

GENERAL COUNCIL REPORT

Another year and another Council and I am not sure what progress has really been made.

As most members will realise the membership of the Ramblers is a really mixed bunch. Unfortunately the structures of the organisation do not really reflect or accommodate this fact.

We have a pyramid structure where things are mainly suggested at group level, passed up to Areas who in turn are represented at General Council where decisions are made.



The central administration knows this is a problem with the great weight of our membership not really being represented.

As best I can tell only 30% of the membership is active in groups and I for one must fall into that camp. The Board of Trustees did last year try to bring in one man one vote with postal voting to provide more involvement by the wider membership but the representatives at that General Council would not accept this.

There are all sorts of members and it is not possible to put them all in convenient boxes with generalised descriptions of the types of members.

There are those members active in groups, many of whom are primarily interested in walking in a social group which is fine. There are those who are very active walking with friends and family or other organisations but who have nothing to do with the group they are nominally allocated to. There are those whose main interest is in campaigning to protect and enhance the rights of way network and then there are those whose best walking days are behind them but who still wish to support the work of the organisation and keep in touch with old friends.

It is not black and white though, there are some members of groups who actively walk with their groups but also take administrative positions and help with campaigning work. There are members who like to do their own thing when it comes to walking but do get involved in research and campaigning work. The problem we have as an organisation is how to provide for the needs of all the members and how to enable them all to get involved in the democratic processes.

Another suggestion floated last year which got nowhere was to allow for different types of group for members with different ambitions and aims

This year's General Council did not address these issues again with the Board having elected for a more gradual transition. There was some tidying up of the constitution which took up a lot of time but a number of major issues were not covered.

We as an Area had tabled a motion requiring central office to provide more support to Areas fighting closures of footpath rail crossings but it was never put to Council which ran out of time. Your Area officers feel that the railways are using inappropriate legislation to try to justify arbitrary closures rather than going down the usual channels where we would have a chance to argue our case and we wanted more help from the centre.

At least as it ran out of time, the Board of Trustees are obliged to consider our motion at their first meeting and we have given them what would have been our presentation and a lot of chapter and verse about local cases.

Network Rail is engaged in a programme of level crossing closures and centrally the RA are urging Network Rail to consult rights of way user groups and local communities as early as possible about the proposed diversion or closure of rights of way across railway lines. Highways authorities are supposedly working with Network Rail to try to develop a framework or protocol for dealing with applications for level crossing closure and diversions.

A government minister is on records saying that Network Rail needs to improve its existing approach to applications for rail crossings orders. Whilst he understood that safety is Network Rail's top priority, this must be balanced with local authorities' responsibility to assert the public's right to use a right of way. Where a crossing needs to be closed on safety grounds, there is a duty to consider alternative options working closely with local authorities.

(See notes at the end of this report)

The Ramblers position remains that the permanent closure of rights of way over level crossings should be a matter of last resort, when there are no other reasonable means of improving safety.

Despite all this we have a case where Network Rail have closed a crossing despite objections from us and others and despite the highways authority turning down their request as the road alternative was more dangerous.

We were pressing for more support from the centre when we are fighting cases locally.

We are given to understand that they are sympathetic to our request and have actually allocated a budget to deal with challenges against closures.

During conference it soon became fairly apparent that some groups represented were not only just seeking to walk socially but they resented being asked if they would help with campaigns and were actually hostile to the concept.

Part of the problem is that to many people campaigning conjures up images of protest marches with banners and placards but in reality just walking your local paths to keep them open is a form of campaigning.



Your Area Secretary and Area Chairman in rapt attention.

Once people realise that most “campaigning” is scrutinising proposed path changes, making representations to local authorities, placing discreet letters and articles in local papers, they are usually entirely supportive.

When all else fails, giving submissions and evidence to public inquiries and the occasional court case, may be necessary

At a local level there has been a suggestion that we should organise an occasional forum when the members not involved in the groups could come together to discuss issues of interest and get an update on the campaigning work being done. To some extent the AGM should provide such a platform for discussion but a lot of the meeting is taken up with formalities and that can put off many members.

We have in each of the last two years, organised a semi-social get together of all members who have expressed an interest in voluntary work and research, with reasonable turn outs. We are now entering a new phase of research which may interest many members we do not normally have contact with and we are to arrange a get together to explain what we have in mind. If this is successful we can consider an annual Forum aimed at such volunteers and those members not involved in a group to give them an opportunity to express their concerns and find out what is going on.

We do try and keep them informed through this publication but that is a one way dialogue.

Independent members are entitled to two members on the Area Executive Committee and we would be delighted if we had any takers. It only involves four meetings each year.

NOTES - Railway Crossings

1) For most public rights of way which cross a railway line on the level, the company's obligations are set out in section 61 of the Railway Clauses Consolidation Act 1845.

This reads:

Company to make sufficient approaches and fences to bridleways and footways crossing on the level. If the railway shall cross any highway other than a public carriageway on the level, the company shall at their own expense, make and at all times maintain convenient ascents and descents and other convenient approaches, with handrails or other fences, and shall, if such highway be a bridleway, erect and at all times maintain good and sufficient gates, and if the same shall be a footway, good or sufficient gates or stiles, on each side of the railway, where the railway shall communicate therewith.

2) In November 1990 British Rail submitted to Parliament a Private Bill, the East Coast Main Line (Safety) Bill. If passed, this would have had the effect of closing ten level crossings over the East Coast Main Line, and thereby creating 20 cul-de-sac paths. Opposition from the Ramblers' Association and other bodies helped to persuade MPs to block its progress through Parliament.

3) Law Commission Recommendations - factors to be taken into account in considering an application for a level crossing closure order:

safety of users of the crossing (including information as to the incidence of accidents at the level crossing); costs involved in maintenance of the crossing compared with costs involved in closing or closing and replacing the crossing; the effect of closure as opposed to retention (in the case of public level crossings) on the efficiency of the rail and road networks; the effect (in the case of public level crossings) on the integrity of the network of non-vehicular public rights of way; the effect of closure compared to retention of the crossing on the local community; the effect on those holding private rights over the crossing; the usability of the level crossing or its potential alternatives for all level crossing users; the convenience of level crossing users; and the effect on the environment and local amenity.

MYTH, HISTORY AND MYSTERY

After a very early Easter when all sorts of daft explanations were about, it seems timely to explore some traditions.

The tree is the centre of most Christmas displays but where did this tradition of bringing a tree indoors come from. The fir tree is the traditional Christmas tree and the branches of this tree have been used for centuries to decorate houses during winter festivals. The evergreen nature of the fir represented life and fertility and was a celebration of the coming of spring. The modern tradition seems to have started in Germany around the middle ages but caught on in England during the 1880s when Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, had a Christmas tree installed in Windsor Castle. Trees were decorated with candles, nuts and fruits in those days.

Part of many people's Christmases these days are chocolate Yule logs. These haven't always been covered in chocolate as the tradition predates the invention of chocolate and hails back many years to a time before central heating. We also have a tradition of the twelve days of Christmas and these traditions overlap.

In Nordic times winter solstice celebrations involved the burning of a Yule log. They were always very careful to make sure the log stayed lit as it was unlucky to have to re-light it. A large tree was felled and brought indoors in a grand ceremony. The widest end of the tree was placed into the fire and lit from remains of previous year's log. The tree was then slowly fed into fire over the festival. After twelve days, the remains of the Yule log were safely stored to protect the house against lightning and evil spirits for the following year.

Anglo-Saxon pagans would light candles on top of the Yule Log to light up the house and welcome the early spring sun. In fairly recent times on Christmas Eve, the youngest member of party would light two candles from the burning Yule log and everybody present would make silent wishes about the year to come. Burning Yule logs and bringing in a small log or piece of coal if visiting just after midnight on New Year's Eve continued in the west and north of England into the first part of the 20th century.

In the dark days of winter the cheeky Robin brightens up our gardens with his lovely red breast. There are any number of myths as to how it got that red breast amongst which was it being scorched by fire while taking water to lost souls in purgatory or that it was stained by the blood of Christ as the robin comforted him on the cross. The Robin is now very much a symbol of Christmas but this does not go back very far. The 'tradition' comes from an association with the postman.

Victorian postmen wore red jackets which earned them the nickname 'robins'. The bird then became popular on Christmas cards as a symbol of the postman delivering them.

Bright red holly is widely used as a Christmas decoration and is often used on top of the Christmas pudding. Before Christianity, holly was the male symbol of fertility and ivy the female partner. During festivals in the dark days of winter, a young boy dressed in holly and a young girl in ivy would parade through the streets bringing life to the most miserable part of the year. Bringing holly into the house was also thought to protect a home against evil fairies. It was considered bad luck to fell a whole holly tree so only the odd branch was taken. It was also accepted that witches ran along the tops of hedges and a strategically placed holly trees caused an excellent barrier.

Better hang on to that sprig of holly to ward off mischievous fairies!

Another tradition from the mists of the past is very welcome today. A stolen kiss under the mistletoe is all very well but why do we lock lips under this particular evergreen and poisonous plant? It was considered a plant of vivacity and fertility by Druids, with its always green leaves and wintry white berries. Kissing under it is thought to come from Norse mythology. There are variations on the story involving Baldr, son the Norse goddess of love and fertility, Frigg. He was supposedly plagued with dreams of his impending death and as an enemy arrow made of mistletoe hits him, Frigg's tears fall upon the mistletoe arrow and turn it into white berries. Baldr is brought back to life and Frigg proclaims that anyone standing under the miraculous plant will come to no harm and will receive a kiss as a token of love.

It sounds like a convenient excuse which we all use now, but in Victorian times male servants were allowed to steal a kiss from their best girl under the mistletoe and a refusal would bring bad luck. It is said that a man would pluck a berry from the bunch with each kiss and the privilege would end when all the berries were gone. Next time you pucker up under the mistletoe, remember you're keeping a tradition going.

Whilst many people think the strange way Easter moves about each year is something to do with religion it is actually an astronomical phenomenon. It obviously has historic connotations impacting on all the religions 'of the book' but is actually based on the movements of the moon.

This is a bit odd given that so much of the Church Calendar hangs on the date of Easter Sunday but when this is actually to be, is based on it being the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the official spring equinox (March 21st).

There you go! Simple isn't it.