

Taunton Deane Ramblers
Annual General Meeting – 24th November 2023
Footpath Secretary's Report

This is my ninth annual report as Footpath Secretary since taking over the role in January 2015.

Once again, there have been relatively few statutory consultations from Somerset County Council on changes to rights of way. There have been some consultations from Somerset West and Taunton Council (since April 1st, Somerset Council) on planning applications, to which I have been responding where there are issues that affect Ramblers.

One proposal with significant implications for walkers, if it is allowed, is a current planning application for a solar farm at Preston Bowyer, across the route of public footpaths WG7/29 and T13/10, to which I have submitted an objection. Given the scale of the impact, I would be disappointed if this were to be permitted.

Another proposal for a solar farm is at Ham in Creech St. Michael parish. This is also crossed by rights of way (T10/27 and T27/8), from which the views across the landscape to Knapp would, in my view, be significantly affected by the proposed panels. I have objected to the proposal on behalf of Ramblers. As with the solar farm proposed at Preston Bowyer, no decision has yet been made by Somerset Council.

Ramblers and the British Horse Society have commenced the process under Section 130A of the Highways Act to require Somerset Council to secure reopening of bridleway T2/11 in Bickenhall parish. This remains blocked, despite the Planning Inspectorate deciding more than a decade ago that the route should remain on the definitive map. Somerset Council duly served notice on the landowner requiring the obstructions to be removed by 18th November. Unfortunately, the landowner has failed to comply. The next stage is for Somerset Council to serve formal enforcement notices under Section 143. Under this, the Council can carry out the work itself and reclaim the costs from the landowner. In the event that Somerset Council does not do this, then either Ramblers or the BHS may apply to the Magistrate's Court for an order requiring them to remove the obstructions. There is, in effect, until 18th March 2024 to do this, although it is hoped that Somerset Council will act and that it will therefore not be necessary.

I met with the British Horse Society and Les Stather (Ramblers Area FPS) regarding a potential diversion of T2/1 in Bickenhall parish, together with possible dedication by the landowner of a connecting permissive section of the Herepath. BHS are also seeking to have Grughay Lane added to the definitive map as a bridleway. Taken together, these measures would potentially enable the need to walk on road past the RSPCA Centre at West Hatch, where there are no verges, to be reduced. There seems to be agreement that these are good ideas, but progress will depend on

agreement between the landowner, the Highway Authority and the various parties, possibly involving some funding.

There was a consultation over the proposed closure of footpath WG17/17 that crosses the railway at Longforth Farm, Wellington. Given that the alternative route is 8 times longer, Ramblers objected, but as the crossing had been 'temporarily' closed for many years and was proposed to be closed on safety grounds, the closure has now gone ahead.

As in previous years, I have been contacted on a number of occasions by people who had encountered issues with rights of way. I have been taking up these where appropriate with Somerset County Council. For example, I met with a local resident at Milverton regarding WG7/17 at Creedwell Orchard, where the path was in danger of collapsing into an excavation made by the landowner.

I have also helped the Group Secretary with walking and re-waymarking sections of the West Deane Way. We have now covered the route from Staplegrove as far as Wiveliscombe. As well as replacing some missing waymarks, we have added a number of new ones where additional opportunities exist. For example, several new fingerposts have been erected fairly recently north of Wiveliscombe which provide an opportunity for WDW signage.

There have been no meetings of Group Footpath Secretaries in Somerset during 2023.

Having been acting as Footpath Secretary since leaving the Committee last year, I am pleased to report that I have recently been approached by Brenda Prentice who has expressed an interest in taking over the role. Subject to the agreement of this AGM, she will now take over from me, although I remain available to give advice and support.

Philip Bisatt
Footpath Secretary