

Ramblers' Association – North West Essex Group

Minutes of the 33rd Annual General Meeting held at the Maurice Rowson Hall, Gosfield on Saturday 6th November 2021 at 11am

1. Welcome

There were 18 members present at the AGM.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from the following members: Tony Fraser, Tony & Brenda Brightwell, Ann Reilly and Ann Smith.

3. Minutes of last meeting

The results of the proxy vote of 2020 were approved.

4. Matters Arising

All matters arising are dealt with under the following agenda items.

5. Annual Report

This past year has been another difficult year for the group as it was again dominated by the coronavirus pandemic and our walks programme was severely disrupted. After walks resumed in August 2020 they were cancelled again on 5 November until 2 December and then following a brief restart were cancelled again on 20 December with the country being in lockdown over the Christmas period. Walks did not resume again until 8 April. These constant changes and sometimes ambiguous advice from the government did not make it easy to run a walks programme or organise any social events. Most of our walks were therefore confined to areas relatively near Braintree but with a walk on the Suffolk coast in late summer and a London walk in October. No formal social events took place though we enjoyed an al fresco meal at the end of our London walk and met for coffee at the end of walks where suitable premises were open. We were also able to make use of a member's beach hut in Harwich following a walk on this underrated stretch of the Essex coast. No committee meetings or AGM have taken place in the last year due to restrictions on indoor meetings which have only been lifted fairly recently. The disruption caused by the pandemic together with illness and injuries within the group have adversely affected walk numbers and it has become increasingly difficult to maintain interest in the walks programme particularly on the longer weekend walks where numbers are barely sustainable. Following

numerous cancellations a small group of us did eventually manage to walk the northern section of the Cotswold Way in September and were fortunate to have excellent weather during our trek along the footpaths between Chipping Campden and Painswick.

Work continued on the Parish Paths Adopters (PPA) scheme and some members took advantage of the lockdown to survey their local footpaths and update the results on the Essex area PPA database. Thanks to all those members who took part in this initiative. We have been unable to undertake any further working parties under the Parish Paths Partnership (P3) scheme since October 2020 when we cleared a local footpath between Halstead and Colne Engaine. Members continued to report footpath problems on Essex Highways website though these were met with mixed responses with the county council under sustained pressure due to Covid and staff shortages. However a campaign to save the unique footbridge over the River Blackwater in Coggeshall generally known as Dick Nunn's footbridge was successful and the bridge has now been granted listed status by Historic England and restored to its former glory.

Finally it remains for me to thank all those who have led or participated in walks over the past year and I look forward to your support in the coming year. Please remember that the future existence of the group depends upon you supporting the walks programme and other group activities.

6. Treasurer's Report

The report for financial year ending 30 September 2021 was tabled at the meeting. There was a balance in the main account of £552.16 bank deposits and £16.46 petty cash, with the self funded account showing a balance of £150.58. Due to the current balance in the main account no funds had been requested from Ramblers HQ for the current year in order to keep the balance within permitted limits.

7. Membership Secretary's Report

Group membership was 98 members as at 31 October 2021 and had been fairly static for the past few years.

8. Footpath and Countryside Secretary's Report

See attached Katherine and Paul Evan's report below.

9. Publicity Officer's Report

Following the first lockdown being announced in late March 2020 and then being lifted and reimposed twice again we decided not to send our latest programme to local libraries and the Braintree & Witham Times as there was no certainty when walks would resume and we thought that sending out a programme when most walks were likely to be cancelled would be confusing to the general public. Instead we concentrated our efforts on online promotion via our website, facebook page and Ramblers walk finder as we are able to update these platforms at very short notice.

Despite the pandemic traffic to our website remained broadly similar to last year with 839 unique visitors, 1,489 total visits and 2,713 page views. Our facebook page following increased by 58% over the past year and at the time of writing we have 312 followers though unfortunately this has not translated in any more group members. We affiliated our site to Rambling Essex which features many walks and photographs of the Essex countryside although this site is not actually run by the Ramblers. However it has helped increase the profile of our own facebook page and also helped increase our following. Government regulations and guidelines relating to the pandemic are subject to change at short notice and we remain ready to adjust our publicity accordingly.

10. Election of Officers

POST	Nomination	Proposed	Seconded
Chairperson	Geoff Farrow	Janet Bugler	Ann Bennett
Secretary	Position vacant – no nominations		
Treasurer	Maureen Davis	Geoff Farrow	Ann Bennett
Membership Secretary	Janet Bugler	Ann Bennett	Frances Starnes
Publicity Officer	Geoff Farrow	Maureen Davis	Gwen Nicholls
Ramblers Walk Finder	Brenda Brightwell		
Rambles Secretary (Joint)	Ann Bennett & Gwen Worrall	Geoff Farrow	Maureen Davis

Area Committee Geoff Farrow Janet Bugler Paul Evans
Representative

Committee Clive Collins, Ronnie Davis & Frances Starnes
elected en bloc by Geoff Farrow & Ann Bennett

Appointment of Independent Examiner

Paul Evans agreed to continue with this task for the coming year. Proposed by Geoff Farrow seconded by Maureen Davis

11. Dissolution or merger of the group

Despite membership numbers remaining fairly static there was concern over the general level of participation in group activities in particular group walks where attendances had fallen sharply over the past year. There were only around a dozen people who were now willing to join the longer weekend walks which had resulted in very low attendances on some walks. The Ramblers appear to have difficulty in attracting new members despite the fact that a new Facebook page called "Rambling Essex" had over 12k followers many of whom posted photos and routes of recent walks. Various suggestions were put forward to improve the situation including restricting activities to shorter midweek walks, running more figure of eight walks and possible joint walks with other groups. Teresa Clark offered to lead a stage walk along the Crouch Valley Trail next year if there was sufficient interest. There was also a problem recruiting volunteers to replace existing committee members and the position of secretary had remained vacant for 5 years. Following some discussion there was a consensus that walk numbers be monitored carefully over the next two programmes before deciding the future direction or possible closure of the group.

The meeting closed at 12.20 pm

Geoff Farrow – Chairman

Post Meeting Note:

Gwen Worrall to investigate venues for post Christmas lunch on 15 January. Now booked for the Swan Inn in Chappel - names to Ronnie and menu shown on Events page of website.

1) Path Orders in Braintree District

There have been fewer path orders due to COVID which severely restricted Essex Highways PROW staff meetings with landowners.

The issue of fingerposts at Toppesfield still pointing to the old pre-diversion routes - diverted over 3 years ago - was raised again at the Essex Highways (virtual) PROW User Group meeting in August. Toppesfield is one of several Parishes in this northern part of Braintree District that has been without a PROW Inspector for many year. The lack of PROW manpower has been raised by Ramblers and ELAF (Essex Local Access Forum) several times.

PROW diversion proposals at Clees Hall (Alphamstone 32) are stalled. The proposed diversion of Bures 5 (east of Ferrier's Farm) was not proceeded with and the path down the slope in the woodland, off-line for many years, has been re-instated. The issue of the off-line walked routes of Great Bardfield FPs 4 & 5 is being pursued by Great Bardfield Parish Council. At the August Essex Highways PROW User Group meeting, Alan Goffee advised that extinguishment & diversion applications for Wethersfield footpaths at Codham Park, Beazley End had been made/ were about to be made. Nothing has come through the system as yet. The proposed diversion of Hatfield Peverel FP 29 at Chase Cottage, which had stalled in 2007, has been resurrected. The proposed changes to Black Notley FP11 at Batemans Farm, at the far east of Braintree District, were discussed but ultimately have been objected to. Ramblers Central Office were consulted. Whilst the west end of Black Notley byway 13 at Bateman's Farm is accessible to walkers it is not available to byway traffic - Essex Highways are aware. Advice about locked gates across Finchingfield FP2 at Locksmith Farm was received by NW Essex Group. The matter was raised at the Essex Highways PROW User Group meeting with the Enforcement Officer and it is understood that the gates are no longer locked.

The proposed diversion route for Earls Colne FP1 to run through the tree belt on the west side of the walked line through the field on the west side of the Earls Colne business park was confirmed. It is understood that the plans for a cycle route adjacent to the footpath and on other parts of the Marks Hall estate, which had received planning permission, are being revised. There has been tree and scrub clearance in the area of Coggeshall FP13, north of the A120 underpass. As the Chairman has advised, Dick Nun's footbridge over the river Blackwater on Coggeshall FP 37 has been reconstructed and repaired by ECC. Repairs still need completing to the smaller footbridge to the south-west. Coggeshall FP 37 is a useful, albeit often soggy link, link to the Essex Way from Coggeshall West Street.

Development on the east side of Witham, substantially in Rivenhall Parish, is affecting the south end of the John Ray walk - Rivenhall FPs 58 & 60 & Rectory Lane - and also Rivenhall

FP59. Witham Town Council successfully applied for the designation of a new footpath - Witham FP 124 - in the area of the town park and sports fields. The northern end of the Blackwater Rail Trail in Witham is a designated ECC Country Park - however it is not obvious that this route is available to the public as it has no PROWs and so does not show up on the Essex Highway's Interactive Map. The east end of the Flitch Way - also an ECC Country Park - is also not a PROW so is also not shown on the Interactive Map from the east end of Rayne bridleway 45 to Braintree Station.

Temporary closure Orders continue to be prevalent, with some closures continuing for several years. This can be because of housing developments but also because bridges are out-of-repair. There is now a MAP, which takes a while to load, showing temporary closures at..

www.essexhighways.org/getting-around/public-rights-of-way/temporary-closures-or-diversions

Just over the border in Uttlesford, the issue of path closures in the Felsted Mill area continues - although our Chairman has advised the walks are being led in this area.

Before leading a walk, do please check the Essex highways interactive maps for PROW changes - this IS the most up-to-date information on the legal definitive routes - tick the assets tabs to show PROWs (pink), tick the programme tab to show which paths are on the once/year cutting programme

<https://www.essexhighways.org/transport-and-roads/interactive-maps-and-live-travel-information/Highways-Information-Map.aspx>

Ramblers Essex Area are campaigning on stiles.

2) Planning & Development

Solar Farm applications are continuing. On the one hand energy is provided without carbon dioxide emissions but on the other hand farmland is taken out of production & paths can end up enclosed between fences / hedges & fences.

The **Braintree District Local Plan** has been examined by the Planning Inspectorate. The examiners' report is expected before the year end. As there will undoubtedly be some recommended changes, so there will be another public consultation before the plan can be adopted. The good news is that Braintree District now has a 5 year housing supply (as defined by the Government) which means that speculative developments on land not designated in the Local Plan can be resisted.

Nonetheless, house building & development continues apace around Halstead, Braintree and Hatfield Peverel affecting PROWs - also around Silver End, Cressing and Notley. The Ramblers are now again receiving notifications where there is a PROW on or near a planning

application site. There is a recent proposal to build a prison, but no staff accommodation, on the old RAF Wethersfield air base at CM7 4AZ. The PROWs around this airfield were truncated.

The results of the public inquiry into **Network Rail's proposals** to close 50+ non-vehicular level crossings throughout Ramblers Essex Area & east Hertfordshire are still awaited. The results have been reported of both of the earlier Cambridgeshire and Suffolk inquiries.

The pre-Development Consent Order (DCO) statutory consultation on the **widening and junction improvements to the A12** between Boreham and Marks Tey was held in July. An Essex Area Rambler's response was submitted which included substantial input from me as the majority of the section to be improved is in Braintree District.

Work has started on the **Rivenhall** IWMF (integrated Waste Management Facility) after an agreement was reached in January between Gent Fairhead, the landowners, and Indaver, a waste management company founded in Belgium in 1985. There are concerns that whilst plans for the incinerator ("energy from waste") element are being progressed there is uncertainty regarding the other elements of the "integrated" scheme. Work has started on the Woodhouse Farm site which is traversed by Kelvdon FP8. The restoration of the Rivenhall /Bradwell quarry site is proceeding but slowly so the PROWs are still on long-term diversions. The routes ARE shown on the Essex Highways interactive map.

3) Lost Ways / Don't Lose Your Way (DLYW) & the 2026 cut-off date

I volunteered to be the Essex - ECC area only - Ramblers DLYW co-ordinator when there was a call for volunteers by Ramblers Central Office. All the various DLYW co-ordinators from around England report to Dominic Tooze & Jack Cornish at Central Office. There are monthly zoom meetings of the co-ordinators hosted by Dom & Jack. The degree of interaction with Area Committees seems to depend on what role, if any, co-ordinators have at Area level.

I am not sure who gets emails from Ramblers central office about DLYW - for example the email of 25 August with the subject line "An update from Don't Lose Your Way" from Jack at the Ramblers. This had a link to the DLYW web pages and so to the "map of lost paths" which is work in progress

<https://dontloseyourway.ramblers.org.uk/> --> click on square "map of lost paths"

If you are interested in trawling old maps and documents for paths that are not on the current legal Definitive Map of PROWs, please register your interest by clicking on one of the "join the movement" links on the don't loose your way campaign page on the main Ramblers web site www.ramblers.org.uk and also let me know... email: ramblers.ke@gmail.com

Katherine Evans

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