

## IVW Chairman's Report

Welcome to the 2020 Ivel Valley Walkers AGM through our Zoom Meeting account. This year IVW are having to hold the meeting online which the Ramblers Association have strongly recommended we do because of the pandemic. We feel this is the most responsible and safe thing to do under the current circumstances. As members you are invited to submit questions and comments to discuss at the AGM via the General Secretary by email or by post beforehand (2<sup>nd</sup> November). Once you've been given details of how to log into Zoom, you will be able to listen into the formal proceedings of the AGM and then join in the informal discussions when it occurs under 'Any Other Business'. I will raise member's questions without naming names at this point and open each one up for discussion to everyone online. The General Secretary will be taking the minutes and there are options in Zoom to make recordings, if Gillian thinks it is necessary. Hopefully, you will be available to join me and contribute to our online meeting on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> November at 19:30 from the comfort of your armchairs.

Unlike previous years, 2020 has been an extremely busy one for the Ivel Valley Committee. For our members, taking part in any form of group walk or social event has been severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, all our IVW walks and social activities had to be cancelled in April, May, June, completely disrupting the Spring & Summer programmes. Secondly, as lockdown eased any planned walks had to have restricted attendance and a booking system introduced with guidance from the Ramblers to keep them Covid safe through July, August, September. It meant we had to have more committee meetings (virtual) during this period to discuss how to restart walks safely. Thirdly, the committee had to cancel the entire Summer programme and introduce a new Rolling programme of walks on the website, with leaders controlling attendance and the committee setting rules for those attending them. No one could just turn up as before or look at a printed version of our walk programme, making it difficult for any member who has no computer or online access. The Programme Secretary, Alan Rowland and Webmaster, Pauline Seddon have worked tirelessly to organise a programme of walks for this situation. Also Social Secretary, Roger Mcleod had new ideas for walks as lockdown eased further and government incentive schemes emerged. His 'Eat Out to Help Out' and 'MAX6' walks for example. On behalf of the membership and myself, I would very much like to thank all Committee members for their contributions in restarting the walks programme and to the walk leaders for their skills in providing an amazing showcase of IVW walks this summer under difficult circumstances.

It is now remarkable to think back to the wonderful events we held after last year's AGM and into 2020, before there was any talk of a lockdown and any restrictions imposed upon us socialising. At the end of November, we held our biennial Barn Dance at Houghton Conquest Village Hall. A lot of food was brought along which meant everyone had to take to the dance floor and encouraged by the caller Joan and the Ivel Valley Band, we danced arm in arm, side by side all evening. A good evening of fun and we must thank Val Bailey for organising this event. What a surprising difference now to what we did then.

Also we marked the Christmas season with a large gathering of 90 at our Christmas Lunch at the Barns hotel, Bedford. The pre-dinner walk which attracted around 50 was led by David & Rosemary and had to be split in two, with one group walking to Cople in the opposite direction to the other. Our popular Christmas Carol Concert was introduced by Bernard and accompanied by a resourceful group of musicians led by Antony Copsey on violin. Our thanks to Mary and Bernard for organising the festivities, to David & Rosemary for leading both walks and to Antony and his band for keeping us in tune. The traditional

Mulled Wine Ramble for Sunday walkers was held in Shillington village hall in December. The walk on the day was led by Dave Broughton. Thank you to Dave and Tina German for organising it. All these wonderful events seem to be a distant memory considering what has gone on subsequently and unfortunately we cannot plan any more indoor events such as the Mulled Wine Ramble or Christmas Luncheon this year. However, I'm hoping that we might be able to provide walks with these titles in December 2020, although we won't go indoors to socialise, so keep an eye on the website for further announcements.

Unfortunately this years' planned social events came to a grinding halt in mid-march with the government announcing a countrywide lockdown. Pauline Seddon & I had already reced in February the IVW holiday to Ambleside and there was even a thought in our minds that the holiday in late April could go ahead. However we quickly learned that it wouldn't be and it had to be cancelled and then moved into 2021. Likewise, our planned coach trip to Telford and the city break to Bristol & Bath, both in June, had to be cancelled and members booking fee refunded. Similarly, other social events were affected too. The Skid Pan experience in April and Summer Barbeque in July had to be cancelled. However one event survived cancellation, kayaking on the Great Ouse, purely on the basis it was not organised by the Ramblers but by the Canoe Club. Restrictions had eased in July allowing the organisers to offer a round trip on the river, unlike our planned kayak trip to Great Barford with cream tea afterwards. Those that decided to attend, still had a good time on the river and we thank Roger McLeod for making the arrangements.

We were lucky in September to be able to organise and recce an earlier plan of a weekend holiday to the city of Wells, Somerset starting on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> October. Covid restrictions had lifted sufficiently for the committee and organisers, Tony Dolphin & I to be satisfied that the walks could be managed safely under Ramblers guidelines. However we weren't so lucky with the weather since it poured heavily with rain from storm Alex for much of the weekend. (Wettest day on record – enough rain falling to more than fill Loch Ness say the Met Office) Strangely, those on the walks were happy in the rain, even singing in it, mainly because there was a sense of togetherness in a group on holiday and nothing was going to dampen their spirits. Not even with wet feet, wet clothing and footpaths that had become flowing streams of water. We managed a Wells City walk to Dinder, a walking tour of Cheddar Gorge, even to the high point on the Mendips at Beacon Batch but were beaten back by the conditions getting to Wookey Hole. The only real view of where we were in the country was on Monday, up on Glastonbury Tor when there was a break in the clouds before it started to rain again on arrival at the carpark. Well, it's supposed to be a magical place and it was.

In addition to IVW events, we continue to support Ramblers Area initiatives in Training and Path Restoration through the year, as well as the Greensand Country Festival in May and the Bedfordshire Walking Festival in September. Unfortunately our contributions to them this year have been affected by the pandemic in slightly different ways. Both the festivals were cancelled by the organisers. Our plans for an 'End-to-End' walk of the Greensand Ridge across three weekends and a training course were completely shelved by lockdown. Our walk contributions to the Bedfordshire Walking Festival became 'Pop-Up' walks with limited numbers of walkers attending them as lockdown eased in September. However the festival website did offer the public a virtual walking Challenge of the Greensand Ridge and a virtual training course in the use of maps and apps. The training course was remarkably successful and I would like to thank Nick Markham, Andy Knight and Barry Ingram for organising the initial event and providing alternatives, as well as the walk leaders who contributed to the walk programmes. IVW will continue to support these initiatives next year.

Our webmaster, Pauline Seddon has worked to find ways to get the walks programme reformatted to make it easier to transfer onto our website and the Ramblers website. The IVW website has also had a makeover since last year which should make it easier to find relevant information. Since lockdown eased Pauline has worked endlessly to organise a Rolling programme of walks to replace our summer and autumn programmes. Early on they needed regular changes of information and frequent updates as guidance for walk leaders and walkers alike continually changed. The website became our “live” portal on what walks were available and what restrictions were present when members booked a walk, like maximum number on a walk. All this information couldn't be printed into a programme because the changes were frequent and start locations unknown. The only real method was an online programme and a weekly snapshot of it, distributed by email via the Membership Secretary, Ruth McNally. Indeed this is the current situation today with the autumn programme and will likely continue to affect the spring programme next year. I can't see the situation changing for quite some time unless there's a reliable way we could make a printed version of the walks programme worthwhile.

Therefore our IVW website has got to be the first place to get the latest walk information.

The RIPPLE team started early in February to clear a few lengthy footpaths around Peter's Green, south of Luton. These clearance tasks continued at regular fortnightly intervals until lockdown in March. As lockdown eased in June there was time for 6 members of RIPPLE to get a refresher training course in the use of power tools and renew their 3 year certificate of competence. Path maintenance was one of the first volunteer tasks the Ramblers allowed to restart after lockdown and since then has continued in earnest on almost a weekly basis until recently when it has settled back to a Tuesday as a fortnightly event. They are always looking for more volunteers and our thanks go to Barry Ingram for continuing to organise tasks with ROW officers in both Beds Borough and Central Beds Councils.

The lockdown period affected people's lifestyles and prompted many to take their exercise by walking, in some cases for the first time. This has highlighted deficiencies in the footpath network, including where routes cross busy roads. For example the A1 Biggleswade bypass became easier to cross in the spring and walkers took advantage by exploring more of the paths west of the town. In June, as traffic levels increased again, the Footpath Officer for Central Bedfordshire Council asked for our comments about the safety of these crossings. Several members responded and I look forward to reviewing their comments with him when he finds the time. This demonstrates how local council's do not have enough resources or staff to run their rights of way sections in a way that is appropriate given the amount of use that they get, leading to work having to be prioritised and long delays building up.

Central Bedfordshire Council is currently consulting on its Draft Physical Activity and Draft Leisure Facilities Strategies up to 2025. Whilst both recognise the importance of regular physical activity as a means of maintaining and improving both physical and mental health, they place great importance on the provision of leisure facilities in towns. We urge members to respond to consultations such as these by asking for more emphasis on and investment in walking, public rights of way and other off-road routes.

At the start of 2020, the Ramblers Association announced a plan to speed up progress with the 'Don't Lose Your Way' project. This is a scheme to identify “lost” rights of way that don't currently appear on the Definitive Map. Hundreds of Ramblers members compared old and current Ordnance Survey maps and identified thousands of possible ‘lost’ routes in just six weeks. The data is being reviewed and we look forward to finding out what paths have

been found in our area and what we should do next. Claims that they should appear as public routes must be lodged with the relevant highway authority (Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Council in our area) by 2026 or they will remain lost forever. I would like to thank our footpath officer, Derek Turner for keeping his ear to the ground and providing the above contribution in this report.

Looking nervously ahead into next year, we know that the pandemic will be an umbrella over any of our planned activities. Our holiday to Ambleside, moved from this year will be a concern. The recce is complete and members have deferred their accommodation, so the event is full and ready to go. But things won't be easy for the organisers, Pauline Seddon & I, who might have plenty of issues to address to keep the group Covid safe as guidance moves forward. The committee in future will still have to consider other cancelled trips and events from 2020, like the coach trip to Telford and any new events put forward. The fluctuation in pandemic restrictions makes long term planning quite difficult. However, the committee have agreed in principle to approve next year's long weekend to the Marlborough Downs from Friday 8th to Monday 11th October 2021, organised by Antony Copsey and Martin Whillis. Please keep an eye on the IVW website for further announcements about our plans for events and trips in 2021 – it is the first port of call. The committee still have to consider whether it is appropriate to produce a printed version of our popular programme of walks whilst the situation remains as it is. Flexible.

IVW membership has increased largely due to other Ramblers wanting to become affiliated members of our group. This is because we have produced a full and safe walks programme in response to our commitment to the Ramblers. The committee felt a duty to restart walks for our membership and we have tried hard to do that. We have no news from the Ramblers how the pandemic has affected their membership.

Lastly, I would like to express thanks to everyone on the Committee, especially over the last 6 months and to the backroom staff (the walk coordinators, the technicians and the auditor). The committee have worked exhaustively on your behalf to bring back a programme of walks after lockdown that exceeds the Ramblers expectation. And above all we must thank all our walk leaders who have excelled themselves in putting forward walks onto the rolling programme that are in every way as good as we had originally planned. Yes, the numbers allowed to attend them have been limited, in order to keep them safe but our leaders have continued to supply walks of interest and inventiveness throughout the late summer and into autumn. A fantastic effort by everyone concerned.

The committee will be losing one committee member at this AGM, Richard Brain. He is stepping down after many years in the role of Membership Secretary and oversaw the harrowing times of getting to grips with GDPR. The role was becoming ever more 24/7 which became difficult to time manage whilst working away from home. Can we thank Richard for his contributions on the committee and his continued support of IVW. Ruth McNally stepped in as the new Membership Secretary earlier in the year. We have a vibrant committee with plenty of good ideas and know that we have members out there who might be willing to step forward to fill vacant positions. The current vacant positions are Publicity Officer and Committee Member (replacing Richard). During these unprecedented times, the committee are meeting monthly, online using Zoom.

Please join me in giving all of the Committee members, a round of applause. Thank you.

Roy Carter.....Chairman, Ivel Valley Walkers