

REPORT OF THE RIDGEWAY WALK – SATURDAY 8 MAY 2004 by Alan Smith

It was a cruel twist of fate that in a period of, admittedly, changeable weather it was sunny on the 7th May and on the 9th but overcast and wet on the 8th. In fact, the 8th was the last wet day for some time in this part of the world! It seemed to be spitting with rain from the word go and got steadier as the morning wore on. The rain did not stop until the afternoon. Fortunately, it was not particularly cold, though it was cooler on the top of the Ridgeway than lower down. However, it was not the weather that concerned Ridgeway walkers most but the **MUDDY CONDITIONS UNDERFOOT**. Carl Roe, who completed his 30th crossing of the Ridgeway this year, said that the mud was the worst that he had ever seen. However, unlike 2003, when the dry hard ground caused lots of problems with sore feet and blisters, many people found the soft going helped to keep their feet in good condition. Walkers found progress was better where the surface of the Ridgeway had been repaired, though Dave Wright commented that in some places flints had been put down which could cause difficulties if walkers had sore or blistered feet.

Marshals too had to contend with the mud. The approach to checkpoint (CP) 4 was a very slithery drive and the muddy interior of the tent at CP 6 led to a tongue in cheek call for some matting to be put down in the future. But the most challenging location was CP 9. Marshals have to reach this CP along a very long track. Emma Haile found on arrival at the CP that she could not reverse due to the bad state of the ground. She had to drive further on until she could turn right onto a parallel track and then back to the CP. When it came to drive off the mud later in the day, she felt like a rally driver; the mud shot over the top of her car at one point as she slewed from side to side into the puddles.

In view of the conditions, it is a tribute to the determination of so many walkers that they did complete the walk, the sort of determination displayed by the last walker to arrive at CP 8 just before 21.00 hours. The marshals there had tremendous difficulty persuading her to retire in view of the darkness and the particularly atrocious conditions between CP 8 and CP 9.

In spite of the weather and the mud, the number of retirements was not higher than usual. Seven retirements by members of the Marlborough Brandt Group were planned and they arranged their own transport home. Friends or relatives collected many retirees and this contributed to the feeling that the number of retirements was low. However, 28 walkers had finishing times over 14 hours, with 7 of these over 15 hours; this is a record! It is no surprise that Karen and Henry Winsor, the last walkers to arrive at the finish, said that the walk was the toughest thing they had ever done, adding "Never again!" Karen and Henry's finishing times of 15 hrs 43mins were not the longest. Steve Piltz finished in 15 hrs 50 mins but he, along with John Bell, Steve Doone and Ian Ritchie, had started at 06.00. Three other walkers, Stuart Gibbons, Trevor Greenaway and Richard Preece started at 07.30.

An unusual, but welcome, feature of this year's walk was that more ladies took part. Out of 56 ladies who entered, 46 started. Amongst these were the youngest walkers in this year's 40 mile walk, Victoria Gregson (18), Catherine Hingley (17) and Rosie Ore (18). Catherine and Rosie said that they had never walked more than 20 miles before. Having youth on your side is an advantage though older walkers have experience on which to draw. But that is not always the case as John Mountain points out about one of his walking companions (see letters).

At least two dogs took part in the walk; Caroline Easterbrooke's Old English Sheepdog (short-haired) named Molly Mansell completed the walk in 12 hrs 21 mins while Pine Dog Harrison, a black Labrador/greyhound cross, retired at 28 miles with his owner, Alice Harrison.

STATE OF THE PATH - I recall from my own years doing the walk (1973 to 1996) that the Ridgeway was always rutted to some extent and, in wet conditions, the chalky surface was slippery. But I only remember once (on Hackpen Hill in 1978) when I had to negotiate a wide or deep muddy section. So, more general mud is a phenomenon that has arisen recently. Although some damage to the surface of the path may be attributed to farm vehicles, they have always used the Ridgeway. But, in recent years, 4x4 vehicles and trail riders (motorbikes) have increasingly used this green lane. The Ridgeway is high profile sufferer from damage caused to tracks all over the country by off road vehicles. Indeed, the reason for the diversion after CP 1 was because part of Gypsy Lane was badly damaged. Gypsy Lane is not part of the Ridgeway National Trail but it is a byway open to all traffic. In the words of the Wilts Rights of Way warden, Gypsy Lane had been wrecked by a gang of off roaders! Beginning in October 2004, vulnerable parts of the Ridgeway (if not all of it) are to be closed to all non-essential motor vehicles for the winter months. Whether this will be enough to restore the surface of the path to a reasonable condition remains to be seen. But if you feel that the Ridgeway should be closed permanently to non-essential motor vehicles you should join the Friends of the Ridgeway (see website at www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk).

TIMINGS - The three coaches arrived at the start at 07.48, 07.52 and 07.57 respectively. I have adjusted the starting times for walkers on the coaches to 07.53, 07.57 and 08.02 respectively, apart from those who asked on the day for their exact times of departure to be recorded. This broad-brush approach cuts down on the administration at the start, allowing walkers to set off as soon as they disembark from their coaches.

STATISTICS - 40 mile walk - 191 entrants; 161 starters; 123 finishers; first walker home Ken Fancett in 6 hrs 45 mins; last walker Steve Piltz in 15 hrs 50 mins.

40 mile run – 10 entrants; 9 starters (one from CP 1); 7 finishers; first runners home Steve Bienkowski and Debbie Smit in 7 hrs 22 mins; last runners Angus Davidson and David Moreland in 7 hrs 50 mins.

20 mile walk – 75 starters and finishers; first walkers home identical twins, Ben and Jon Hall in 5 hrs 18 mins; last walkers Laura Swain and Alison Thorpe in 10 hrs 34 mins.

GLITCHES - Not many, though the worst one was the unscheduled early start by the 20 milers which meant they arrived in force at CP 6 before the marshals there had set up their checkpoint. There was also time wasted worrying over a missing walker who, apparently, went home without telling a marshal that he was retiring: but that was the walker's glitch, not ours!

CONGRATULATIONS to Pete Clegg and Carl Roe who have each completed 30 Ridgeway Walks. They each receive a suitably inscribed clock. In addition, 13 green badges were awarded for 2nd crossings, 2 red badges for 5th crossings and 2 black badges for 10th crossings.

A PRESENTATION of a special certificate and a set of coasters showing buildings associated with the Ridgeway Walk, the White Horse motif and a photo of their checkpoint has been made to Mike and Mary Newland to mark their service to the walk from 1962 to 2003. They were surprised and delighted. Mike said, "We didn't expect anything" which sums up the attitude of all marshals. They just turn up for the fun of it!

ALL LEAVE CANCELLED FOR 7th MAY 2005 - I knew that, in a year when two veteran marshals (Mike and Mary Newland) 'retired' and another stalwart, Richard Killick, moved away from Reading, finding replacements would be difficult. But it came as a further blow to find several marshals were on holiday on the 8th May. The line-up of volunteers was looking very threadbare by mid-March when it is usually complete.

After all my concerns about how to fill all the gaps, it is a wonder to me how, in the end, we turned out to be so well staffed on the day of the walk. We were helped by the fact that several group members rushed back a bit early from their holidays in France to help out. And walker Andy Mansfield gave hours of assistance directly after returning from the 40 mile walk at 17.59. Other volunteers seemed to come out of the woodwork and the low number of retirees needing transport made us appear on occasions to be over-staffed! We even had some welcome help with tea making at the finish from two members of St John Ambulance.

Walter Cullis, a veteran Ridgeway Walker, who was marshalling for the first time was astonished by the facilities provided at CP 6. He commented that he could see in the eyes of the walkers the will to continue draining away! However, the results prove the last point incorrect!

Where do all our marshals come from? Well, in addition to members of Reading Outdoor Group there has been substantial help from members of the Vanguard's Rambling Club (mainly from London) both in this year and in the previous six years. Several former Ridgeway Walkers are also volunteers. These include Tim Ardill, who did the walk about thirty years ago - he turns up every year to run CP 1 (7 miles); Mike Sandford, a veteran Ridgeway Walker, who has been associated with marshalling the walk and organising the Ridgeway 40 run since 1997; and Chris Hayward, a Ridgeway Walker who has volunteered for the past three years.

Several volunteers not only give their time but also supply other resources. Mike Sandford supplies the food at CP 4; for CP 6, Pam Deverill bakes ginger cake and flapjacks while Linda Wright supplies her bread pudding. Keith Rix and the Deverills provided the tents for CP 4 and CP 6 respectively and other marshals have used petrol or provided cups or other small items of food without charging Ridgeway Walk funds. Our thanks go to all of them.

We also thank St John Ambulance personnel and members of Raynet who provided medical and radio communication respectively and Nick Crivich and his staff at Streatley hostel who have bent over backwards to help make the Ridgeway Walk a successful event. This year, we moved CP 3 to The Shepherds Rest and our thanks go to Brenda and Steve, the landlady and landlord, who allowed us to use the car park and opened the toilets before the pub's usual opening time.

MARSHALS

Coach	Abigail and John Elrick, Carl Roe and Ken Royce and Dave Young
Start at Overton Hill	Ken Brooks, Ian Mitchell, and Alan Smith (Walk); Mike Sandford (Run)
CP1 Burderop Down	Tim Ardill, Ken Brooks and Ian Mitchell
CP2 Whitefield Hill	Angela and Brian Bellwood
CP3 Shepherds Rest	Walter Cullis, Veronica Hope, Ian Mitchell and Colin Saunders
CP4 Uffington Castle	Nick Lamb, Keith Rix, Mike Sandford and Lesley Secker
Ridgeway 20 start	Christine Cogger and Ron Cutler
CP5 Eastmanton Down	Chris Hayward and Jackie
CP6 Yew Down	Walter Cullis, Pam and Steve Deverill, Ian Mitchell, Colin Saunders and Linda Wright
CP7 Bury Down	Alyssa Rowlandson, Norman Willis, and Helen Walker (afternoon); Frances Passey, Tom Stagles and son Ben (early evening to close)
CP8 Compton Down	Sue Arnold and Peter Dziwior
CP9 Starveall Turn	Douglas Chester, Emma Haile and (from about 16.00) Nick Lamb
Finish	Ian Briggs, Vanessa Brown, Christine Cogger, Ron Cutler, Sarah Feneck, Alex Heap, Christine Lord, Andy Mansfield, Lesley Secker and Peter Smith
Certificates	Christine Cogger and Alan Smith
Fold up marshals	Ken Brooks (to 18.00), Alan Smith and (from 18.00) Stuart Walker
Roving Marshals	(1) Stuart Walker and (2) Alyssa Rowlandson and Helen Walker
Transport for retired walkers	Brian Bellwood, Chris Hayward, Veronica Hope and Stuart Walker
Photographer	Derek Smith (but light conditions were thought to be too bad to take many photos!)

LETTERS & EMAILS

I would like to say thanks to yourself and all the other volunteers who organised the 40 mile walk on Saturday. The hot food and drink at the CPs was very welcoming and so was the portaloos at CP 6. I entered the walk as a couple of my friends were doing it. I did not expect to finish the full 40 miles or even 30 miles. I was in a slight state of shock (& pain!) when we finished just after 10 pm, completely surprised that I could walk 40 miles in one go! I had a fantastic day.'

Louise Acreman

'I write to thank you for your efforts in organising and running the Ridgeway Walk. In spite of the wet conditions both overhead and underfoot, I enjoyed the walk. The checkpoint helpers were pleasant and supportive in spite of having to spend hours outside in the cold and wind and rain most of the day. Their efforts were appreciated. Please pass my gratitude to those involved in a successful event.'

Gerald Bateman

Please extend my thanks to everybody that worked to ensure the Ridgeway 2004 was a success. I enjoyed my annual 'fix' of hedgerows and fragrance of the blossoms sufficient to get me through to the next Ridgeway. You must have been chuffed by the good turnout. Well done!

Sue Clements

'Dear Alan and the fantastic team, Thank you all so very much for all of your hard work, pleasantness etc last Saturday on the Ridgeway. Considering the conditions both overhead and on the ground I think you all deserve a medal. All your dedication etc helped me so very much to complete the walk. Please pass on my regards to St John who do such a fantastic job and also to Nick and staff at the hostel.'

John Leather

'Thank you once again for arranging a really superb Ridgeway experience. They do get better from year to year and this was an absolute peach. The weather did not detract and greatly added to the challenge. The checkpoints were staffed by cheery people (Oh to be walking rather than standing around). The 28 mile Monument CP deserves a special mention for its bonhomie. Indeed, the welcome was so warm in that cosy tent that we had a job tearing ourselves away. Furthermore, they were so keen to fill all the seats of the getaway car that they mugged any walker who was faintly flirting with the notion of retirement (Mike [Cambray] being the unwitting victim from our group – we could not blame him for he was caught in a moment of weakness).

Conditions were greasy to say the least and I came a cropper on three occasions in spite of the walking pole. On the last of these, I stood in 12 inches of water totally soaking trainers and socks. As with previous walking in sodden weather, my feet were like a baby's bum on completion with not a hint of a blister – there must be some water-cooling effect at work here.

The Ridgeway Walk really is a great tradition and I am indebted to you and your loyal staff for keeping it going and taking it from strength to strength. It was great to see such a good entry. Thank you also for allowing us the luxury of the Blewbury pick up which adds to the nostalgia as well as the convenience. Next year will be the 30th anniversary of standing in that lay-by and watching out for the coach coming over the hill. A great event and one of the highlights of my year.'

Bob McGavin

'I think the walk could be described as "somewhat testing". I hope that everyone came through ok. Once again your arrangements were superb and so a big thank you to you and your team from Anita, Mick and myself. Michael Lane is 65, had never walked until 2 months ago, has done a few rambles and the Seven Dales Circular. So his time was a terrific achievement.'

John Mountain

'Just a quick message to congratulate you and your team for doing such a great job under adverse conditions on Saturday. I was amazed at how well organised everything was - a real tribute to you, I think.

My little group did the 40 miles - I am glad we started early (thanks again!) as three of us arrived at 7.30 (13.5 hours) but one did not arrive until nearer 10pm - 16 hours! The state of the surface of the Trail was a good advert for what we are campaigning to change - it really was a mess. I hope that a few of the walkers may decide to join us. (*i.e. the Friends of the Ridgeway*)!

My partner Susan also sends thanks for allowing her group from the MBG charity to do the first 20 miles to Uffington. They all made it. Collectively we think we have raised over £3000 for the charity.'

Ian Ritchie