

# The Friends of The Ridgeway

## Summer Newsletter, July, 2016



### From The Chairman

Dear Friends,

In the Annual Review, I wrote that spring was coming, which I hoped was a harbinger of good summer weather to follow. Somehow I seem to have missed the good weather and more importantly I seem to have missed the good news. The Ridgeway is under threat again, this time from funding issues affecting the Ridgeway Partnership; it is clear that our role to protect the Ridgeway is very real.

It was a great pleasure for me to attend my first Annual General Meeting of the Friends of The Ridgeway, in the congenial surroundings of the Goring-on-Thames Village Hall, and to submit myself for election as your first new Chairman for many years. I much enjoyed meeting many of you, and getting more acquainted with the concerns and objectives of the Association. You will find a report on the Meeting later in this Newsletter.



Since becoming Chairman, I have attended a number of meetings of the new Ridgeway Partnership. I have been much encouraged by the way the Partnership, and the new Ridgeway Officer, Sarah Wright, have been getting to grips with the challenges and opportunities for more intensive promotion and development of the Ridgeway. However, I have also been made keenly aware of the threats to its public grant funding. We have had to fight hard to fend off plans to slash the current year's grant by half,

and although the grant has been secured for this year there is no assurance of funding beyond March 2017.

Our work was not done when we won some protection from the off-roaders, and it is becoming increasingly clear that the reduction of public support for National Trails has become an existential threat at least as grave. The transfer of management responsibility to the new public/private

Partnerships is clearly seen as an opportunity to reduce public funding in favour of new sources of revenue from commercial activities and donations. While this is not necessarily wrong in the long term, a sudden withdrawal of support can only cause great damage. This Association, as the only organisation focussed solely on The Ridgeway, needs to take the lead in mobilising public support. Our membership numbers have sadly declined in recent years, since the off-roader battles were won, and we need now to reverse that decline and to appeal to everyone that loves The Ridgeway to join us in fighting for its preservation. I am accordingly writing to ask you all to approach your friends and neighbours to become members. We will only be listened to if we can speak on behalf of a substantial membership. Please help us to do so.



We also aim to share our love of this ancient path and its tranquil environment, and the inspiration that it can give us. The Vale of White Horse Local Group provides one forum for this through its talks and activities, and we hope that new member groups will form elsewhere along similar lines. A recent walk around Sheepdrove Farm is an example of the excellent events organised by the group. A generous member donation now enables us also to spread awareness of the creative power of the Ridgeway

environment through the new Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize, which will be awarded for the first time at next year's AGM. A notice with details is enclosed with this mailing.

Anthony Burdall

### Ridgeway Friends Day, 2016

The lovely Oxfordshire village of Goring-on-Thames, facing its twin Streatley across the river in Berkshire, was the venue for this year's Ridgeway Friends Day and our Annual General Meeting. The villages are linked not only by the charming and historic bridges, the lock and weirs, but also by The Ridgeway, which here meets the Thames Path, its associated National Trail. Goring-on-Thames has a vibrant and active community life and its Village Hall is spacious, well-resourced and much used.

We were fortunate with the weather, with early rain clearing to a sunny morning. A walk along The Ridgeway path beside the Thames, led by Jim Gunter, set off at 1000 am, for a visit to Withymead Nature Reserve, run by The Anne Carpmael Charitable Trust. The walk and visit was also enjoyed by a small group of local residents. Withymead is famous for its rare Loddon lilies, and we were fortunate to find these in full bloom.

A tour of the Reserve, led by Robert, a Withymead Volunteer, enabled us to enjoy the lilies, the sand-martin "hotel" and the other plant and bird life in this peaceful reserve.





Lunch was enjoyed at a variety of locations around the village and the AGM was called to order at 2.00 pm. After the initial formalities, Anthony Burdall gave his report on behalf of the Committee, expressing thanks to Ian Ritchie for his long and successful service as Chairman, and hailing the launch of the new Ridgeway Partnership. Anthony noted the continuing need for the Association's work to protect The Ridgeway, and called for a campaign to strengthen the membership. He also launched the Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize, funded by a munificent donation by a member, which will award £1,000 in prizes for works inspired by The Ridgeway in painting, photography, sculpture and writing. Thanking the Committee, Anthony called for new volunteers to join the Committee.

Treasurer John Edgerton then presented his Report and the Annual Accounts for 2015. John noted that 2015 had been a financial success for the Association, with a generous bequest from a member, and a further donation to be used to support the Ridgeway Partnership. Funds in hand at year-end were at a very healthy level. However, without this income we would have barely covered our costs, with membership continuing to decline, and a large number of subscriptions in arrears. Elections were then held and Anthony was duly elected as our new Chairman. The President, Vice-Presidents and the other Trustees were re-elected



The AGM was followed by two talks and presentations, as follows:-

**a) The Ridgeway Partnership:**

The Ridgeway Officer, Sarah Wright, spoke about the Ridgeway Partnership, detailing the five themes adopted for its promotion and development plans for the different aspects of the Ridgeway's appeal, namely the Ancient, Natural, Sporting, Living and Creative Ridgeway. The Living Ridgeway is a first priority, being implemented by a strategic access project to improve the links between The Ridgeway and local communities, services and other attractions. The Chiltern Society is launching a survey of historic and ancient sites along the Chiltern sections of The Ridgeway, and plans are being developed for the other themes. Secretary Jeff Goddard spoke about the Creative Ridgeway theme that may be of particular interest for the Association, and the synergy with the new Swire Ridgeway Art Prize.

**b) Recent Discoveries at Stonehenge**

Trustee Jim Gunter spoke entertainingly about new finds and interpretations about the Neolithic and later occupations of the Stonehenge landscape. New discoveries support the proposition that sarsens may have been transported to Stonehenge from the Marlborough Downs along the Avon river valley, and precisely indicate the source of the bluestones.



Both talks were much appreciated by members; and the proceedings concluded with a cream tea kindly provided by Sally Barnes and Valerie Burdall and their helpers, and much enjoyed by all.

### The Ridgeway Partnership

The launch of the new Ridgeway National Trail Partnership, which has assumed responsibility for management of The Ridgeway from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016, and the background to its establishment, was reported in detail in the 2015 Annual Report and previous Newsletters. The Partnership, with a wide-ranging institutional membership representing most of the stakeholders in the Trail, has recruited a new Ridgeway Officer, and has had an active and promising first year of operation, as disclosed by its Report to Natural England for 2015/16. The Report focussed on the four key objectives set by Natural England (the 4 Es) and demonstrated the good progress made in consolidating the user **experience**, **enhancement** of quality standards, **engagement** of new partners and volunteers, and benefits for the local **economy** and investment. The adoption of the five Ridgeway themes - Ancient, Natural, Creative, Sporting and Living – for promotion and development has opened up new ideas and perspectives. The Partnership is working effectively, both at Partner and Board level, with active working groups for Delivery of the quality standards, and for Promotion and Development. Events have been held for volunteers and tourism providers, and the first Ridgeway Forum is under discussion. The administrative arrangements are settling down well, and a wealth of new initiatives are taking shape. Top priority is being given to a Strategic Links project under the Living Ridgeway theme, to improve access for communities along the route and the services they provide for users. A survey of Ridgeway heritage sites in the Chilterns has been launched by the Chiltern Society. Good links have been forged with event organisers, that will lead both to better facilities for participants, and to increased income for the Partnership. However, efforts to attract sponsorship and to diversify sources of income have not yet borne fruit, and the Partnership remains unduly dependent on public funding. The Partnership Board’s attention will necessarily be focussed on this issue in the months ahead.



### The Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize

The Committee is very grateful for the generous donation that has enabled it to set funds aside for an annual Arts Prize, offering a total of £1,000 pa for art works in the broad categories of painting, photography, sculpture and writing, that have been inspired by the Ridgeway. Further information is given in the flyer enclosed with this Newsletter, and the detailed rules will be available to those interested. It is planned that the awards will be announced at next year’s Ridgeway Friends Day, when there will be an exhibition of art works submitted.

