

CHAIR'S REPORT

I am pleased to report that White Cliffs Group continues to thrive and is now back to full participation of activities that were restricted due to Covid.

Group Holidays are back with a wonderful trip to the Dolomites in May this year and three holidays planned for 2024.

Other reports from the various Committee Members covering their roles are detailed below and there is little more for me to say other than a heartfelt thank you to all our volunteers, Committee Members and everyone who contributes and takes part in the various activities we do as a group. From Vegetation Clearance, Footpath monitoring, organising Holidays through to Group Walks. It is these various activities that make White Cliffs so successful and enjoyable to be part of.

There is one small plea from me though. To continue to operate the way we do, and be so successful, we always need new people to volunteer to help fulfil roles, both on the Committee (where there are vacancies for Secretary and Web Editor), as Walk Leaders, Parish Footpath Observers, Local Footpath Officers and to join the Vegetation Clearance team. Although people may be apprehensive about volunteering for such roles, they can be very rewarding and having sufficient volunteers helps reduce the workload on others. So please, if you feel you can offer to volunteer in some ways do not hesitate to do so. One of the best ways to do so is email me at johnrpye@icloud.com and let me know which area you are interested in volunteering for. You will be made most welcome.

John Pye (Chair)

White Cliffs Ramblers

AGM 2023

Reports

TREASURER'S REPORT for 1st October 2022-30th September 2023					
MAIN WHITE CLIFFS RAMBLERS ACCOUNT					
Opening balance		£1690.32			
Income			Expenditure		
	Head office funding	£576.00		AGM 2022	£84.05
	Ramblers holidays	£80.00		1st Aid kits	£126.08
				New website	£373.15
				Meeting mileage	£180.00
				Clearance team	£449.32
				Walk leaders training	£55.00
	total	£656.00		total	£1267.60
Closing balance		£1078.72			
WHITE CLIFFS FESTIVAL ACCOUNT					
Opening balance		£3122.02			
Income			Expenditure		
	Donation	£10.98		new website	£460.00
Closing Balance		£2673.00			
WHITE CLIFFS SELF FUNDED					
Opening balance		£432.25			
Income			Expenditure		
	sale of calendars	£45.82		LP trophy	£47.98
	annual lunch	£799.00		bank charges	£0.30
				stile costs LP/ML	£213.63
				gift for Helena Trevelyan	£17.50
				Annual lunch	£799.00
Closing Balance		£198.66			

John Shale (Treasurer).

Secretary's Report

When my very short AGM report is read out to you all, I will be in Chiang Mai in Thailand!

I hope the AGM is going well this afternoon and that you are not too cold and also that I'm not wilting in the heat and humidity of the Far East.

After 6 years, I have decided to step down from my role as Secretary and pass the baton on to some new blood.

It has been a great privilege to be a member of this hard working and creative committee. I have worked with four Chairmen, including Tony who was acting Chair for a time, when Margaret sadly died.

I know that I'm resigning at a time when John, our current Chair, is managing the work of the committee in such a superb way. His implementation of the new website has made the work of the secretary far easier. Now the minutes and the agenda for our committee meetings are popped seamlessly onto the website!

May I wish the next Group Secretary the very best of British and I will support him or her in whatever way I can.

I'm continuing to lead walks and also to join in more Thursday Walks than I had done following Covid. In this way, I will still remain an active member of this truly wonderful group of walkers. Long may we continue to enjoy walking in this beautiful area of Kent and many thanks and good wishes to you all.

Helena Trevelyan (Secretary)

Membership Secretary's Report

Our current membership (as at October 2023) is 480 compared with 497 last year, so our net total is around 3.4% lower than in 2022. This compares with a fall in national Ramblers membership of around 6.1%, so we are still bucking what seems to be a trend. We remain, by a good margin, the largest and one of the most active Ramblers groups in Kent and Medway (only Bromley group in Greater London but attached to Kent Area is slightly larger.)

During the year from September 2022 to September 2023, we welcomed just over 50 new members, but a slightly greater number of members left. During the Covid pandemic, there seemed to be a surge in interest in walking as a permitted and accessible activity and there was a corresponding upturn in membership. As often seems to be the case, the largest number of leavers are made up of people who joined in the last two years, suggesting that there is a "gym membership" scenario, where people join with good intentions, but let their membership lapse after not making use of it as originally intended. After a year of high inflation, there is also a possible effect that some people may have been managing their outgoings and cancelling non-essential spending.

White Cliffs Ramblers

AGM 2023

Reports

It is encouraging that we seem to be performing slightly better than the national average, but we can never be complacent. New members are always welcome and new joiners often say they find us a particularly friendly group. This is where all members can play an important role when potential new members come along on walks by helping to make them welcome. I am certain, too, that our varied walks programme with opportunities for walks on more days, and the range of other activities we offer, such as volunteering, group holidays and social events, are also important factors in our group's continued success.

Around 12% of White Cliffs members have registered as volunteers compared with 11% of Kent members overall – but there is always an opportunity for more members to get involved in leading walks, joining the path clearance team, acting as Parish Footpath observers and or helping with Group administration. Just ask us at any time!

Andrew Swarbrick (Membership Secretary)

Walks Co-ordinator's Report

I officially took over the role on 13 November 2022 and produced my first walks programme in December 2022 for January to March 2023.

Walk leaders

At my first WCR committee meeting as Walks Co-ordinator I wanted to act on Anne and Tony's October 2022 report recognising the need to:

- ☐ encourage new walk leaders *and*
- ☐ provide support for existing walk leaders

After initial thoughts and discussion with the committee, we decided that it was important to hold a practical, hands-on session in planning a walk for the next walks programme open to any prospective walk leaders within the WCR.

As a result, the afternoon of Saturday 11 March was booked for our first **Walk Leaders' Forum**. It was a successful and enjoyable afternoon and we recruited another 6 walk leaders (Val P, Tony, Dale, Julie, Ufuk and Robert S) to the 2 (Ian and Kim) who had already offered walks for our January to March programme.

Our next Walk Leaders' Forum will take place on Saturday 9 March 2024 and be open to existing walk leaders and prospective walk leaders, with an emphasis on sharing of good practice and safety on group walks.

Leading a successful walk is quite an onerous task and without the time and commitment offered by our walk leaders we would not be able to produce the interesting, diverse, and increasingly lengthy walks programmes that we do. We now have a team of 31 active walk leaders. We continue to lead walks every Thursday and Sunday and have added several Tuesday walks and more recently some Saturday walks.

White Cliffs Ramblers

AGM 2023

Reports

More experienced walk leaders continue to support both new and existing walk leaders in several ways. I am proud to say we have never had to cancel a walk as a result of a walk leader being indisposed or extreme weather conditions. New first aid kits have been bought and issued accordingly as have hi-viz vests. We are now offering secateurs to those who require them.

As part of my role, I have asked walk leaders to provide a short feedback email at the end of each of their walks on:

- ☐ how their walk went *and*
- ☐ numbers attended

This helps to highlight successes as well as some occasional concerns that can be addressed to inform better practice in future. It is heartening to see very large turnouts now and again and generally good average numbers (slightly better than the national average).

Walking Week

It was not possible for the White Cliffs Walking Festival to take place this year, so we organised a Walking Week, which would be lower key, more manageable and concentrate more on walks being arranged at different times of the day, in less frequented or unusual locations and with an emphasis on socialising during and/or at the end of the walk in a pub/café/restaurant. It took place from 17 - 23 July. There were 11 walks led by 9 walk leaders. Numbers ranged from 5 – 19 and averaged 10 per walk.

Walks programmes

We returned to three monthly programmes this year and have offered 136 walks altogether ranging from 4 to 18 miles in length and from starting points as far apart as Chatham, Sissinghurst, West Hythe, the Isle of Harty and Thanet. Walk numbers have ranged from 4 to 36, with the highest average number interestingly in the January to March programme. The average numbers of walkers per walk up until 17 October has been 15.5.

Walks Manager

The new Ramblers website has been up and running since 1 June and along with it the new Walks Manager, 'the source for all walks'. I am now able to publish individual walks as they are submitted to me by walk leaders. These continue to be backed up by our own WCR walks programme which is available on our website too.

The future

In the coming years, I hope to continue to:

- ☐ build on our team of walk leaders *and*
- ☐ produce as diverse and varied walks programmes as possible.

Deborah Quow (Walks Co-ordinator)

Publicity Officer's Report

A quieter year than last year on the publicity front as there was no White Cliffs Walking Festival. Walking week was a low key affair although we did get a mention in KM Newspapers, The Guardian, The South East Walker and Visit Dover Deal and Sandwich

White Cliffs Ramblers

AGM 2023

Reports

website, all with a link to our White Cliffs Ramblers' website. KM Newspapers and the Guardian had lifted the details from the website which was our main advertising platform where you could find the walks. Walking week was also advertised on the Kent Area website.

We have had 4 articles in the South East Walker and another 2 will be included in the December issue.

Articles advertised our Walking Week and shared our experience of the Walk Leaders' Forum. Articles to come concern solar farms and their effects on footpaths, the other tells the story of the mammoth task it was to install the new kissing gates in memory of Margaret and Les.

The October issue of Dover Community-ad, which is online and a free magazine, included a piece in their October issue highlighting Ramblers' activities White Cliffs members can attend including walks, volunteering and enjoying holidays and social events.

In January the White Cliffs group were invited to take part in a podcast. "Hop on Board" hosted by Ed Byrne and sponsored by South Eastern Trains was designed to bring tourists, by train, to our beautiful coast. John Pye, Maura Pell and Ed Byrne did a good job of promoting the group and their work on path maintenance, the fabulous train connections we have and our path network.

Facebook has proved a good platform for us, membership to the page has risen from 331 to 437 in the last year. We have more people posting photos of our walks which is a good advert for the group.

We have explored both Instagram and Meet Up as a way of promoting the group. Meet Up is too expensive and is now charging for bookings made through the platform. Instagram at the moment does not work as it is not possible for all group members to post.

Lee Pickup (Publicity Officer)

Local Footpath Officers Coordinator's report

My personal role:

A somewhat tumultuous start to 2022/23, which saw the energetic Maura Pell recruit a number of new Local FP Officers (LFOs) locally before resigning in February. Since then I have been offering some assistance and providing some information to LFOs relatively locally, but no more than that. I am neither able nor prepared to resume my old role for the entire eastern half of Kent. Sadly there have been no face-to-face LFO meetings in east Kent since January, which I for one greatly miss, although we have met up for a Lenham countywide volunteer networking day.

Current LFO Position:

Tony Bristow has helpfully taken over some of the admin functions, but understandably this is not a role he wants to pursue long-term. As I see it, we still have parishes without LFO

White Cliffs Ramblers

AGM 2023

Reports

cover, in the Folkestone & Hythe area in particular. Either Tony or I would be happy to give anyone further information.

LFO work on path changes in the WC area:

On the face of it, this has been a very quiet year, but a lot is happening just beyond our borders in places like Staple and Goodnestone (where upgrades and new creations are being opposed), in Aylesham (affected by new building) and Bishopsbourne (where footpaths have been upgraded to bridleways).

For the WC area's 50 parishes, the figures for path change documentation are:

11 documents received covering 10 issues in 9 different parishes, so not at all onerous for any individual LFO.

The 10 issues this year break down very positively as

- claims made for new PROW – 3 (in Eastry, Woodnesborough and Elham)
- new PROW created - 1 (an odd case just east of Jubilee Way in Guston parish)
- standard diversions confirmed – 2 (in Capel and Elham – perfectly reasonable changes)
- standard diversion order made, not yet finalised – 1 (Alkham)
- path changes due to approved planning development – 1 (by Shepherdswell Village Hall)
- changes of status – 1 (the FP passing by Winkland Oaks in Sutton is now a bridleway)
- creation of new PROW refused – 1 (In Coldblow Woods between Walmer and Ripple Mill)
- extinguishments – zero

Local Planning Issues These seem to become more significant each year. Watched over by LFOs. In 2022/23 we have seen:

- Mongeham Airfield scrapped – as was the controversial Hythe seafront development
- Waldershare Deer Park proposed but later scrapped
- the hotel at Betteshanger Country Park rejected, but a new application submitted
- houses proposed on the footpath from Whitfield church to Archers Court Road
- the expansion of Sholden's housing rumbling on

KCC in difficulties

Although the PROW team at Brabourne is at last at full complement and the new recruits are proving effective, local government finances are in dire straits. Andy Hutchinson is apparently asking his team to spend the cash sooner rather than later on outside works – while they still have it. But at least there was a successful Cropping Campaign this summer, with special checks on paths considered at risk of obstruction. Also the clearance contract went as planned. But KCC are so grateful for the wonderful work done by the WC "Slashers".

White Cliffs Ramblers

AGM 2023

Reports

Do report path problems – online. The benefits of doing so:

You can all help by reporting any path problems you may encounter, essentially via the KCC fault reporting website. This will ensure that you receive automatic updates of any action taken.

In KCC's own words, it will enable them to

- programme and prioritise programmes of work
- target enforcement (e.g. for the Cropping Campaign)
- provide the information for their path clearance contractors (just under 10% of the network is cleared in this way)
- and identify jobs suitable for volunteers such as the "Slashers" and KCC's own Countryside Access Wardens. This really DOES happen every year. E.g. A path in Northbourne I have complained about was targeted this year.

Can I help? Despite everything I am still here, and will try to help if you think I can be of use.

Roger King – LFO Co-ordinator

Parish Footpath Observer (PFO) Co-ordinator's Report

This has been a very successful year for recruiting Ramblers to cover the parishes within our area. We have 53 parishes and as of today only 6 remain empty. If you would like to contribute to filling these posts please let me know:

Alkham, Paddlesworth, Postling, River, Tilmanston and Whitfield.

We held another meeting for PFO's on 24th March this year, as the feedback was very positive (for the content of the meeting rather than the venue) we have already set the date for our next meeting, which will be Friday 24th March 2024 at St Margaret's village hall. We hope this time to have two representatives from PROW Kent to join us. Any suggestions or ideas for the meeting would be most welcome.

Margaret Milsted-Williamson

White Cliffs Ramblers

AGM 2023

Reports

Vegetation Clearance Activities

Report on Clearance work 1/10/22 to 30/09/23
The path clearance team or the "Slashers" as they are better known, completed another busy year.
The team consists of four regulars, but potentially another 3 or 4 occasional volunteers, we could do with more if anyone is interested and has the time.
We continue to enjoy the support of Heather Waller at KCC in many ways.
Our annual lunch is 7th December in Martin Mill where apart from having an annual social event we have the opportunity to discuss any issues, which as a group we don't otherwise have.
The team has completed 230 man hours of clearance work this year, slightly less than last year, but, however the team I think operates much more efficiently now. The petrol brushcutters, combined battery hedgecutters, can clear dense vegetation efficiently. And the team are just better at it now.
KCC organised another days strimmer and brushcutter training day a couple of weeks ago, where David Gardner and myself were trained.
This year has seen several clearance requests come in from walk leaders, which is good. We have also had requests from Ramblers and Averil.
Whilst we have had a couple of requests from PFO's it would be good to get more.
The WCR has funded strimmers repairs/ servicing , and the purchase of some saws and rakes.
We are now using a very eco-friendly brushcutter fuel called "Aspen". Unfortunately eco friendly also means, comparatively expensive!!
I am aiming to do a quarterly report to publish on the website. A good example of our work was 13th July where we cleared a permissive path that is not registered on PROW but is used regularly with the support of the landowner at Snake Lane/ Cutthroat Lane near Hawkinge.
So in conclusion i would like thank the team, particularly John Tipping, Simon Townsend, Andrew Searle and David Gardner who give a lot of their time to the clearance, to the pre-clearance recce's etc
Without their efforts and enthusiasm we would be lost.

John Shale – Vegetation Clearance Co-ordinator

Web Editor Report

As many of you will know, that with Gavin Trevelyan stepping down in his role at the end of last year, it was decided to redesign the WCR website. One of the benefits of doing so was to make it easier to edit and update using the latest web tools.

The redesign was completed in early 2023 and the WCR website now includes the White Cliffs Walking Festival website, instead of having two separate ones.

Having a modern looking and up to date website is so valuable and promotes the group in many ways, not just to members but anyone with access to the internet.

On our website you can find lots of information about the group. Walks programmes, guides for Walkers and Walk Leaders and links to key areas of the Ramblers website that provides a lot of useful information. As well of course as News updates for items such as the monthly PROW updates by Roger King and other relevant news items as well as photos from recent walks. If you haven't seen it recently it is certainly worth taking a look.

John Pye (temporary Web Editor)

Social Secretary Report

I have been the group's Social Secretary for this year, commencing at the AGM last year. During that time we had an Annual Lunch at the Rising Sun in Stourmouth attended by 30 plus people. The lunch was well received and feedback was positive. Some of this included people requesting that we have a walk before the lunch. This is what we used to do years ago and I would be happy in conjunction with our Walks Secretary to have this reinstated. There would be a choice for those who wish to walk first, perhaps finishing no later than 12.30 with a meal served at 1pm. Last year there was not a great deal of notice, so for 2024, I have gone ahead and booked The Rising Sun again, for Sunday 3rd March. Nearer the time I would be pleased to know who wishes to attend and whether you intend to walk first.

In June we held a Skittles match, with an excellent buffet half way through the evening, at the Chance in Guston. It is now under new management and I would like to be able to offer this activity again next year, probably in June again if there is sufficient interest. Typically it's been a warm evening outdoors in the pub garden although we can't guarantee the weather.

Recently in September we held a pub quiz at the 5 Bells in Eastry. As usual, refreshments figured prominently as we hold half the quiz, have supper half way, then resume. There was a lot of laughter and jovial competition and people who don't normally attend it thought it was fun. If there is sufficient interest I would be happy to organize another quiz for next year, whether sooner or later.

If you have ideas about any particular activities you enjoy doing as a group, please make suggestions. I would be happy to stand for another year as Social Secretary unless anyone else would like to take it on.

Anne Hickey – Social Secretary