

talking walking

Oxfordshire Ramblers Issue 68, April 2026



Start place

How to live better, longer with the Ramblers



Photo Peter Flaxman

In mid-March our Oxfordshire Ramblers President, Professor Sir J. A. Muir Gray, gave an online presentation to us which explained to us how a longer, better life could be achieved. Muir is Director of the Oxford Optimal Ageing Programme which contributes to the NHS Living Longer Better [Programme](#). Muir's talk is entitled 'Live longer better with the Ramblers.' To watch his talk, go to the Oxfordshire Ramblers [homepage](#) then click on the link below Muir's photo. The link to the talk is four lines down on a short document which, amongst other things, has links to useful sources of information.

Professor Gray



Professor Sir J A Muir Gray, CBE, FRCP SGlas, FCLIP is the President of Oxfordshire Ramblers.

Find out how to live longer, better, with the Ramblers, and view Muir's video, [here](#) .



You will find more on Sir Muir's work and a synopsis - *Rambling is the Elixir of Life* - of his talk in the next issue of South East Walker.



Cover page.
On the
ramparts of
Uffington
Castle.
Photo Dave
Cavanagh

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Good weather is all the sweeter when it follows a previous period of inclement weather. So, here's a reminder of what it was often like in January and February.

All of these photos were taken by our members and posted on Facebook.



Rivers ran high. Photo Peter Flaxman





Not a few walks had to be re-routed. Photo Rosemary Britton





Like ducks to water ... Photo Becky David



Round the edge or through the middle? Photo Ian Macpherson

Let's not
forget the
mud



Photo Ian Macpherson



Photo Ruth Cornish



Photo Becky David



A misty moisty morning. Photo Ian Macpherson



Hurrying off for the pot of gold. Photo Sue Yallop

Oxfordshire ramblings

will give you a brief update each quarter on the current issues in Ramblers Oxfordshire Area.

Richard Birch
Chair of Oxfordshire Ramblers



Botley West Solar Farm

We will have to wait quite a bit longer for the Government decision on Botley West. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has informed Parliament that a new deadline of 10 September 2026 is being set for deciding the Botley West Solar Farm (the statutory deadline was 10 May 2026). This is to enable the Department to seek further information from the applicant with sufficient time to allow for consideration of this information by other interested parties.

The delay does seem to support the view that the applicant had not provided all of the requested information during the Examination.

Live longer, better, with the Ramblers – Sir Muir Gray

On 16 March 2026 Oxfordshire Ramblers President, Sir Muir Gray, entertained us with a ZOOM presentation titled “Rambling, the Elixir of Life”. If you missed the presentation you can see a recording via the home page of the Oxfordshire Ramblers website (or by clicking on [this link](#)).

Abingdon Reservoir

Thames Water has renamed the controversial South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) the White Horse Reservoir. Their intention is to apply for a Development Consent Order (DCO) in late 2026.

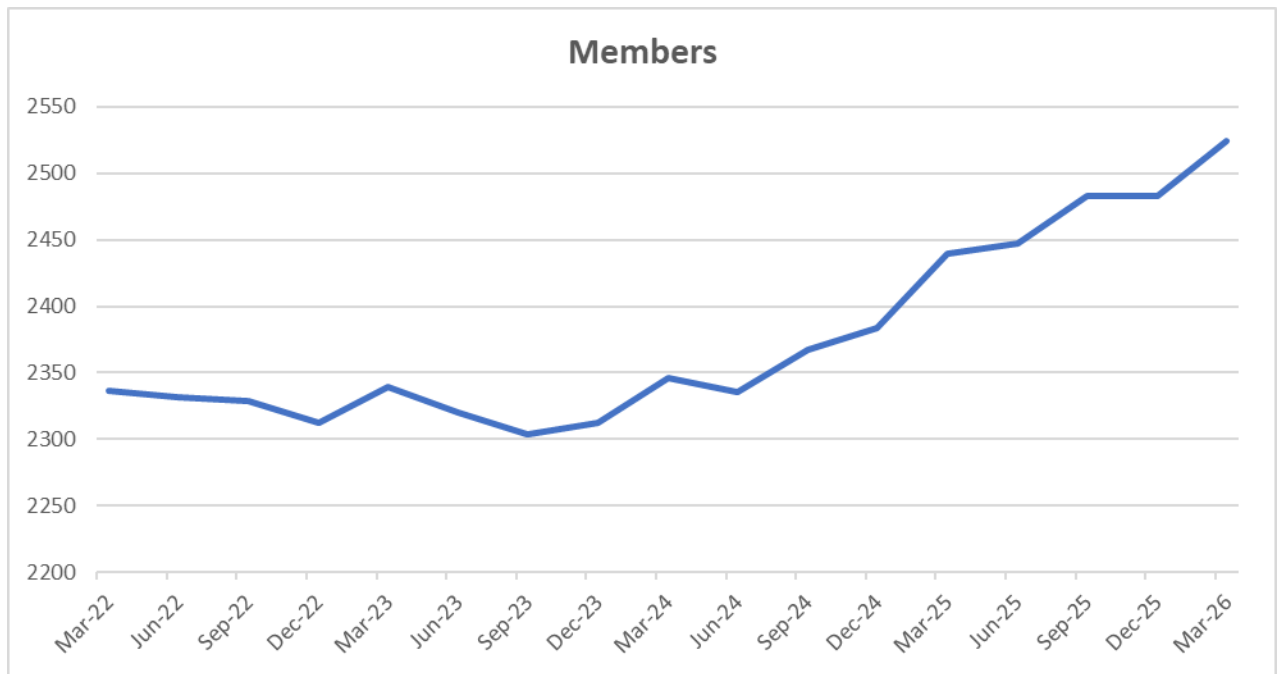
In January 2026 Thames Water opened a £5.7bn tender notice to design, build, test, and commission the reservoir. Interested parties must submit a request to participate by 24 April 2026 after which shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit detailed tenders.

Local councils have expressed concerns about the increased risk of flooding, increasing costs, and the impact of draining the reservoir in an emergency on the River Thames downstream.

The latest information can be found at <https://thames-sro.co.uk/SESRO>

Oxfordshire Membership

We generally see a surge of new members each year in the quarter January to March. The last quarter was no exception with a net increase of 47 members, taking our membership on 31 March 2026 to 2524, as illustrated by the graph on the next page.



Oxfordshire Ramblers membership numbers since March 2022



As a trustee of The Friends of the Ridgeway (FoR), I gave an online talk in March about the origins of the Friends, its activities in the 80s, 90s, and noughties, and its expanded activities since then. Its early years were devoted to seeking prohibition of non-essential (recreational) motor vehicles from the Ridgeway National Trail, with successes in the noughties. I related the 30-year story of the campaign using extracts from the FoR's extensive archive of press cuttings. After the successes (though not quite complete, for reasons explained in the talk), the Friends extended its remit to include the championing of the [Great Chalk Way](#), and celebrating the spirit of the Ridgeway with the Swire Ridgeway Arts [Prize](#).

I also featured recent and ongoing mass volunteering focussed on looking after and increasing access to the Ancient Monuments along the Ridgeway, as part of the Historic Ridgeway Project. Here is a [link](#) to the YouTube page of the Ridgeway National Trail where you will find links to my and other talks in the Historic Ridgeway lecture series.

Dave Cavanagh

The prize for having no sense of embarrassment goes once again to Bicester & Kidlington group, for their Easter Bonnet walk.

Photo Peter Flaxman



Oxfordshire Ramblers

Picnic – 7 June 2026

Come along and enjoy the annual Oxfordshire Area Picnic at Combe Reading Room Grounds. This year it is hosted by West Oxfordshire Group who will be providing cakes and drinks, but bring your own picnic. The Reading Room will be open for toilets, and shelter if the weather is wet. There is a choice of walks which will converge on the picnic site for the picnic at 1230. The walks are listed below but do check online on the day.

10:00 SP357196 OX7 3PQ Moderate 10 miles Circular

Title: Picnic walk from Charlbury. Start Place: Charlbury, Spendlove Centre car park. Down the Evenlode valley, to join the Oxfordshire Area Picnic at Combe, and back. Walk Leader SG 07775 751361

10:00 SP447168 OX20 1JQ Moderate 10 miles Circular

Title: Picnic walk from Woodstock. Start Place: Woodstock, Hensington Road car park. A circular walk from Woodstock to join the Oxfordshire Area Picnic at Combe. Walk Leader MS 01865 735626

10:00 SP462194 OX5 3EP Moderate 10 miles Circular

Title: Picnic walk from Sturdy's Castle to Combe. Start Place: Sturdy's Castle, A4260 Oxford Rd, layby near PH. A circular walk from Sturdy's Castle to Wooton, the Blenheim Estate and Combe for the Oxford Area Annual Picnic with the other groups. Dogs on short leads please. Walk Leader MG 07939 826412

10:00 SP388162 Leisurely 6.5 miles Circular

Title: Picnic walk from Stonesfield Common. Start Place: Stonesfield Common (to reach start place go West out of Stonesfield along Stonesfield Road towards Fawler. After 0.4 miles turn left (South), signposted North Leigh, for 0.7 miles to parking layby). A wander through Stonesfield, Akeman Street and the Evenlode valley to join the Oxfordshire Area Picnic. Walk Leader AC 01608 810283



10:00 SP399136 OX29 6PU Moderate 8 miles Circular

Title: Picnic walk from North Leigh. Start Place: North Leigh Common, car park just off Boddington Lane towards East End. A walk through East End to the Roman Villa, via Baggs Bottom, Wychwood Way and Shakespeare's Way to join the Oxfordshire Area Picnic. Walk Leader CE 07708 254512

10:00 SP414160 OX29 8NA Moderate 5.5 miles Circular

Title: Picnic walk from Coombe through Blenheim Park. Start Place: Coombe, sports ground car park off Park Road to East of village. After leaving Coombe, we enter the Blenheim Estate, taking a circular tour of the parkland before following the Wychwood Way back to Coombe for the Oxfordshire Area Picnic. Then it's a short walk back to the start. Assistance Dogs only. Walk Leader RC 07788 190170 / 01844 213608

Rest stop



Really? Photo Becky David

Gambling has brought our family together. We had to move to a smaller house.

A man said to me 'I'm going to chop off the bottom of one of your trouser legs and put it in a library.' I thought 'That's a turn-up for the books.'

A blind bloke walks into a shop with a guide dog. He picks the Dog up and starts swinging it around his head. Alarmed, a shop assistant calls out: 'Can I help, sir?' 'No thanks,' says the blind bloke. 'Just looking.'

Tommy Cooper

Don't knock the weather; nine-tenths of the people couldn't start a conversation if it didn't change once in a while. - American cartoonist Kin Hubbard.

Why does everyone usually paint Easter eggs?

Because it is much easier than wallpapering them.

Did you hear about the artist that always took things too far?

She didn't know where to draw the line.

If you cannot see something then you are likely to value it less, or even to be unaware of it. This applies to some of our Ancient Monuments that have been obscured by vegetation.

Wayland's Smithy: now you can't miss it

Dave Cavanagh

In the case of Neolithic Wayland's Smithy, you are likely to be unaware that you are approaching it as you walk along the Ridgeway, because of the tall hedgerow.

Just what a shame this is has very recently been highlighted by the big reveal: the removal of some 300 metres of hedgerow, which will be replaced with a shorter hedgerow.



Now you don't see it (left), now you do (right): the island of beech trees surrounding Wayland's Smithy can now be seen from far away, drawing you in. As you get closer (below), you can actually see the standing stones at the entrance to the long barrow.



The building of the dead hedge was part of Historic England's *Historic Ridgeway Project*. This has the twin aim of conserving archaeological sites along the Ridgeway and of closely involving the public in this endeavour. ►



The heaps of cut trees on the right are gradually being transferred leftwards to create a dead hedge. Photo Dave Cavanagh



View of the 150-metre dead hedge along the Ridgeway to the east of the path that leads to Wayland's Smithy. A dead hedge of similar length is being created on the 150 metres to the west. Photo Dave Cavanagh

The **heaps** of cuttings, seen in the photo on the left, have been used to make a dead hedge (right). So, nothing is removed. The hedge is neat, and ecologically sound, providing refuges and living spaces for wildlife. As soon as the dead hedges are complete, some 1500 mixed tree whips will be planted in front of the dead hedge, to create a living one. The dead hedge will

protect the young trees from south-westerly winds, and provide support when the weather comes from an easterly quarter. As the whips become established, the dead hedge will gradually subside. Once the living hedge is at the height of the dead one, the hedge will be cut regularly to keep it that way, and the open view of Wayland's Smithy maintained.

How to make a dead hedge

1 For this project, tree professionals Hayley (who also coordinates the many volunteers who contribute to the Historic Ridgeway Project), Rob and Ross cut down the hedgerow. If you have any experience of hedgerows that comprise hawthorn, blackthorn, briar and brambles then you'll know what a tangled, potentially painful, mass that they have to deal with.

2 Stout Ash stakes are driven into the ground to make a framework to support the dead hedge to come. ▼



Photo Dave Cavanagh

3 About every 5 metres, trunks and thick branches are placed at right angles to the plane of the hedge, to make a supporting 'wall'. This step was done by myriad volunteers.

4 Volunteers then use bow saws and loppers, as necessary, to cut the heaped material into manageable lengths. They then gather armfuls of the material and place it between the rows of vertical poles. Logs are used to produce the face of the dead hedge, on both sides, to help keep the loose material in place.



Carrying stakes to start a new section of dead hedge. Photo Dave Cavanagh

5 To give stability to the dead hedge, so that it resists the wind, for example, it is important to compress the infill vegetation. ►

In all, the dead hedge will be about 300 metres long, with a gap in the middle where a path leads from the Ridgeway to the Smithy.

Some 1500 hedging whips have been planted in front of the dead hedge to form a new living hedge that will be kept at a low height by volunteers. ▼



Photo Dave Cavanagh



Photo Tony Gibson



▲ A view of the sarsen stones of Wayland's Smithy from the Ridgeway at the beginning of March. In time the dead hedge will subside, revealing more of this five and a half thousand years-old Ancient Monument. Photo Dave Cavanagh

Five of the Vale Path Volunteers with tree professionals Hayley and Rob. Photo Pat Rosum, VPV Coordinator





At least a dozen different groups of volunteers have worked at Grim's Ditch, Scutchamer Knob, Wayland's Smithy, and the Lord Wantage Monument, as listed below. Some groups have worked several 'shifts'.

Ministry of Defence Staff, Shrivenham
Vale and South Oxfordshire District Councils
Faringdon Young Farmers
Oxfordshire Young Farmers
Ridgeway Cycles, Wantage
Tfd Health & Fitness, Grove
Ridgeway & Thames Path Volunteers
Cuckhamsley Scout Troop
Ramblers Vale Path Volunteers
Sustainability Team of Grundons
Wallingford Green Gym
King Alfred's School Scout Troop, Wantage



In addition, and not least, there have been work parties made up of individuals who responded to requests for individual volunteers, including on Facebook.

Whilst Historic England is the major source of funding for the Project, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment and Friends of the Ridgeway are contributing, making it possible to do more than otherwise would have been the case.

Discover the mysteries and histories of the Ridgeway's ancient landscape and monuments from the comfort of your home via the Historic Ridgeway Project's on-line talks on the Ridgeway National Trail's YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9MUTxI2Zjn5_LmNDRqo9cw





Even in January and
February there were
some blue-sky days

Photo Pam Wheeler ▼

Photo Nicola Jones ▲





Photo Elaine Price



Photo Nicola Jones



Photo Alie Hagedoorn



Neither daffodils nor
snowdrops let us down.
Photos Sandra Newton

Benson weir reopened

The Environment Agency's (EA) £15.1 million Benson Weir replacement project was completed this spring, and the walkway carrying the Thames Path National Trail was re-opened to the public on 1 April.

This section of the Thames Path is a vital link between Wallingford and Benson in south Oxfordshire. It is used on a daily basis by local people, as well as thousands who are walking and running the Thames Path National Trail.

On 1 April, Stuart Malaure, the EA's senior manager for the Thames Area, led a countdown to the re-opening at 9am and the resident lock-keeper Katie Marshall cut a ribbon on the footbridge. Families, walkers and runners from Wallingford and Benson poured across, eager to see the river and resume their familiar route.

Benson Weir walkway was closed by the Environment Agency (EA) in November 2022 due to safety concerns. The structure had been weakened by many impacts from floating trees, flood debris and a narrowboat.



Photo Wendy Tobitt

The route of the Thames Path was diverted between Wallingford and Benson via the villages of Crowmarsh Gifford and Preston Crowmarsh. During the summer months a small ferry was operated by Bygone Boating between Benson Lock and the waterfront at Benson.



Photo Wendy Tobitt

The new weir is a more efficient structure for managing the river. It has a wider walkway, which makes it safer for people on the Thames Path and EA staff operating the weir gates. A footbridge between Benson and the weir was resurfaced and repairs made to the brick abutments.

A fish pass will enable fish such as the European Eel, a critically endangered species, to migrate upstream into tributaries of the River Thames where they live for several years. When eels are ready to breed, they migrate down the river to breed in the Sargasso Sea.

Wendy Tobitt

Chair, Thames Path Partnership



Photo John Tippetts



On Scutchamer Knob, an Ancient Monument adjacent to the Ridgeway in East Hendred parish. Photo Sandra Newton

Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Thames Path (TP) National Trail

Various activities have been arranged. As previously notified, there will be a Relay of walks along the TP, starting from the Source on 5 June and finishing at Woolwich on 28 June. The TP Relay is a collaboration with Mayors for Drinkable Thames, part of the Drinkable Rivers campaign for healthy rivers. Details will be on the [Thames Path](#) website around the end of April. They will also be in the next TP magazine, also available from the TP website from mid-May.

There are further events with poetry, art and photography.

Robert Seatter's 30 superb poems about the River Thames will be published on QR codes between Kemble and Woolwich

A beautiful mural of wildlife painted by Vickie Amiralis will be on Mill Meadows Pavilion in Henley-on-Thames

You can enter the Thames Lens competition with your best photos of the Thames Path in London. The winners will be able to be seen in the Totally Thames Festival on the Bazalgette Embankment



Wildlife photographer Jon Mason will be visiting 30 nature reserves along the Thames Path

The source of the River Thames.
Photo John Tippetts

March, the transition month.

Photo Sandra Newton





A view from within the Manger, below White Horse Hill. Photo Dave Cavanagh

There is now a new water tap on the Ridgeway at Sparsholt Firs, insulated and boxed-in to keep the cold weather out, to keep it from freezing. The installation was done by Roger Baker, volunteer coordinator on behalf of the Ridgeway National Trail Partnership, and volunteers Dick, John and Bob of the Ridgeway and Thames Path Volunteers.



Earlier, the Friends of the Ridgeway had contributed to the costs of a new, all-weather water dispenser to be fitted at Sparsholt Firs. Unfortunately, the water pressure was insufficient for the new kit. It is now being fitted on the Ridgeway at Aston Rowant Nature Reserve.

Photos Roger Baker

SEGSBURY CAMP

An Iron Age
Hillfort in
Oxfordshire

Key Stage 2
Education Pack



Back to school?

Well, not quite, though we are never too old to learn something new.

As part of Historic England's Historic Ridgeway Project, archaeologist and project leader Dan Bashford has spearheaded the production of an educational resource for Key Stage 2 pupils on Segsbury Camp, the Iron Age 'hillfort' alongside the Ridgeway above the Letcombe villages, near Wantage.

It's a mine of well-illustrated information about Segsbury, which is the largest hillfort in Oxfordshire, the enclosed area being the equivalent of 15 football pitches. It was built around 600 BC and was in use for 450 years or so.

The resource is a PDF that you can download [here](#)





ACCESS DENIED

As Ramblers has been saying recently, too many paths are missing, blocked or unusable. This is cutting millions off from nature, especially in less well-off communities. In late March Ramblers launched [Access Denied](#), a campaign that calls on governments across England, Scotland and Wales to act.

Ramblers has started by asking members to lead the way by adding their name to their pledge.

[Add your name](#)

Ramblers, comprising people like you and me, has always been at the forefront of protecting access to the outdoors. The more members that support a Ramblers campaign, the more weight it has.

[Add your name today](#) and help launch the campaign. The more people who join, the harder it will be for governments to ignore us.

In December, Ramblers hosted a meeting in the House of Lords, attended by members of the Government and other MPs, to call for an Access to the Countryside bill. The Government expressed an interest in supporting this. We need to keep the pressure on to expand the path network so every community can enjoy nature close to where they live.

So, please add your name by clicking on one or other of the links above. All you have to do is give your name and postcode.

Numbers matter, so please add your support to this campaign. It will only take a minute of your time.

Feet up

Which European painter liked eating lentils.
Salvador Dahli.

What's the difference between an art student and a table?
A table can support itself.

Why did the art thief's van run out of fuel as he drove away from the museum?
Because he had no Monet to buy Degas to make the Van Gogh.



Photo Jan Knight



Photo Peter Skuse

So, I rang up my local swimming baths. I said 'Is that the local swimming baths?' He said 'It depends where you're calling from.'

So, I rang up a local building firm, I said 'I want a skip outside my house.' He said 'I'm not stopping you.'

So, I was getting into my car, and this bloke says to me 'Can you give me a lift?' I said 'Sure, you look great, the world's your oyster, go for it.'

Tim Vine