

Maldon and Dengie Ramblers
Minutes of the 24th AGM
Wednesday 8th November 2023 at 7:30 pm
Purleigh Bell, The Street, Purleigh

Committee Present:

Russell Griffiths	Chairman (outgoing)
Linda Dutaut	Secretary
Jackie Harrop	Treasurer
Graham Rayner	Membership/Communications
Alan Davey	Website

Also Present: Gerry Burl, Jean-Pierre Dutaut, Clare Griffiths, Andy Hudson, John R Little, Jim McWhirr, Wendy McWhirr, John Mennie, Alan Seager, Kerina Seager, Alison Taylor, David Tipping, Janet Tipping

1. Welcome by Chairman

Chairman Russell Griffiths welcomed members to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from Susan Hilton, Dennis Miller, Terry Wood, and David Dawson

3. Minutes of the AGM of 7th November 2022 (hard copies were made available)

The Minutes of the AGM of 7th November 2022 were unanimously approved.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising from the Minutes.

5. Officers' Annual Reports:

a) Chairman's Report – Russell Griffiths

Russell began by saying that this is his final report as Chairman after a very enjoyable 7 years in post and people have often talked to him about the post of Chairman and have assumed that the role is hard work. Russell said that he has genuinely never found it to be hard work and one of the key reasons is that he has always been lucky to have an excellent Committee, who throughout his time as Chairman have studiously and conscientiously completed their role leaving him with very little to do.

One further decision which made the task more straightforward was to focus on the Group rather than the wider environment. For the most part, keeping our social events ticking over and putting on our ambitious walks programme keeps the Group happy. Russell said that he used the word 'ambitious' advisedly. Having walked with a number of Ramblers Groups and spoken to members of other Groups, for a Group of our (small) size to put on a regular three walks a week plus Brekkie walks and specials like out of area, Pub walk, Moon walk is really quite amazing.

Looking to the future and with our walks programme in mind the key issue facing the Group is new leaders. We currently manage to run the full, scheduled programme (with the very rare exception). In common with other Ramblers Groups our search for new leaders is proving to be rather difficult. Our core purpose is to go walking and we need leaders. Russell thanked all of our leaders past and present - long may we continue and let's hope new faces appear – but he said the Group needs to move forward and, having never actively recruited, it is now perhaps the time to do so by whatever means.

Once again Russell thanked all the Committee Members who, he said, have done such a great job during his seven years as Chairman saying that whoever takes over as Chairman will be inheriting a superb team. Russell also thanked Dennis Miller (who was not present and is stepping down) for all of the work he has carried out as a Committee Member over a number of years.

Russell finished his report by saying that in his normal round off he would say "I believe Maldon and Dengie Ramblers are in a good state of health, but as ever I would like to hear any comments on improvements". However, a slightly different sign off this year - if you have any comments on improvements please tell someone else! Thank you.

b) Footpath Maintenance Group Report – Andy Hudson:

Starting in November 2022 the Group have lost just 2 weeks to the weather and 3 to public holidays. In their working weeks they have:

1. Installed 41 waymarkers, including 7 in one day. (17 more than last year).
2. Totally replaced or repaired 11 bridges. (3 more than last year).
3. Repaired or cleaned 8 flights of steps. (4 more than last year).
4. Dug one drainage ditch.
5. Cleared vegetation almost every week, including re-establishing paths and removing numerous trees.

The relationship with our PRoW Officer remains very good with the organising of work for our group well planned. We have also had 2 planning meetings where we review all the existing faults in our region and plan how, who, and when to tackle them.

In February and March, 3 groups walked the Coastal Path, tackling blizzards, to review the signage and any obstacles between Maldon and Salcott, with each group replacing signs where required and providing a report for the PRoW Officer to send onto Natural England and to log and action any faults found. Although the section from Maldon to Burnham is officially open there is still some work to complete once finance issues between ECC and Natural England are resolved. However, we did clear a new section around Stansgate and have been asked to review the entire length in the coming months. The approval of the Burnham to Wallasea Island section is progressing with 1 of the 5 sections fully approved and work has commenced to establishing the path south of the river Crouch.

Our membership has fallen to 17 from 18 members (although some are taking a sabbatical), and on average we are able to field a team of at least 6 and in some weeks, 9 volunteers. Eight members have recorded over 20 weeks of volunteering with 2 attending for over 40 weeks.

We have been assisted in our work by the hedge cutter attachment that Maldon and Dengie Ramblers purchased for us last year. Thank you.

Other Activities: Members of our group have also assisted Ramblers from South East Essex with Footpath Maintenance, especially in providing brushcutter support.

We have also; been working with the Local Access Forum about accessibility to the Coastal Path including a review walk with members and Natural England from Heybridge to Osea Island ramp and the provision of videos; and provided advice to Ramblers groups in Surrey on how we work with our council and the work we are allowed to do. This has led to an improvement in the tasks undertaken by Surrey Ramblers.

Next Year we aim to continue in much the same way but hopefully we will be able to set up a plan for future work 3 to 4 weeks in advance to enable better planning.

Parish Path Adopters: The PPA has continued with a new PPA year starting around May 2023. From May we have some Adopters leave us but replacements have been found and currently we have one vacancy as someone has just left.

When asking for Adopters for the New Year a few Adopters remembered to send in their reports and so we ended the year well with 19 of the 33 parishes fully complete.

This year I have revised the process slightly so that Adopters are encouraged to submit part-reports (even for non-urgent items) so that actions can be expedited. This has occurred on several occasions this year when from the Adopter reporting to me, getting it approved by the Footpath Officer, and scheduled and closed by the Footpath Maintenance Team has been less than a month, e.g. Bradwell 1, Asheldham 5 and 8 etc.

Regarding Fingerposts the Council install these, but we are working to January 2024 when there is a 2-week project to fix as many as possible, so hopefully those identified so far will be fixed then.

In 2023 our progress to date has been excellent, although we are slightly behind last year's overall progress, but ahead on throughput.

2023 Status		
Status	Parishes	Paths Reported On
Adopter	17	6
Coordinator Review	6	78
Awaiting PROW Officer	0	0
With PROW Officer for review	0	0
Complete (P)	6	52
Complete	4	79
Total	33	215

Finally, I should mention that the Council has been working on improving the definitive maps, and the information they provide. Whilst I understand that some platforms (Apple) are experiencing difficulties in general these are a vast improvement.

Andy thanked Russell who he noted had set up both the Footpath Maintenance and the PPA Groups with great success.

c) Footpath Secretary's Report – Terry Wood (*Terry was not present but had submitted his Report as follows*)

- Application No: PROW/MAL/22/00324: Permanent diversion of PROW 17 and PROW 19. Footpath 17, Parish of Heybridge and Footpath 19, Parish of Great Totham:- The application to divert these footpaths (along the Heybridge woods) was previously submitted. Comments on behalf of the Ramblers were posted. It is expected the application will be approved.
- Footpath 41, Parish of Maldon and footpath 14, in the Parish of Hazeleigh:- Application to divert these 2 footpaths (South Maldon development) was approved and new routes put in place. In August, after complaints that the footpath routes were unclear, I talked to the PROW officer. He has spoken to the developer to ask for additional waymarkers, and for vegetation to be cut back.
- Heybridge FP30, Langford FP3: footpath through the new housing development to the north of Maldon. There is a dog-leg in the footpath where Heybridge 30 becomes Langford 3. Coming from the Langford Road, at this point the official footpath crosses from the left-hand side to the right-hand side of the ditch. But the official Langford 3 footpath is overgrown here and so people have been staying on the left-hand side of the ditch and continuing along the line of Heybridge 30. At our request the PROW officer has agreed with the developer and the landowner that the official Langford 3 footpath will be reinstated. The developer has cut a gap in the new fence and the landowner has promised to clear the path and reroute some irrigation pipes.
- Application No: FULM/MAL/23/00807 PP-12258575: Solar Farm together with sub-station, ancillary buildings, structures, landscaping, emergency lighting and access. Location: Land South West of The Warren, Hackmans Lane, Purleigh Essex. The application has been submitted. Comments on behalf of the Ramblers were posted. It is expected the application will be approved.

- Application No: FUL/MAL/23/00762: Proposed change of use of agricultural field to playing field for Woodham Walter C of E Primary School. Location: Woodham Walter Church of England Primary School, The Street, Woodham Walter, Maldon. The application has been submitted. Comments on behalf of the Ramblers were posted. It is expected the application will be approved.
- Informal consultation - FP 17 Woodham Mortimer. Maldon District Council intends to divert Footpath 17 Woodham Mortimer. This is in relation to approved application FUL/MAL/21/01276 for the erection of a crematorium with arboretum and associated landscaping. Comments on behalf of the Ramblers were posted. We had no objections.
- Informal consultation - FP 18 Woodham Mortimer. Maldon District Council intends to divert Footpath 18 Woodham Mortimer. Instead of cutting diagonally through a vineyard, the footpath will now go round the edge of the field. Comments on behalf of the Ramblers were posted. We had no objections.

d) Secretary's Report – Linda Dutaut

Linda had nothing to report but offered a supply of Membership leaflets to those present to facilitate any membership enquiries.

e) Treasurer's Report – Jackie Harrop (See also Appendix I)

Hard copies of the audited accounts (Appendix 1) were made available at the meeting.

Unity account – Our greatest expenditure is on footpath maintenance the majority of which is reimbursed by Essex County Council. Since finalising the accounts for 2022- 2023 a further £166.16 has been reimbursed and there is £74.46 pending.

Actual balance at time of the AGM - £359.33

We did not receive our basic grant allocation from Ramblers central for 2023 as it was considered that our closing balance at year end 2021-22 was too high (£821). This balance has greatly diminished throughout the current year. We have applied for our basic grant for 2023-2024, estimated to be £234.38. On 31 October I received notification from the Area Treasurer that the Groups' funding request has been granted.

I would remind members they are able to claim legitimate expenditure on items such as stationery, administration and meetings. Invoices must be provided.

Social Fund (Barclays) – We again enjoyed our annual lunch at Le Bouchon, kindly arranged by Dennis Miller. The receipts and payments balanced out.

We are also organising a group holiday to the Isle of White for April 2024. Twenty-three people have booked. All deposits have been received and payment made. The balance of payment is due in the New Year.

The accounts have been audited by Brenda Neal and she is willing to continue next year. Jackie proposed the accounts be adopted and this was seconded by Jean-Pierre Dutaut.

There were questions about the cost of Footpath Maintenance. Jackie said that the bulk of these costs were reimbursed by the Council. The disparity was due to 2 refund payments arriving after the preparation of the audited accounts. In addition there had been the expenditure for the purchase of the hedge cutter at the end of last year which had been approved at the last AGM.

f) Membership/Communications – Graham Rayner

No report had been submitted in 2022 due to circumstances beyond Graham's control.

Now that the Area Membership Secretary has retired, information has not been forthcoming on a monthly basis to break down. This is our current membership position at the end of Oct 2023; we have 136 members in our group. Overall figures are difficult to break down, but this year we are down on members against last year by 6, yo-yoing during the year. Some have lapsed membership so might re-join. By the end of October 2023 the Ramblers have nationally 133,108 members, year to date.

Active + PP Members - Start of Month	133,108
New Members	15,658
Rejoiners	2,154
Transfers In	1,138
Leaver	-18,449
Transfers Out	-1,128
Net Growth	-627
Active + PP Members - End of Month	133,108

It would seem most of the email address issues have been brought up to date, many members contacting Head Office to resolve or update. We reach around 103 of our members through email, however some prefer to communicate by post.

We ask members to review the M&D web page for updates and contacts as this sometimes is the only information you can seek. It is constantly up dated and shows any location changes or timings.

g) Walks Programme Coordinator –Susan Hilton (*Susan was not present but had submitted her Report as follows*)

For the current Autumn programme, we still have no volunteers to lead the all-day walk on Tuesday 21st November. Jean-Pierre has reported that this will be the first time that we have not had a long walk scheduled due to no-one volunteering to lead. Sunday 26th November is also still vacant, likewise the TA walk on Tuesday 28th November. It has been a struggle to fill walks on the current programme and, as I'm sure members will have noticed, often dates are not filled until much closer to the 'vacant' date, and then it is usually one of our 'regular' leaders who volunteers to help in order that we can offer a walk.

The new Winter programme is no different – it is off to a very, very slow start, particularly for Sunday walks and Tuesday all-day walks. The programme will be published in mid-November, but at the time of writing (Monday 6th November), the following figures will give an indication of how sparse the new programme will look:

Sunday Walks: Only 5 dates have been taken out of a possible 17 dates. The dates taken are December 3rd, 10th, 17th, January 14th, and March 17th.

Tuesday All-day Walks: Only 4 dates have been taken out of a possible 17 dates, booked by only 2 volunteer leaders on: December 19th, January 30th, February 20th and March 5th.

Jean-Pierre has reported that the All-day Tuesday Programme has been living on borrowed time for a number of years as we have relied on volunteers from neighbouring groups to fill the gaps. We do see new leaders coming through, but we lose our regular ones at a faster rate.

Tuesday TA Walks: As ever, the TA programme is filling reasonably well. Ten dates have been taken on the new programme out of a possible 16 dates. It is, however, the usual volunteers who fill those dates. The vacant dates are January 2nd and 23rd, February 6th, 13th and 20th, and March 19th.

Jean-Pierre and I are of the firm opinion that we need to recruit new members and hopefully a percentage of those new members will show an interest in leading. At a previous Committee meeting it was suggested that we might look into and offer a map reading course, which would perhaps encourage more leaders to come forward, but this was never followed up. This was something that a previous Committee organised as a one-off several years ago (maybe 15 years or so ago), and it was successful in generating new leaders at the time. Perhaps we

could reconsider this idea as a starting point? For anyone thinking of leading a walk for the first time, there is always support available. We cannot walk without our leaders!

Regarding the number of walkers on each of our walks, Alison Taylor has submitted the following data.

1st October 2022 to 30th September 2023:

	Sunday	Tuesday All day	Wednesday	TA	Other	Total
Number of walkers	583	554	48	475	173	1833
Number of walks	48	44	5	46	20	163
Average	12	13	10	10	9	11
Change from Previous Year	Down 2	No change	Down 1	Down 2	Up 1	Down 1

Comparison over previous year 1st October 2021 to 30th October 2022:

	Sunday	Tuesday All day	Wednesday	TA	Other	Total
Number of walkers	695	612	44	578	170	2099
Average	14	13	11	12	8	12

I would like to thank all those who do lead for their contribution to the Walks Programme over the past year.

I would also like to thank J-P and Alan for their help in putting the programmes together, J-P and Terry for their footpath updates, and Alan for continuously updating the website.

Litter Picking – Jean-Pierre’s report is currently available on the website.

6. Election of Officers/Committee Members (See Appendix 2)

Both Chairman Russell Griffiths and Committee Member Dennis Miller have tendered their resignations. Nominations were requested for both post but none was forthcoming. The Committee will meet on 20th November and this will be discussed at that time. Dennis will continue with the organisation of the New Year Lunch.

7. Any Other Business

- Jim McWhirr proposed to arrange a Quiz for the Group in early 2024. This was met with enthusiasm.
- JR Little pointed out that our presence on FaceBook at the moment is confined to a Private Group and he asked the Committee to review this to improve the Groups online visibility. He noted that other Groups had followers in the hundreds whereas our Private Group has just 29 members.
- JR also noted that when carrying out a search on Google for ‘walks in Maldon’ (for example) Maldon and Dengie Ramblers were very far down the page and asked the Committee to look at search engine optimisation.
- JR asked why our Group walks are not advertised on the main Ramblers website. Allison Taylor said that this had been discussed in the past but it was not an easy process. JR offered to look at ways of importing the walks from our own website and will confer with Alan who will bring it to the Committee.
- Alan Seager said that the role of Vice Chairman appeared to have been dropped and Russell pointed out that we had never been able to recruit one.

The meeting ended at 8:50 pm with thanks to all attendees.

• Appendix 1 Audited Accounts