back-filling with chalk removed from the main body of the Horse.

Age is not just a number

In the 1990s the Oxford Archaeology Unit (now Oxford Archaeology) used optically stimulated luminescence dating to date soil layers below the Horse and dated it to between 1380 and 210 BC – later Bronze Age or Iron Age. Dating technology has improved since then so this year more samples of the chalk were taken from two deep trenches, adjacent to the head and to the belly – for analysis by the Research Laboratory for Archaeology & the History of Art, Oxford University, in the hope of obtaining a more accurate age for the Horse, the better to put it into the context of the people who created it.

More to come

This year's restoration work is unlikely to be the end of the matter. The archaeologists collected lots of data in June that they will be studying over many months. This will advise them on what further restorative work they might undertake to further rejuvenate the Horse, and to increase its impact on the many thousands of people who look at it,

Top, Win Scutt explaining the rationale behind the extension of one of the legs. Below, tamping in chalk to the extension.



from near and far, every year.

You can follow Oxford Archaeologist's work on their website for this [project](#) and get more [background information](#).

The White Horse and the surrounding archaeological features on White Horse Hill are on land belonging to the National Trust. These are in the Guardianship of English Heritage, who subcontract their care to the National Trust. Historic England is also involved in the decision-making, and the work is carried out by Oxford Archaeology, and scientific dating is by Oxford Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art.

Abingdon Walking Festival

In May Vale Ramblers were a major contributor to the second Abingdon Walking Festival, the first having been last year. The Group offered five walks. Four were circular ones, starting in the Market Place, and one was a linear walk along the Thames, starting in Oxford. Seventy-seven people joined the walks.

Other bodies who contributed to the event included the Oxford Field Paths Society, Abingdon Health Walks and Abingdon Community Walks.



Rest stop



Seen on the Pennine Way near Pen-y-Ghent in June. Photo Dave Cavanagh

BBC pundit, after England's fifth and last penalty kick against Switzerland in Euro 2024 produced the winning goal: "Pressure, what pressure? Pressure is for tyres." Love it.

A scammer called my grandma and said he had all her passwords. She got a pen and paper and said "Thank goodness for that, what are they?"

Operator answering a 999 call: Do you require police, fire or ambulance?

Caller: An ambulance, a man just got hit by a car.

Operator: What's your location?

Caller: I'm on Eucalyptus Street.

Operator: Can you spell that for me?

Caller: Silence.

Operator: Sir, are you still there?

Caller: I'm going to drag him over to Park Street. Then I'll call you back.

Oxfordshire Ramblers path maintenance 1: Henley & Goring Group

Four of Oxfordshire Ramblers groups have been active on footpath maintenance since late March. On this and subsequent pages we look at some of the work that they have been doing.

Strictly speaking, Henley & Goring Group do not have their own path maintenance team. Instead they cooperate with the South Chiltern Path Maintenance Volunteers (SCPMV) who work in our area. The SCPMV liaises with the Chiltern Society, which takes care of the volunteering rules and also provide some help. “Henley & Goring Ramblers cooperate with the SCPMV in the sense that we deliver people power,” says Wim Klaucke, long-time volunteer with the SCPMV. “I should not forget to mention that Oxfordshire County Council is also involved in funding and sometimes delivery of tools/materials and training. And they give us the odd job to do.”

“If you interested in volunteering for the SCPMV, please contact us (the.scpmv@gmail.com) and we put you on the list of volunteers.”



The SCPMV are a very impressive outfit, with several ‘quartermasters’ looking after their extensive kit. They even have the loan of a van from the Chiltern Society together with a trailer to ferry tools and gates to work sites. The photos here illustrate just a few of their achievements in recent months.



Oxfordshire Ramblers financial support for steps on the Chiltern Way

Alie Hagedoorn

A project has started to build in some steps on a steep path close to Ewelme/Swyncombe

The steps are mainly funded by Oxfordshire Ramblers, and the first set is planned to be created on 10 July. The path is part of the Chiltern Way, and is very steep. It is particularly slippery and dangerous in case of wet weather. The path leads up to the Swyncombe Downs at the top, a beautiful area. The path is used a lot by both Ramblers and other walkers.

The work will be carried out by the Chiltern Society Path Maintenance Volunteers, assisted in the first session by Oxfordshire County Council. It is a significant effort as there are a number of roots to negotiate and the path is slightly hollow. The steps will be created following Oxfordshire County Council Countryside Access Team standards. More updates to follow when the steps are in.

If you would like to help with the work contact alie.hagedoorn@gmail.com



The slippery slope

To continue the focus on the Goring area, a new, £7,000 orientation plaque was unveiled on 28 June at Goring & Streatley railway station.

The plaque highlights various routes from the station that are accessible and enable everyone, but disabled people especially, to enjoy the countryside of the Thames valley. This includes the two great national trails, the Ridgeway and the Thames Path, and the two National Landscapes, the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs, that come together at Goring and Streatley bridge.

(left to right) Margaret Pawson of the Mid and West Berks Local Access Forum; Sarah Hebbes of Mend the Gap; Tom Butler, GWR station manager; Tom Pierpoint, GWR director; John Boler, chairman of MIGGS; Sonia Lofthouse, Goring parish council chair and Frank Tomlinson of the MIGGS committee. Photo Great Western Railway

Access to the countryside for mobility scooter users from Goring & Streatley railway station



Photo Ron Bridle



The plaque was unveiled jointly by Frank Tomlinson from South Oxfordshire and Margaret Pawson of West Berkshire, both of whom depend on scooters for their mobility. Frank is a member of MIGGS, the Mobility Issues Group for Goring and Streatley and Margaret a tireless campaigner for better countryside access who is lead member of the disabled access group in the Mid and West Berks Local Access Forum. The launch event was hosted by Great Western Railway.

The plaque was devised by MIGGS and funded by grants from Mend the Gap, the South Oxfordshire District Council's councillor grant scheme and the Defra Access for All fund, managed by Chilterns Conservation Board.



Photo Wendy Tobitt

Oxfordshire Ramblers (‘Area’) Picnic

Thame and Wheatley Group’s new approach to the annual Oxfordshire Ramblers picnic.

Ruth Cornish

This year it was the turn of Thame & Wheatley Group to host the Oxfordshire Area Ramblers annual picnic. Chair Linda King and her committee decided to take on all the responsibilities. With huge support from the Group, not only did they source the venue and make the cakes, but they chose the routes and led all the walks for it. When planning the walks, they realised that some of them had to cross a notoriously difficult stile on the steep slope of Red Hill in Holton Parish, so the Thame & Wheatley Maintenance Team, led by Bob Merry, repaired and improved it the week before.

All the organisation paid off as the event, which took place on Saturday 22nd June, was a great success. Seven walks, starting from places such as Waterperry Garden Centre, Shotover Country Park car park and Stanton St. John, and of lengths varying from 4 to 10 miles, all took the walkers to the picnic site in Holton. It was hoped to have the picnic in Holton orchard, but unfortunately following some overnight and early morning rain, the ground was too wet there, so the adjacent Village Hall was used.

Around 65 walkers from the Oxfordshire groups took part and they were met in the hall by an amazing display of cakes and an endless supply of tea, coffee and soft drinks. John Gordon, vice-chair of the Oxfordshire Ramblers Executive committee, gave a vote of thanks, while Linda took the opportunity in her speech to thank all her team, including the seven walk leaders and their back markers, the 11 cake-makers, the drinks servers and washers-up and all those who helped set up the hall and clear away afterwards - a great effort. There were many appreciative comments about the walks and the cakes, so it seems the event was a winner!

Photo John Gordon



T&W Chair Linda King thanking all those who had made the event such a success. Photo Ruth Cornish



Oxfordshire Ramblers path maintenance 2: Bicester & Kidlington Group

Blitz & Klean, the path maintenance team of Bicester & Kidlington Group, cleared a path in Wendlebury.

They were joined by James from Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Team. The day was also the occasion of a photoshoot as Ian Baldwin, coordinator of the B&K team, was a winner in the draw for completing a Ramblers survey on path maintenance. Ian's prize was Cotswold Outdoor Vango path maintenance pack.

"This," said Ian, "comprises a flask, two cups, a waterproof first aid kit, thermal blanket, waterproof poncho, tin of Kendal mint cake, all-weather tough note pad and a weatherproof document bag."



Vale Ramblers commemorate the crew of Wellington bomber DV595 which crashed in Uffington in 1942

Dave Cavanagh

At 0105 hours on 25 August 1942 Wellington bomber DV595, on a night bombing practice flight out of RAF Harwell over Odstone Down (SSW of Uffington), collided with Wellington N2755 from RAF Hampstead Norris.

N2755 survived but DV595 crashed just a few hundred metres from Uffington village, killing all the crew. A small memorial plaque was later placed alongside FP19 in the field where the bomber crashed.

Uffington Museum is commemorating the crew of DV595, and indirectly all the young men who died in accidents during WWII, with a special exhibition.

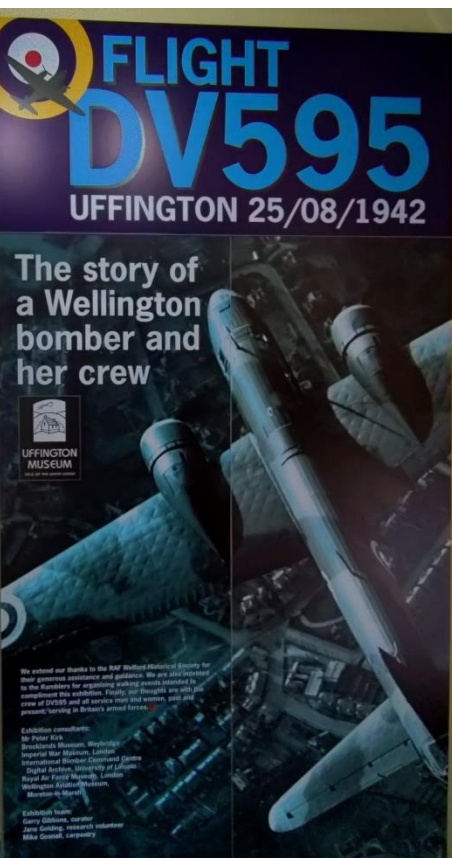
Vale Ramblers offered seven walks which featured aspects of the tragedy. One, a 10-mile weekend walk, went from Uffington village past the memorial plaque then up to Odstone Down where the bombing range was situated and above which the aircraft collided. One must remember that the night was pitch black, and the crews of the two Wellingtons would have had no awareness of each other's presence. The pilot of the surviving Wellington, which landed safely at the airfield of Stanton Harcourt, knew that they had hit something but didn't know what until after they had landed.

At the other end of the walk scale four very short walks (1.8 miles) were on offer, on weekends in June and August. These followed part of the Uffington village trail and then headed for the memorial plaque.

There was the opportunity after all the walks to look around the special exhibition and other exhibits in [Uffington Museum](#). Its normal times of opening are on Saturdays and Sundays from 2pm to 5 pm, Easter to the end of October, and on Bank Holiday holidays. Entrance is free although donations, essential to maintain the museum, are, of course, welcome.

The adjacent church has tea and cakes on Sundays (14:30 to 17:00), the last is on 29 September. Parking is available at the village hall (Thomas Hughes Memorial Hall) at the top of High Street. The Fox & Hounds is open on High Street.

Odstone Down is top right. Photo John Gordon



Has your group had a good experience? Share it.

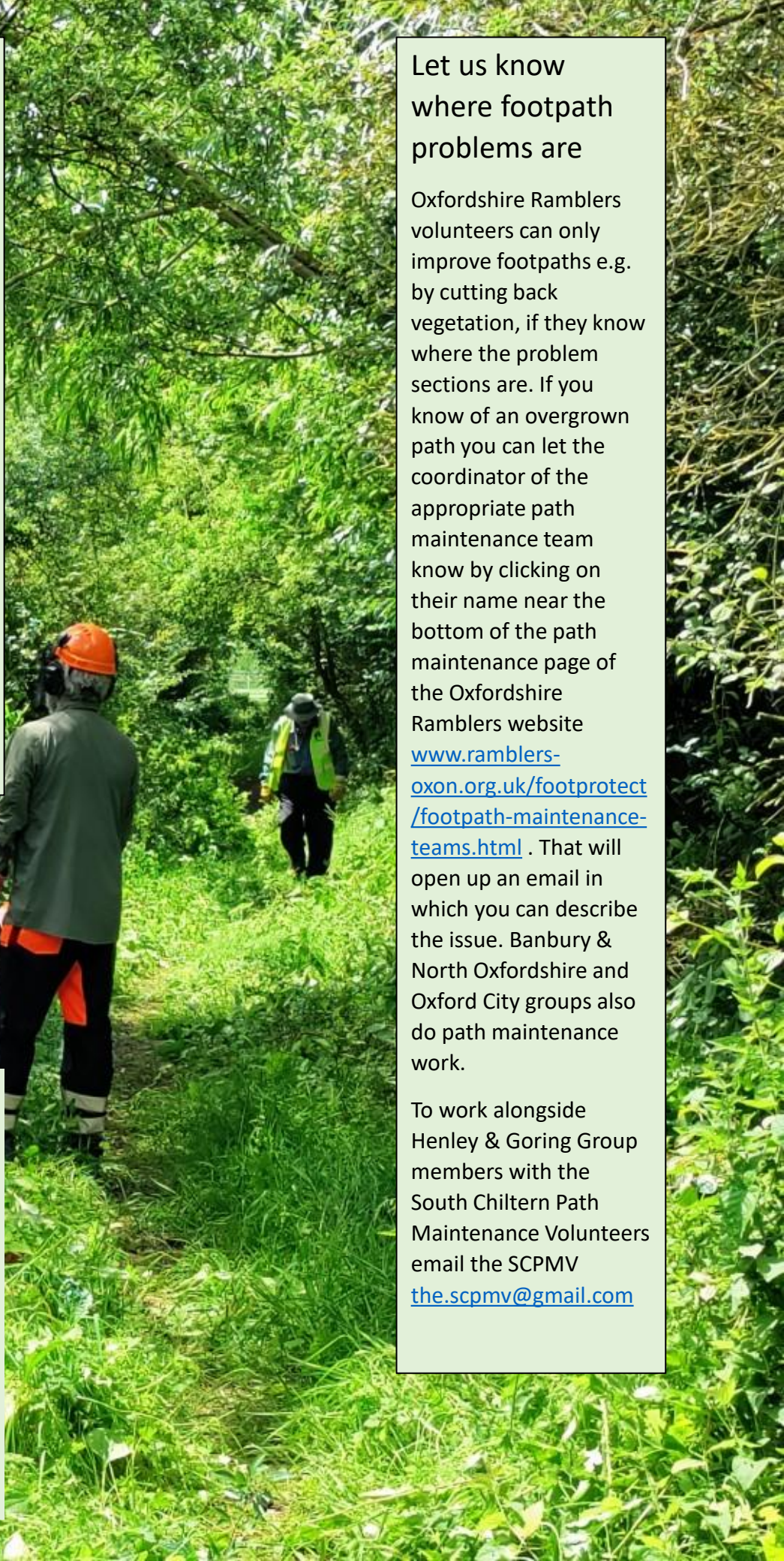
If your group has trialled something new e.g. to attract new members, or to respond to the needs or desires of your existing members e.g. a programme of shorter than usual walks, or inclusion of a café or pub meal at the end of a walk, or other social activity, do share your experience with our other groups by writing about it for *talking walking*.

We do learn about innovations from articles in South East Walker. If you are reluctant to publish in that, then *talking walking* might suit you. Certainly, we can publish more photos in *talking walking*. Contact the editor, Dave Cavanagh, davecavanagh1000@gmail.com

Let us know where footpath problems are

Oxfordshire Ramblers volunteers can only improve footpaths e.g. by cutting back vegetation, if they know where the problem sections are. If you know of an overgrown path you can let the coordinator of the appropriate path maintenance team know by clicking on their name near the bottom of the path maintenance page of the Oxfordshire Ramblers website www.ramblers-oxon.org.uk/footprotect/footpath-maintenance-teams.html . That will open up an email in which you can describe the issue. Banbury & North Oxfordshire and Oxford City groups also do path maintenance work.

To work alongside Henley & Goring Group members with the South Chiltern Path Maintenance Volunteers email the SCPMV the.scpmv@gmail.com



Oxfordshire Ramblers path maintenance 3: Vale of White Horse Group

Vale Group's path maintenance team, the Vale Path Volunteers (VPV), were in action half a dozen times in late March to June. Team members identify paths that need the VPV's attention, usually having experienced them in an overgrown state on group walks.

Some of the paths that the VPV has cleared thoroughly do not subsequently require an annual haircut. Consequently, the team leader, Pat Rosum, is always on the lookout for paths that need attention. The VPV works on the mornings of the first Monday and third Wednesday of the month. If you have experienced overgrown sections of a public right of way in the Vale, do let Pat know (patrick.rosum@hotmail.co.uk). This applies even if the task is quite small e.g. a bad but short section along an otherwise reasonably clear path. In such cases the VPV sends out a 'flying squad', a small team,

Dozens of people past us on the town stretch of the footpath, often saying 'thank you', which is always encouraging



The team on the stretch to Wicklshamlodge Farm and the quarry.
Photo Pat Rosum

which may also work on more than one site in a given morning.

The photos illustrate the VPV working on the very long Faringdon footpath 17, which they have done several times previously. The town section of this footpath is metalled and heavily used by towns folk, not least because it leads to a health centre. Anyone using it would assume that it was simply part of the normal pavement network of the town and maintained accordingly. It isn't; by a quirk of fate it is a public right of way (PROW), with the same status as other rural, and usually non-metalled, footpaths. OCC's Countryside Access Team, who are responsible for PROWs do not have the resources to keep the vegetation, which includes brambles swooping down from above, at bay. So, this has become a regular task for the VPV.

The path

continues on the south side of Park Road along a causeway up to Wicklshamlodge Farm and the adjacent quarry. Consequently two VPV teams were in action, with coordinator Pat Rosum overseeing both teams, not least to deliver the chocolate Hobnobs at break time.



Oxfordshire Ramblers path maintenance 4: Thame & Wheatley Group

Golf courses have featured in two of the three outings by Thame & Wheatley volunteers since March.

They replaced some waymarks on Waterstock Golf Course as the previous waymark posts had rotted and were lying in the undergrowth.

At Oxfordshire Golf Club the volunteers firstly replaced a rotten, collapsed waymark post on the bridleway from the Oxfordshire Golf Club to Thame (383/31), and cleared away brambles. Secondly, they added a handhold to a stile on footpath 232/21 on the path near the main A329 road.



It required a scenic 800 metres walk through the golf course, even more than the 500 metres – and carrying tools and materials -for replacing an unsafe stile on footpath 251/72 in Holton Parish. This footpath was on one of the routes led by Thame & Wheatley Group for the Oxfordshire Area Picnic on 22 June, so the volunteers had a deadline for repairing the stile, which they met. Oxfordshire County Council’s Countryside Access Team had provided the materials, sufficient to add a third step on the downhill side, plus a firm handhold.





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Ridgeway National Trail
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Join us in giving a warm Ridgeway National Trail welcome to our new Ridgeway Trail Officer, Ian Black.

I caught up with Ian along the Trail at Goring, almost mid-point between Avebury and Ivinghoe Beacon. "I can't wait to meet everyone and to get started" he says, "but I know there is a lot to become familiar with."

Ian lives locally in Newbury and is familiar with our Trail as a keen cyclist who has enjoyed cycling many miles through the Berkshire Downs. "I want to learn about what's been happening, and honour the projects that my predecessor, Sarah had been running to completion. Then I will turn to opportunities for promotion, enhancement and continuity of trail management. The Ridgeway is 5000 years old and even if I stay in post for 25 years, it's a relative blink of an eye!"

Ian has had a strong career in Countryside Management which he studied at Berkshire College and then Countryside Recreation and Tourism at Aberystwyth University. His passion is for outdoor recreation for all, whether that's for a cycle ride in the countryside, wildlife spotting or to enjoy ambling around an historical site. He volunteered as a warden at an ancient royal hunting forest, now a Site of Special Scientific Interest at Hatfield Forest in Essex.

What a person could learn along the way

But it's not all work with Ian, he spent 11 months on the road, literally, cycling from Newbury to New Zealand. What an epic trip! Ian cycled through Europe, along the Danube to the Black Sea, through Turkey, Mongolia and the Gobi Desert, China, Laos and Vietnam. He then had a much-needed rest in Bali before cycling through Cambodia, and Thailand with a flight to connect him to the South Island of New Zealand which he explored from top to bottom.

What a person could learn along the way!

Ian has reflected on the current state of the countryside, where there is so much happening, not just here, but across the world including: climate change, the fragile state of the UK economy, the financial pressures of reduced budgets at all levels, the cost of living crisis, a possible change of government this year, new grant funding replacing the farm payment systems since leaving Europe, improved communication allowing people to live further from where they work fuelling migration from towns and cities to the countryside, increased leisure time and an aging population. "I could go on" he says, "but I feel this highlights my point, steering me to try and take the longer view, looking for opportunities and ways of securing funding and protecting the Ridgeway for the future."

Ian is excited about the opportunities and is looking forward to working with you all on improving access and links to the Ridgeway, broadening diversity and recognising the many health benefits that being in the outdoors brings and encouraging further partnerships with the local business community that want to invest in the visitor economy. Without flourishing biodiversity and nature connectivity, none of this will be possible.

Ian will be in touch with you all as soon as he has settled in.

With best wishes

Simon Kearey

New Ridgeway National Trail Officer

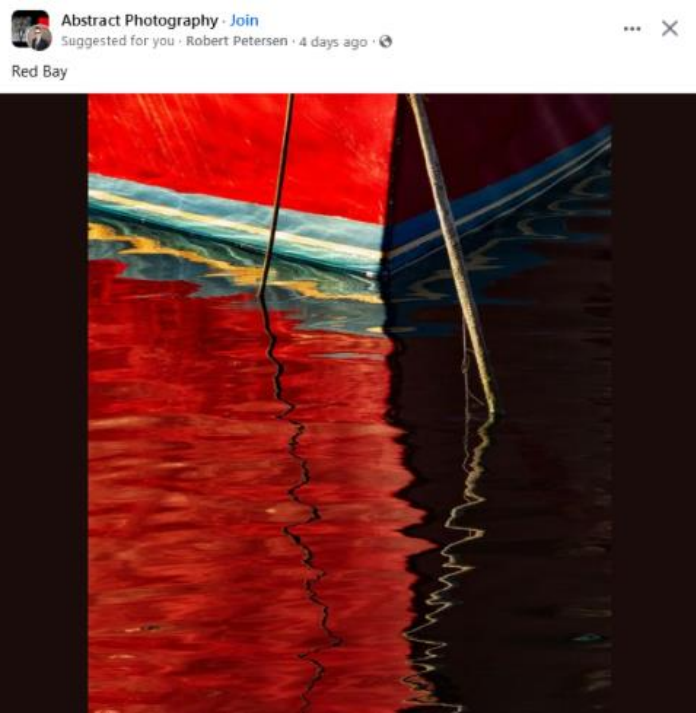
In May, Ian Black became the Ridgeway Officer. Simon Kearey is the Chair of the Ridgeway Partnership, the body that promotes, maintains and improves the Ridgeway National Trail. Below is the text of his message to members of the Partnership, and subsequently published on the Ridgeway National Trail Facebook page.

Feet up



Road sign on the approach to Horton-in-Ribblesdale. Apart from the illustrated issues, plus that huge quarry lorries roll through there all day long, there’s nothing to worry about. Photo Dave Cavanagh.

Abstract Photography Facebook page



First five of the top ten jokes at the 2023 Edinburgh Fringe:

I started dating a zookeeper, but it turned out he was a cheetah - Lorna Rose Treen

The most British thing I've ever heard? A lady who said 'Well I'm sorry, but I don't apologise.' - Liz Guterbock

Last year I had a great joke about inflation. But it's hardly worth it now - Amos Gill

When women gossip we get called bitchy; but when men do it's called a podcast - Sikisa

I thought I'd start off with a joke about The Titanic - just to break the ice - Masai Graham

