

OXFORDSHIRE RAMBLERS ANNUAL REPORT

FOR THE YEAR 2020



CHAIR

It has been my privilege and honour to be the chair of Oxfordshire Ramblers Area Council for the past year. However the year 2020 has been unprecedented with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The

only light in the gloom has been the possibility of individual members being able to walk the path network which has remained open even during the two periods of Lockdown. This is in contrast to a situation, some 20 or so years ago, when an epidemic of foot and mouth disease completely closed off the footpaths to all users. I was heartened by the quick reaction of Oxfordshire groups and their walks organisers in resuming the walks programme when led walks were allowed during the period in the summer between the Lockdowns. Members are to be congratulated on adapting to the new booking arrangements which have had to be implemented and observing the rules for safe walking.



Your Area Council met 4 times during the year and has adapted to the now familiar Zoom procedure for holding meetings. Among the most significant issues which the Council considered was the proposed construction of the Oxford to Cambridge expressway and the massive housing development linked to it. Your Council agreed to a motion opposing this development which was forwarded to Ramblers Central Council for consideration.

After much debate it was agreed not to publish the normal printed Winter Walks programme because of the uncertainty of being able to run it. This has turned out to be the right decision, see the article by Richard Birch "Where's my walks booklet?" in the South East walker supplement of the December edition of Walk magazine.

Area Council has also agreed to the renaming of the 20 and 30s Group to 'Hike Oxfordshire' which has given the Group greater flexibility in recruitment.

Your Council welcomed new officer members of the Council - Wendy Mannix - who took over the position of Area Membership Secretary from Peter Stone, and Steve Walde as Area member rep. However, Alie Hagedoorn has indicated she wishes to stand down as Area Vice Chair. I would wish to pay tribute to Alie's service in that position and am pleased to record that she will remain on the Council as the representative for the Henley and Goring Group.

I would like to thank most heartily all Area Officers and Group Representatives for their support and contribution to the running of the Ramblers. To all those members who volunteer to lead the walks and also engage in other activities as Parish Path Wardens and Path Maintenance teams, our gratitude and thanks. I know you will find the following reports interesting and informative. In spite of all the current problems they bear testimony to the continuing healthy state of rambling in this our county of Oxfordshire.

Jim Parke

SECRETARY

This has been an extraordinary year. The first Area meeting in January 2020 followed by the AGM in Beckley was the last time we met in person, and because of lockdown in March we had our first meeting via Skype for the meeting in April. It was decided to continue with the meetings via Zoom until circumstances allowed us to meet in person. It was quickly found that one of the advantages of the virtual meeting was that Area members did not have to travel from all areas of the county resulting more people attending and shorter meeting. In March I attended a Leadership meeting in Central Office just before lockdown and subsequently have attended virtual meetings in May discussing COVID restrictions, July, virtual AGMs, October Cluster Groups, and in December the way forward with Covid. All these meetings were extremely useful, and despite the restrictions it has enabled us to keep in contact.

Social media has enabled us to keep in contact with members via email, newsletters and various Facebook pages which have proved to be a great way of sharing walks and ideas with our members.

Rosemary Williams

TREASURER

Income & Expenditure for the year ended 30 September 2020

	<u>2020</u>	<u>2019</u>
	<u>£</u>	<u>£</u>
INCOME		
Allocation from Ramblers National Fund	10470	10588
Walks Programme Advertising	220	185
Bank Interest	0	0
TOTAL INCOME	10690	10773
EXPENSES		
Group Allocations	2424	2745
Group (Other)	64	456
Walks programmes	2310	5325
Walks related	0	0
Walks leader training	108	673
Newsletters/publicity	1041	2315
Publication/goods costs	0	0
Campaigns/casework	215	414
Practical work	268	1104
Fundraising costs	0	0
Meetings (inc. AGM)	78	460
Admin	145	520
Other	0	533
TOTAL EXPENSES	6652	14544
SURPLUS/(DEFICIT) FOR THE YEAR	4038	-3771
Balance Sheet as at 30 September		
ASSETS		
Bank Balance	9810	5772
RESERVES		
General Fund brought forward	5772	9543
Surplus/(Deficit) for the year	4038	-3771
TOTAL RESERVES	9810	5772
Reserves (% of annual expenditure)	236%	51%

Treasurer's Report

The Area's main source of income was from the allocation of funds from the Ramblers Association.

Routine expenditure included the production of one 6-monthly walks programme booklet (£2310), the allocation of funds to the Oxfordshire Ramblers Groups (£2424) and the South East Walker publication (£905). Oxfordshire Area was not involved in Countryfile Live in 2020 following its move to Windsor Great Park.

Our Reserves (£9810), expressed as a percentage of the annual expenditure (excluding Group Allocations), was 236%. This is far in excess of the The Ramblers Association guidelines which state that the Reserves should be between 40% and 100% of annual expenditure. The high reserves are due to greatly reduced expenditure due to Coronavirus resulting from the cancellation of: the second walk programme booklet; several Area Council meetings; and visitors to General Council.

Our funding request for next financial year 2020-21 is significantly less than our budgeted expenditure to reduce our reserves to within the desired limits.

Stuart Kenner has confirmed that he will continue as our Independent Examiner for the 2020-21 financial year.

Richard Birch

Independent Examiner's Report

I have examined these Accounts and the underlying records in accordance with the Area and Group Independent Examination Guidelines. I consider that the Oxfordshire Area Accounts have been properly prepared and give a true and fair view of the Area's finances for the year ended 30 September 2020.

*Mr S A Kenner
Independent Examiner*

FOOTPATH SECRETARY

Oxfordshire County Council

The Ramblers are represented at the Monitoring Group and the District Fora, which discuss strategy and important cases. All the Field Officer posts are now filled.

Definitive Map

82 cases are on the list, thirteen of which were received this year and 11 during 2019. Of these cases 25 cases are being investigated, ten have been determined (five accepted, four refused and one under appeal). Nineteen have had modification orders made, of which seven have been confirmed and seven have received objections.

Four cases from before 2017 (all 2010-12) are shown on the list as not been started; these are all being researched. Since the beginning of the year 11 orders have been confirmed.



Committee

West Oxfordshire and B&NO lack Footpath Officers. These posts need to be filled urgently.

Planning and diversions

Three planning diversions and 15 OCC diversions are in progress. 7 planning orders (five made by districts) and ten OCC diversion orders have been confirmed this year.

Obstructions

B&NO, Vale, B&K, Oxford City and T&W Groups have clearance teams.

Across the county

Mud, mud, glorious mud . . .

The Great Deluge of October 3-5 ushered in the season of mud and miry squelch-fulness, close bosom friend of that sinking feeling followed by vain search for the ankles, and the ability to get sloshed and plastered without need for alcohol (except hand sanitiser, which is best not ingested). The weather, plus increased use since the first lockdown, has made the paths out of Cutteslowe Park (especially across Sparsey) even squelchier than normal. At least there is now hope for a boardwalk across the sludge wallow hippopotamus-bath on Old Marston FP3 and improvements to the stiles on FP3 and the flooded sections of FP10 by the Cherwell (it's floodplain, so it floods). A fallen tree by the Cherwell on Elsfield FP1 which I reported on September 29 must have been cleared by October 2, as it had gone when I inspected on the 6th; however, other landowners are slow to deal with fallen trees, even where they require limbo practice.

The first lockdown brought out great hordes onto every field edge in sight, and a plague of bicycles which mostly vanished when lockdown ended. Path usage has continued to be above normal, even in the wet, and even in hostile environments such as Elsfield FP12 behind JC Manor's immobile home, which I must have cleared a dozen times since March. The landowner doesn't help by burning rubbish beside the path; he has succeeded in burning the step of the stile, and hasn't yet been persuaded to repair it.

A problem on Gosford FP4 which was rejected in the dry weather of April has turned into a 20ft-long welly-deep paddling pool; I have reported it again. The problem seems to be a silted-up ditch between the fence and the A34.

A proposed diversion of Tetsworth FP65 at Attington Stud looked fairly harmless in itself until I was reminded that the same landowner had the blocked hedges on FP58-59 on his patch. Site visits reminded me that there is an area called the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, though here be sheep and horses rather than gorillas, and impenetrable hedges (worthy of Väinämöinen's week-long journey in brambles) and stiles rather than tropical jungle. Several stiles have steps missing; the stile at the west end of FP54 has a curious and awkward construction, not helped by the support post which is held by a single nail and, when touched, gyrates as if preternaturally ticklish.

We are objecting to the proposed diversion of Oxford FP80 to the road at Warren Crescent, as diverting to the road is against government policy and the path should run alongside Lye Valley nature reserve.

The modification order for Great Haseley FP36 has been reissued with the correct grid references – SP instead of SU which put the northern end of the path somewhere in Portsmouth Harbour, possibly amidships on HMS Victory.

The modification order adding the remainder of the 14 paths claimed by Nick Moon of CPRE, mostly west of the Great Western Park development, has been confirmed.

A diversion of Chalgrove FP3 is proposed round the outside of a housing estate yet to be built; this will remove the definitive line, which is currently blocked by a hedge and barbed wire, to a new exit at the road. This is despite the fact that the path through the allotments has been walked for at least 45 years and the signpost appears to be of pre-1974 vintage.

Finally, three photos on the theme of "if I were you I wouldn't start from here". Both signposts (Tetsworth FP62, with the start blocked by the van, and Pishill FP20) are a few yards from the actual start of the path. The waymarks on the bridge both mark Elsfield FP1; the OCC waymark points across the bridge and the Green Belt Way waymark points in the direction of the path after crossing it.



Pishill FP20



Tetsworth FP62



Elsfield FP1

David Godfrey

MEMBERSHIP

	Sep-20	Sep-19	Sep-18	Sep-17	Sep-16	Sep-15	% change 1 Year	% change 2 Year	% change 3 Year	% change 4 Year	% change 5 Year
B&NO	299	290	282	281	268	280	3.1	6.0	6.4	11.6	6.8
B&K	192	180	175	190	179	164	6.7	9.7	1.1	7.3	17.1
D&W	166	159	166	158	161	160	4.4	0.0	5.1	3.1	3.8
H&G	336	339	339	318	306	304	-0.9	-0.9	5.7	9.8	10.5
H O	57	56	63	75	76	92	1.8	-9.5	-24.0	-25.0	-38.0
OX	281	288	284	305	303	313	-2.4	-1.1	-7.9	-7.3	-10.2
T&W	183	175	179	171	153	155	4.6	2.2	7.0	19.6	18.1
Vale	309	308	310	325	324	319	0.3	-0.3	-4.9	-4.6	-3.1
WO	174	175	175	169	163	152	-0.6	-0.6	3.0	6.7	14.5
WW	139	133	132	160	149	141	4.5	5.3	-13.1	-6.7	-1.4
Un	110	120	97	85	63	60	-8.3	13.4	29.4	74.6	83.3
Total	2,246	2,223	2,202	2,237	2,145	2,140	1.0	2.0	0.4	4.7	5.0

Oxon membership continues to increase slowly but steadily. There is no indication that the pandemic has had a significant impact on membership numbers this year.

Wendy Mannix

PARISH PATH WARDEN NETWORK CO-ORDINATOR

In spite of two periods of Lockdown it has been possible for Parish Path Wardens to go out into the Oxfordshire countryside throughout the year to undertake snipping, clipping and to report on any path problems in their areas. Including the parishes covered by the Chiltern Society and the Cotswold Wardens, around 85% of the county's 320 Parishes are now covered by a PPW or path representative.

There have been no changes to the personnel in the Countryside Access Service. Sarah Aldous has been promoted to the position of Acting Principal Officer - Countryside Access. It is noteworthy that at present there are nearly 4000 path problems listed on the County's database.

This year the annual PPW workshop had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic. For next year it is hoped to hold the workshop on March 26th 2021 at South Leigh Village Hall in West Oxfordshire.

Daryl Dixon, one of the two Local Coordinators for parishes in the Didcot and Wallingford Rambler group, indicated that he wished to retire from that role in the Autumn. I am pleased to report that David Tole, PPW for the parish of Berinsfield, has volunteered to take up the position. I am still without a Local Coordinator for Banbury and North Oxfordshire and would be pleased from any member who would be interested in filling the vacancy.

I wish to express my particular thanks to the 12 PPW Local Coordinators for their support in looking after their teams and to Sarah Aldous for sending to me the twice-yearly lists of path problems in the parishes for distribution via the LCs to their respective PPW teams.

The photographs show PPWs cleaning signs and the PPW group at the start of their walkabout in Wootton.

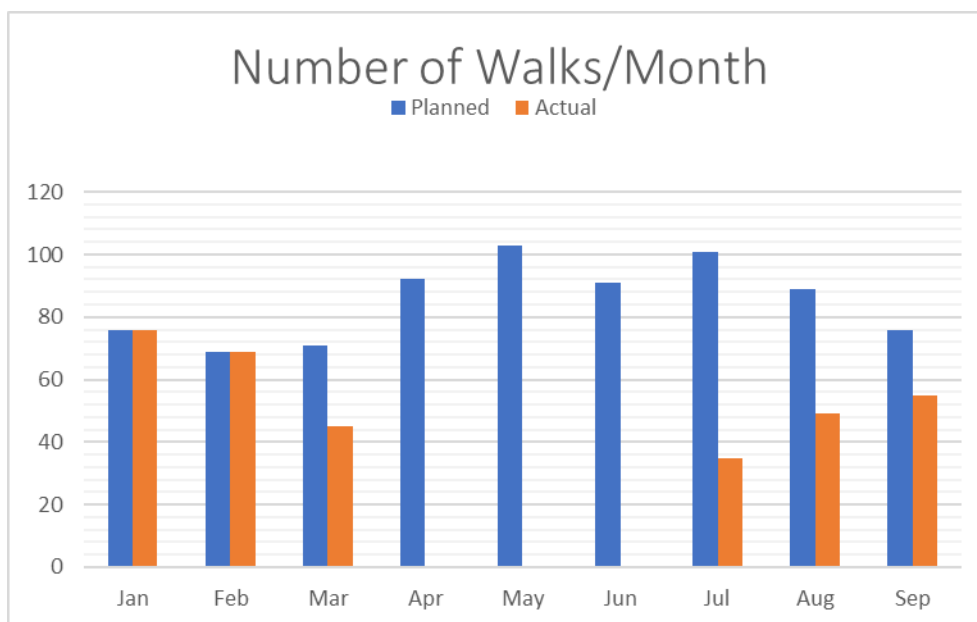


Jim Parke

PUBLICITY – we currently have no publicity officer

WALKS CO-ORDINATOR

The first six months of the year from 1 October 2019 to 31 March 2020 saw our usual varied walk programme. On 18 March 2020 all led walks were cancelled due to Coronavirus and it was not until 1 July 2020 that we could cautiously restart our led walks. As we had already planned the walks between April and September, and assuming a planned weekend walk from both Oxon Weekend Walkers and Hike Oxfordshire, it is possible to compare the actual walks per month with those originally planned.



The bar chart shows that the led walks have started to recover, and by September all Oxfordshire Groups had re-started some led walks. Initially the number on the walk was limited to six, including the leader. This was relaxed during August to allow up to 30 walkers. However, the majority of leaders continued to restrict the maximum number to a lot less than the 30 allowed, often separating the walkers into groups of six if larger numbers were involved. This was partly to ensure social distancing and partly so that we did not upset/concern other members of the public. In addition, the Walk Leaders were required to keep a register of the walkers on their walk, together with their contact details, to meet the requirements of Test & Trace. In order to limit the numbers attending and to gather walkers' names and contact details, all groups have operated a booking system.

Due to the varying restrictions in place since March, and the likelihood that these restrictions may change at short notice, Ramblers advised that we should not be planning 3-month or 6-month walk programmes at the current time and that we should not be producing a printed walks booklet. The booklet normally produced to cover the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021 was therefore cancelled. Instead we have been relying on on-line walks listings on the Ramblers Walks Finder, the Oxfordshire Ramblers website and Google Calendar.

Unfortunately led walks were suspended for a second time from 5 November to 1 December 2020, restarting again on 2 December 2020.

The Group Walks Organisers and the Walk Leaders have done an excellent job in continuing to provide a varied walks programme.

Richard Birch

WALKING ENVIRONMENT AND ACCESS OFFICER

OxCam Expressway

The government is carrying out a review of the original proposal to decide whether it will proceed. Even if it does not proceed as planned it is likely that existing roads will be upgraded. The major concern is that the proposed developments (housing, industrial etc) across the arc associated with the expressway will still proceed, having a detrimental impact on our countryside.

Great Wolf Development, Chesterton

This is a major leisure development on the golf course adjacent to the village of Chesterton near Bicester. The RA objected to this proposal which the planning application was refused by Cherwell DC. The developer has appealed against this decision. The RA has written, as have many others, to the planning inspectorate requesting they reject the appeal.

Proposed Development at Waterstock

This a provisional proposal for a major warehouse and industrial development, again on a golf course. This proposal is being monitored with the local campaign against it. Appropriate action will be taken as the situation unfolds.

Access

Nothing to report. In general, it should be noted that the pandemic has shown the importance of access to green spaces and the countryside for everyone's physical and mental health. We need to look at how access to the countryside can be increased, especially as 2020 is the 20th anniversary of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act.

Terry Pollard

WEBSITE

The website is fairly stable. The weather 'module' was tweaked during the year. The main change has been to the walks' listing, with a choice of formats and a search facility. Training for new editors will in future be done using Zoom and its Share facility, with a script awaiting it's first use.

Pat Lonergan



OXFORDSHIRE GROUP REPORTS

BANBURY & NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

A year of two very distinct elements.

Without wishing to spend even more time ruminating about the negative impact of Covid-19 it goes without saying that planned walks have been severely disrupted since March, publicity has not been possible, either through not having anything to publicise or media channels being unavailable and intended social events have had to be abandoned.

That said, in mid-July, when government guidance permitted, we restarted our walks programme with weekly Wednesday walks that were then supplemented in August by Thursday evening walks running into September, at which point we began offering short Sunday afternoon walks.

After the second lockdown finished, from 2nd December, we were able to instantly get our weekly Sunday, Friday and Wednesday walks up and running again and hope to soon introduce occasional longer Sunday walks.

It is likely to take longer to return to our overall pre Covid level of walks because many of our Sunday walkers (and leaders) have set themselves up to run their own regular independent walks outside of the Ramblers using their own communications etc. There is every indication that these members will continue with this way of walking, and even increase this arrangement over the coming months, and that we may not be in a position to schedule regular longer Sunday walks until they are ready to return to the fold.

Our approach to running Covid-19 compliant walks has been centralised on:

- a single email address for all walk booking applications
- shared admin between committee members, allowing us to divide the workload and providing resilience when one member is unavailable.
- specified cut-off date for accepting bookings, to allow time to try and run extra walks, if necessary, to accommodate all applications
- subsequent applications often accepted or added to a waiting list
- for any extra walks added we try to do the same route using geographically separate start points.
- extra walks are added to GWEM to ensure that all leaders are recognised by our insurers
- much of the Covid-19-safe instruction is circulated by the booking personnel before the walk and restated on the day of the walk by the leader
- Track+Trace is managed by the bookers and simply confirmed by the walk leader
- a variant of the Ramblers Risk Assessment template is used, available on our web page, that is better suited to our needs; this includes where the bookers communicate Covid-19 precautions to walkers.
- we have chosen a maximum group-size of 12 for walks as a compromise between turning walkers away and intimidating other people
- about a third of our walks have exceeded 12 applicants and an extra walk added to accommodate everyone.
- some complaints received, such as “we want to be able to turn up on the day and be sure of walking without advance booking”
- difficult to establish how many potential walkers are put off by having to pre-book?
- looking to accept telephone bookings, but need to be sure we can obtain contact details for Track+Trace, to dispatch pre-walk instructions to such applicants, and to ensure the resilience in our arrangements is not lost

Very clear throughout this period that members fall into three distinct camps
- those that are hyper cautious, those that are accepting and pragmatic, and those that don't see any problem and want to just get on with things, regardless!!
It has been difficult finding an approach to keep everyone happy!!

As a committee I have to say 'thanks' to all members for being willing to accept the challenge of using Zoom and for 'meeting' nearly every fortnight to keep abreast of developments so we could react quickly to guideline changes, and their willingness to adapt to prevailing circumstances.

Membership has been surprisingly buoyant, standing at 284 this time last year and 289 at end of November 2020, with those having left being no more than normal expected attrition. The question has to be, will this remain the case as more subscriptions come up for renewal?

On the question of subscription renewals we realised head office were being slow to process some renewals when a walk leader was nearly removed from our membership list despite having renewed (by post) two months earlier and also found one where a telephone renewal had been lost; we also identified a new member whose online join attempt had failed despite the funds being taken. These issues were raised with head office, and sorted.

Here's to a better 2021 and restriction free walking.

Stuart Dyer

BICESTER & KIDLINGTON

It has been a difficult year due to COVID 19. Thank you to the Committee for their support.

I would also like to thank Andrew for his fantastic Newsletter.

We have gained quite a few members in the last year. This was largely due to Fiona, our publicity officer, who organised two taster walks.



Despite the difficult conditions, we have managed to maintain a walks programme Throughout the summer months, we offered unofficial small group walks on the understanding members came at their own risk and observed the social distance rules. These took place from different starting point on Tuesdays. These walks proved to be extremely popular. About 30 members signed up for them.

A big thank you to Russell, Robin, Cliff, Derek and Pam who have volunteered to lead these walks while I was incapacitated.

A recent walk in the Chilterns

Unfortunately, we had to cancel our annual coach trips. Since 24 August, we have been allowed to walk in groups of up to 30 people provided we abide by the rules. Several of our walk leaders have opted out as they do not want the responsibility. Some walks were submitted for the winter programme but these are being supplemented as more walk leaders come forward.

The accounts for 2019/2020 have been audited and approved by our independent auditor, Margaret Thomson. At the end of September 2019, we had a balance of £923 and at the end of September 2020 we had a balance of £643.

We did not receive our group allowance last year because our balance was way above the recommended maximum of £500, but we did receive £130 from Ramblers holidays but will be receiving our allowance of £274 in the next financial period and anticipate that our funds will be more than sufficient to cover our expected costs.

Active members now total 186. From August there has been 20 new members due in large part to initiative of the group publicity officer and chair who organised two taster walks in the local area.



The Area Footpaths Sub-Committee meetings have happened via email since March 2020. The main events affecting B&K are the major planning scheme at Upper Heyford airbase and HS2 going ahead.

I have reported 9 footpath problems in the last year. Only one has had action ("mitigation" of fallen tree across footpath), the rest are all "unresolved". I have seen evidence of footpath maintenance while walking in the last few months, so OCC are resolving some issues

Group on Soggy Walk from Lulworth Cove

The year 2020 will be remembered by everyone one way and another. So for us walkers no evening Pub Walks and no coloured pie charts and graphs showing the statistics of walks planned etc and no walking booklet either. No one wants to see the statistics for storm Alex either because some of us were out walking in it from West Lulworth House and we know only too well what happened.

Walks are now either put forward on a rolling monthly basis or on an ad hoc basis as and when walk leaders feel able to lead a walk. Walking is of course one of the lower risk activities provided you follow the guidelines.

At present we have 17 walk leaders although for obvious reasons only a very few of these are actively leading walks at present.

The first was to be at Cotswold Clothing and involved a free tombola in order to encourage people to talk to us. Prizes were donated by Tog 24, Blue Diamond, Cotswold Outdoor, Tesco, Co op and Aldi so big thanks to them. Sadly, some of the chocolates have now past their sell by dates but we will be raffling what's left at some point....

The second was a booking for the Community Stall on Bicester Market which I'm still hoping will go ahead when we're allowed!

We were able to organise 2 'taster' walks in September – one from Kingsmere and one from Stoke Lyne. Both were well supported so fingers crossed for some new members.

Mary Gough

BLITZ & KLEAN

Since the last AGM THE Brush Cutter was serviced and a number of items purchased including safety specs, safety gloves, shears and a rake. There was no activity sessions due mainly to bad weather conditions at the end of last year and of course Covid-19 from March of this year.

March There was contact between Bicester Scouts and ourselves about working on path 5 between Middleton Stoney and Bucknell. However due to the Covid situation and the lockdown on March 23rd this had to be postponed. We penciled in September but this again had to be postponed.

August Received an e mail from a member of the public re Path 265/28/10 in Kidlington being overgrown. I attended a few days later and cut back the brambles and some of the stinging nettles.

September Received an e mail from a member of the public who had an unfortunate experience whilst walking with her partner in Launton concerning bulls. This incident resulted in an ambulance being called. The person apparently got no satisfaction from the farmer so contacted me. I put her in touch with the North East Countryside Access Officer.



- I was also contacted by O.C.C to enquire if we could undertake any path maintenance work given the Covid situation. I will be going to view path 148/5 near Middleton Stoney as O.C.C. have received a number of reports. We were intending to do this path in March with Bicester Scouts but due to the covid situation this was unable to happen. A solo member of the Team did spend some hours on this path some months ago.

- I did go and look at 3 stiles plus a short piece of path in Mixbury at the request of O.C.C.

- Stile 1 path 303/11/10 was fairly clear I just snipped a few sloe branches back.
- We have started work near Trow Pool on the footpath that leads to Middleton Stoney.
- We have three potential new helpers

Ian Baldwin

DIDCOT & WALLINGFORD



The year started well with on average 1 walk a week being organised for both the winter and summer programme. However all walks along with the Summer BBQ and September Holiday were subsequently cancelled following government Guidelines in March.

Walks were restarted in July and numbers attending were just starting to return to normal when new restrictions came into force in late October.

David Baker

HENLEY AND GORING

2020 has been dominated by Covid19. In many ways still being able to walk in these difficult times has been a lifeline for many of our group: whether it was via the buddy walks, the restart of the walks in the summer or the few trips that we were able to offer.

The year started well. The Carol Service in December was well attended by around 70 people, as well as the Chantry House Lecture in January (64 people). And then came lockdown. Unfortunately, all other social activities had to be cancelled.

During lockdowns we were able to have buddy walks where people could walk together with another person instead of just having to walk on their own. After the spring lockdown, walks gradually started up again. In October we started with a monthly program which turns out to be really successful. Whereas we normally have about 80 walks over the winter half year, I counted 20 walks in October and with this trend we have even more walks on offer than usual! There is an excellent variety of walks on offer, from short easy 2.5 mile walks to strenuous 16 mile walks.



Photo: Socially distanced picnic during a walk in the summer

Our Trips Coordinator and Treasurer, Peter, has helped a lot with the reorganising our trips and dealing with cancellations/change in booking. Due to less social activities, less money has come into our accounts, but we still managed well, and were able to donate a gate.

Our membership went down slightly in comparison to last year (330) but there has been an increase in interest, and there is the potential for growth with a lot more people discovering the joys of walking.

During the pandemic we kept our members updated via email and monthly electronic newsletters, each time with lots of updates on Corona and other news. We ensured that our website and Facebook page were updated and encourage people to post. We opened a Meetup group, which now has over 100 members.

Less footpath issues have been reported this year, no doubt due to Corona. The biggest achievement with regards to Planning Applications is perhaps the new Public Footpath connecting Highlands Lane and Gillots Field. And at the end of last year, organising a 150-person strong protest walk (together with other organisations) helped us to be able to get the Fawley bridge re-instated, enabling us to walk along the Thames again.

Alie Hagedoorn

HIKE OXFORDSHIRE

We have put on a number of walks this year but not as many as we'd like given the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. In May we changed the name from Oxon 20s and 30s walkers in order to be able to better target the age range that comes to our walks.



During the pandemic we have kept in touch with our members online and with socials over Zoom. Hopefully we can do more with our neighbouring groups in future.

We hope to get back to walking, socials and trips away in the new year and have a full programme in 2021.

Matthew Hutton

OXFORD CITY

- Despite having lost leaders due to ill health, etc a near full program of walks was on the stocks for Winter/ Spring 2020/21. This was largely thanks to some leaders taking on three or four walks each as plans to find and train more leaders had not yet matured.



- Unfortunately, Covid happened and many excellent leaders had no option but to withdraw. Even plans for the Christmas lunch had to be cancelled. We were also unable to publish our much-loved program booklet because the situation was so fluid.

- Our Group have benefited from a generous bequest by Dr Keith Holly. Several of the Oxford Group attended Keith's funeral, who for many years was our very able Footpaths Officer and inducted Tony Dale into his role. Keith was a prime mover in securing the footpath across Warneford Meadow. Keith's Will included a grant to the Ramblers and his daughters have agreed

that some of that money can be used to place a bench in his memory on Warneford meadow, improved waymarking of the Jubilee Way and a proposed bench on Hurst Hill, Cumnor, beside the route of the Way.

- Membership is 282 as of 31st October, down from 290 last year.
- The current concern of the proposed Oxford to Cambridge Expressway on the potential damage to the Oxfordshire countryside continues.
- The Group continues to look for an opportunity to sponsor a stile or gate within the City boundaries. The Countryside Access Team are aware of this. The purchase of first aid kits for leaders has been proposed. Signage for the Jubilee Walk is being evaluated and subject to discussion with the Countryside Access Team.
- Our main involvement this year was helping with the Jubilee Walk which we first reconnoitred on 10 January. Since then we have worked produce up-to-date notes with photos and grid references.
- On 20 March we had planned to meet to inspect paths in the Marston area, which had to be postponed, and only recently (6th November) has it been possible to inspect. We are now hoping for some maintenance work by the County Council.
- The Path Wardens have not met as a group because of Covid restrictions but have each kept an eye on their own area and reported problems they cannot deal with themselves directly to the County Council. Jim Parke has continued to distribute 6-monthly lists of outstanding issues but warns us not to expect too much intervention from the County Council because 'at present there are about 4000 unresolved path problems throughout the County'.



Elaine Steane

THAME & WHEATLEY

Rather than bemoan the difficulties Covid has caused to our walking and social programme I will concentrate on the positives.

Prior to the March lockdown we had put on 38 walks and had a successful walk around the London Christmas lights and a Christmas lunch. Once walking resumed, we managed to get going quickly with group walks. Thanks for this go to all our walk leaders who were happy to continue, Audrey Parsons who liaised with them all and kept our programme updated and Ken King who sorted out our online booking arrangements. 33 walks took place before the second lockdown

Some path maintenance has taken place under the organisation of Tony Clarke. He has now retired from this role with our thanks. Also retiring, this time from walk leading is Chris Signal. He has clocked up 21 years of leading walks for us and so was presented with a gold sprayed old walking boot by us on a recent walk

Luckily, we managed to get in our annual holiday between lockdowns and spent 4 nights at Dovedale with glorious weather, great walking and good company. Thanks to all those who were involved in organising it, rearranging things to comply with Covid restrictions and leading our walks

Our committee has needed to meet more often than usual this year because of the crisis. Many thanks to them for their continued enthusiasm, willingness to work for our cause and success with zoom

Linda King

VALE OF WHITE HORSE



Very much a year of two halves. September through to March we held a record number of led walks for our winter programme and they had high attendance. Then walking stopped between March and June. We used our Facebook page to circulate photos from members' exercise walks. With the excellent spring weather there were quite a few of them. We also circulated photos by email asking people to recognise obvious and not so obvious local views seen on walks.

Once led walks were allowed in July there was no stopping us. We more or less had a full programme of summer walks. Not the programme planned; we replaced all the linear walks requiring car sharing or public transport with safer alternatives. Most of leaders were happy to lead and we found alternatives for the few who did not want to. We have been running walks with multiple groups of up to six per group, apart from a few weeks in August when we formed bigger groups out in the countryside, though still well within the maximum number allowed. By September we decided to stick to groups of six so as not to attract attention from the public at large, who might not understand that we were allowed to walk in groups of more than six. From July to the end of September we organised 42 events with 61 groups walking. 461 attendees walked, consisting of 113 different people. We had a lot of interest from other groups and areas early on as not all other groups had re-started walking. The winter programme has been equally popular with number rising further after Lockdown 2.0.



The other things to suffer this summer were our long distance walks, awaydays, our course and socials. At least we should have an oven-ready programme for Summer 2021.



Our path maintenance team, the Vale Path Volunteers did ten clearances last winter. Some of us learned a new skill of installing waymark posts under OCC instruction. OCC have since given us a set of tools to do this ourselves. Our attempts at summer work were frustrated by weather (good and bad) and other circumstances so we have only worked three times since the first lockdown.

Fingers and walking poles crossed for 2021.

John Gordon

WEEKEND WALKERS

Oxon Weekend Walkers continues to focus on providing Sunday walks of approx. 8 to 12 miles.

In January and February the rain, storms and consequential flooding put paid to several walks including some planned joint walks on the Thames Path, so members headed for higher ground with a series of challenging training hikes taking in Edge Hill, Bredon Hill, and the Malverns.

From March, to lift spirits and keep the group together during the first COVID lockdown, 11 weekly Zoom quizzes were organised. These proved very popular with an average of 18 members joining each quiz. The most popular quizzes were the BYOQ (Bring Your Own Question), where each member brought a question (which they asked in a predetermined order).

As soon as small group walks were possible, the walk leaders offered multiple walks each Sunday. Amazingly this year we delivered 59 walks which was an increase on the previous year.



Over 65 different individuals took part in at least one walk since lockdown eased, with walks led by 18 different walk leaders.

Since September we have seen an increase in membership with 12 new members. Many of these have found us through Facebook and have followed the weekly walk details and photographs posted before officially joining the group.

The commitment and enthusiasm of the walk leaders has been fundamental to the success of the group during these difficult times. The communications through the website and social media have reflected this enthusiasm and helped attract new members for 2021.

Ian Macpherson

WEST OXFORDSHIRE

At the WO AGM (held online) on November 11th, **Judith Wardle, Chair**, gave what she described as more a chat than a report because of the unusual circumstances this year. She said:

“Well, we were all set for another great year of walks put on by West Oxfordshire leaders. Seven leaders offering 24 walks in the half year October 2019 to March 2020: 5 of them leisurely and the rest moderate.



Catherine, our membership secretary led her first walk in November. I had planned one for March that would not only trace part of the route of the Shakespeare Way – from Enstone to Woodstock – but managed to be bus friendly for anyone living on the Oxford to Chipping Norton bus route (the bus actually runs on Sundays! and the stop in Woodstock is right opposite an excellent coffee shop.)

And then COVID-19 literally stopped us in our tracks: my Shakespeare Way one was the first to be cancelled on 22 March – I turned up anyway, in case someone turned up who didn't know: I had a very pleasant day on my own, meeting lots of other independent walkers.

I don't actually know what other members did after that. Judging by reports on Facebook from other groups, lots of members went out on their own or in groups of friends or family. I certainly enjoyed checking out potential new routes for walks, especially near where I live, so that I was avoiding travelling by car. And I took quite some great pictures in the process.

My next project is going to be to trace parts of the Palladian Way which shows itself from time to time as the odd roundel but not as long sections of path: since its full route is from Bath to Buckingham, we have a long section in West Oxon from Burford (passing through Blenheim) to Woodstock.

Unfortunately, in May, I caught my foot in a bramble and broke my wrist – of course, I was on my own, in the middle of a field and on a Sunday, so I had quite a story to tell whenever I did manage to get the opportunity to have a conversation (in the open air) with someone else. We did get back to leading walks in September and October, but now, as you know, we are “locked down” again.

I don't know if anyone else has managed to find paths that need to be rescued before 2026, as part of the national Ramblers' project. What I have done is learnt more about the designations of paths: there is a small section of the Wychwood Way near North Leigh, where I live that is actually NOT a footpath marked as a “right of way” on the County's definitive map. It just shows as “track” on enlarged maps, but David Godfrey the Oxfordshire expert on paths, tells me it is actually designated an ORPA – no, me neither – that means “other route with pedestrian access”. Thanks to Jim Parke, I have been able to ensure that that section of the Way has the appropriate way-markers hammered into a post so that walkers don't find themselves in New Yatt by mistake.”



Secretary, Rosemary Clegg said she had little to report since there had been such a drastic reduction in activity since March. Some walks have continued but the number of participants (30) permitted by Head Office was generally regarded as unwise.

Treasurer, Alan Cobb had circulated the accounts, which showed income slightly higher than last year, but he expected that would reduce over the current year as members may not wish to pay a subscription when no walks are available. Income slightly higher than last year but expected to reduce over the current year as members may not wish to pay subscription when no walks available.

Membership Secretary, Catherine Eddy said membership had risen from 175 to 182. But since there was a reduction of 21: 1 died, 10 lapsed, 10 resigned, that left 154 members.

On paper, there were 28 new members, but only 21 were new members, because 7 had transferred from other groups. Average age 70 (which is worrying): retention rate 62.5%.

Walks organiser, Alan Cobb said there had been a good turn out on walks until February. Since then, to keep to a limit of 12 people on longer walks had been difficult: if people cancel at the last minute that leaves places available, which could not be offered at short notice to those on a waiting list.

All previous officers were re-elected – recorded in the official Minutes.

There was an item of Any Other Business: discussion about the proposal by Sustainable Stonesfield to try to get the wooded area of Stocky Bottom declared a “village green” – so that villagers could continue to walk in all areas of the wood, not only on the official right of way. The suggestion was that West Oxon Ramblers should offer to contribute £100 pounds towards legal expenses: this project clearly fell within the objects of the Ramblers Association. (On receiving the offer, after this meeting, the chair of Sustainable Stonesfield said they were now hopeful of achieving the desired result without having to resort to expensive legal assistance, so they declined the offer. However, he would keep WO Ramblers informed of progress.)

Judith Wardle

