

**Minutes of East Cheshire Group
2020 Annual General Meeting
Saturday 14 November via Zoom at 3pm**

Present

Chair	Jane Gay
Treasurer	Colin Finlayson
Membership secretary	Sue Munslow
Social & events secretary	Maggie Swindells
Footpath Committee Chair	Dave Barraclough
Secretary	Kathryn Carty
Lost Ways Officer	Keith Anderson

Other members present

Denise Hutchinson
June and Ian Mabon
Melanie Davy
Sue Thersby
David Gylee
Brian and Helen Richardson
Janet Allan
Gillian Kay
John Galligan
Jane & Dave Collorick
Steve Hull
Ken Hobbs
Neil Collie
Audrey Sheen

1. **Apologies for absence.**
None.
2. **Minutes of AGM** held on Saturday 23 November 2019.
Approval of these minutes was proposed by June Mabon and seconded by Gillian Kay.
3. **Matters arising from minutes.**
None.
4. **Annual reports from officers.** These have all been made available to read on the group's website.

Chair report – Jane Gay

- Thanks were conveyed to the walk co-ordinators for getting the programme up and running which has now had to go back on hold. The co-ordinators for long are Steve Hull and Sue Thersby; medium Andy and Kathryn; Ralph now evening and Tony Walker the stroller walks; short Dave and Jane Collick and Jane Gay.
- Thanks were conveyed in the report to both Brian Richardson and Colin Park for their tremendous contribution to the group over the years. Thanks were also given to Ralph who had been the long walk co-ordinator for so many years (now swapped with Steve Hull) and to Helen Richardson who started the system, and continued it, of emailing details of mid week walks to fellow Ramblers after the paper programme ceased. This system has now died a natural death and everyone seems comfortable just checking the website.
- All the many other volunteers were also acknowledged.
- No questions were raised.

Treasurer's report – Colin Finlayson

- The first half of the year was pretty active with clearly little activity during the second half. During the first six months some £300 commission was generated by group members booking Ramblers Holidays.
- Thanks to Central Office the budget was turned around swiftly and a decent sum of money has been secured for footpath work.
- Questions. Dave Barraclough recalled that we had agreed, during the pandemic and expected fall in membership income, to accept half of what Central Office would normally give us (£1600 to £800). His question was whether any feedback had been given about the actual loss of membership and how many other groups had taken a similar hit. Colin hadn't received such feedback but would attempt to find it out. He did point out, however, that the group's agreement to the reduction of income was entirely voluntary. Had ECR needed the funds they would have been granted.
- No further questions.

Membership secretary's report – Sue Munslow

- Membership has remained stable overall. Last year numbers had fallen by 20 plus. Until September there had been only a few new members but 10 joined in September followed by a further 8 in October. Some were new to Ramblers, some new to the area, whilst some were from other nearby groups. They were very complimentary about our extensive choice of walks. The long walks were particularly mentioned so thanks to the walk leaders.
- A good number of enquiries have been made about the group's programme so hopefully there will be more new members once the programme gets up and running.
- No questions raised.

Social secretary – Maggie Swindells

- What initially looked like a great social calendar couldn't materialise due to the pandemic. All the events are in the bag for next year so that when the go-ahead is given, the programme will be up and running. Thanks were given to all those people who helped organise the social activities. Without this help they simply wouldn't take place.
- Just one amendment was made to the report, the correction of Melanie's surname to Davy. Apologies for that.
- No questions, but thanks to Maggie from Jane who as former social secretary could understand how frustrating it has been for Maggie, setting up lots of exciting events only to have plans dashed.

Footpath Chair – Dave Barraclough

- There is a brief report in the documents on the website. Essentially there were four key points.
- Footpath orders. Neil Collie does a meticulous job on this so thanks to him.
- The footpath inspection programme has not been massively affected by Covid and 100% coverage of 1298 paths in our parishes was achieved with thanks to the footpath inspectors, to Tony Battilana for

organising the inspections and to Roger Fielding for a database which is working increasingly smoothly and provides very useful reports.

- Liaison with the Rights of Way department, the enforcement officers, has been much increased. One new enforcement officer is very proactive and is using the database report within weeks of it being completed and is commenting back to footpath inspectors. This is a new and pleasing development which is making use of current information. The head of PROW (Public Rights of Way) has been made aware of developments and is very pleased with the improved amount of liaison and ensuing benefits.
- There has also been involvement with other Ramblers groups in Cheshire and Central Office which is fairly normal.
- Since the report was written there has been much national publicity about Lost Ways which Colin Park had worked so hard on and with which Keith Anderson is now involved. The recent national publicity is called "Don't Lose Your Way" and Ramblers are asking for donations. The recent publicity claims to have discovered some 49,000 miles of lost ways across England and Wales (there are currently some 140,000 miles of footpaths). They are therefore claiming over a third of additional paths. Dave is concerned that the full cost of claiming these paths isn't being considered. A procedure to make a claim seems cost free in that the application isn't paid for but every claim has hidden costs of approximately £5,000 for the Rights of Way dept to administer. In our area this could wipe out their budget for ten years which would result in no maintenance budget. The other hidden cost arises from an increase in public enquiries. Two recent applications were turned down at the Inspector's hearing. One went to appeal and one onto the High Court costing somewhere between £10,000 and £20,000. Where is this money coming from? Is it from the Don't Lose Your Way project? He wants to pursue these issues. Additionally such claims are being made without consulting the East Cheshire Committee so we have no say in whether the paths are considered to be worthwhile. Dave would welcome the views of others on this as to whether it is a good thing for him to take this line, or whether we should leave Central Office to pursue the claims.
- **Questions**

Ian Mabon said the situation was created by the law which had put a time limit on making applications for new paths. If the time limit was

removed then this would immediately take off the pressure to submit applications. Dave said there was discussion to amend this cut off date to put it back because of the foreseen amount of work and because of Covid. He clarified that an application only had to be filed before the cut off date.

Brian Richardson asked how such claims were rationalised as some paths are not going to be relevant at all. Dave explained that the exercise was done at Central Office without any involvement with individual groups. East Cheshire was in the fortunate position in that Cheshire was chosen for a pilot scheme to look at the potential of lost paths which had involved Colin Park. The scheme had found lots of paths and the Cheshire Ramblers groups had looked at these, rationalised them and reduced the numbers to feasible claims. The national exercise hasn't done this. The emphasis appears to be on maximising publicity by emphasising the lost miles which Dave felt was misguided.

Keith Anderson said he has been looking at Colin Park's work but said he didn't have any of Colin's expertise. Colin Park's work had reduced the possible number of claims to 19 which seems a more manageable number but still represents a significant cost. It has been difficult to make any progress during lockdown as it hasn't been possible to sit down with people who have expertise. There really needs to be a small committee so that the work can be shared around and until this happens, it can't move forward. A reference book on lost ways was referred to and Keith thought it may be necessary to buy another copy. Dave had the original book. Neil Collie had his own copy. One had been bought for Colin Park which he may well still have. June Mabon held up her copy.

The authors were apparently from the British Horse Society which wants lots of existing footpaths to be upgraded to bridleways, which clearly is not to Ramblers' advantage. A lot of the seminars on lost ways were organised by the British Horse Society which had been the driving force and Ramblers have tacked onto these efforts.

Gillian Kay had a question. Had Dave spoken to Head Office about the project's enormous cost? He had done so during 2016 during a seminar at Crewe organised by footpath secretaries of all Cheshire groups. The project manager was invited to the seminar and was urged to pare down the number of claims to reflect usefulness and cost. Since that time there had been some contact with the project members but it would seem that the project manager considers

essential maximum publicity which a greater number of miles and paths helps to generate. The Cheshire groups of footpath secretaries have not yet made sufficient noise to the other parts of Head Office, the treasurer and the trustees. It is inevitable that claims to contentious paths are going to create more legal cases as landowners are going to issue more objections. East Cheshire shouldn't be financing related legal costs. Lottery funds have been raised and are available and the project has had money from Ramblers Holidays so the project should be self financing. Central Office funds, to which we contribute, shouldn't be used for this purpose. We ought to take the approach that if we want to support contentious paths then any costs should be ringfenced from within that project preferably or perhaps the area from which the application is made. He believes, however, that the recent enquiries were probably funded by central funds. This so far could equate with one full year's subscriptions from ECR members.

Dave was going to attend a Zoom meeting at which this will be discussed. Jane clarified that this referred to a Zoom meeting following the motions from the National Conference. This is to be an informal meeting where motions can be discussed which wasn't previously possible at the National AGM.

Gillian also wanted to know what footpath initiatives were referred to in the accounts. Colin explained that there was a sum of £6000 from which £5000 was already earmarked for general maintenance equipment such as strimmers, and the trial of new waymarkers (with PROW's involvement), and recyclable plastic posts in an attempt to reduce long term maintenance costs.

Dave clarified that Brian Richardson's team had done quite substantial heavy maintenance work using heavy equipment. They are now looking at enabling maintenance using lighter weight equipment to repair stiles. PROW are going to consider the use of adhesive waymarks as these can be put on trees (ones with nails cannot be used on trees) and on metal. The other trial is to change the holes on waymarks from three to four then plastic cable ties may be used. Neil Collie had also looked at using plastic rather than wooden posts. Wood has a life span of ten to twenty years. He had previously been considering plastic stiles but now felt kissing gates were better. Plastic posts are very durable but we need them testing as are unsure of any disadvantages. Stockport council have used them for a while and there is a Peak and Northern one in Adlington in a boggy area which was put in some 15 years ago and is as good as new.

Gillian wondered whether plastic posts need adhesive markers and whether these adhesive markers could be pulled off. Neil Collie explained that plastic posts can be sawn and drilled and screwed and nailed but he doesn't know how easy this is.

Brian Richardson pointed out an advantage of plastic posts is that they are much lighter than wood. He would though like the committee to consider where to put waymarks by kissing gates. If the waymarks had four holes then they could be attached with plastic ties to the mesh on the gates rather than a finger post having to be erected so that a waymark sign could be nailed into the post.

Dave B agrees that PROW needs to experiment with these simple solutions. At present finger posts are being having to be installed close by kissing gates, increasing costs so this clearly needs addressing.

Publicity report – Colin Park

- Jane thanked Colin for his report.

5. Election of officers

The committee officers standing for re-election had been listed in the agenda and Jane read out the list. Ian Mabon proposed their re-election and this was seconded by Michael Murphy.

New officers needed

The Chair praised the brilliant work of the footpath committee but emphasised the need for additional volunteers.

She then went on to stress the need for new committee members. At least one is needed. They would attend about four meetings a year and then it would be hoped they would want to take on a specific role.

- i) A successor is needed for the role of secretary. Kathryn will continue after her move via Zoom until someone is appointed.
- ii) Colin Park's former role as publicity officer needs filling.
- iii) A projects and maintenance co-ordinator to succeed Brian Richardson is urgently needed. Brian is going to draw up a job description and locate relevant articles of work done to put on the website so that people can see what is involved and hopefully be interested.

Paul Higinbotham has offered to take over Kathryn's role as medium weekend walks co-ordinator.

Attendees today were encouraged to ask people (Keith suggested newer and younger members) when on walks if they were prepared to fill the vacant roles. Jane felt that perhaps we should first encourage new members to lead walks.

6. Motions received

None

7. Appointment of independent examiner

The re-appointment of the independent examiner, Ken Hobbs, was proposed by Keith Anderson and seconded by Melanie Davy.

8. Any other business

- Maggie Swindells wished to give a vote of thanks on behalf of the group to the Chair for steering the group through such rough waters this year with both calmness and common sense. Jane had done a tremendous amount of work.
- David Gylie had a question about mid week medium walks. Will they be on the programme just one day a week, as now on a Thursday, or on two days? One day was dropped due to a shortage of leaders and then Thursday was chosen as it enabled walkers to go out on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Jane's response was that this question had been discussed with Andy who would like to return to two days but this all depends on having sufficient leaders when things return to normal. Andy may initially try and fill Thursdays and then fill up the second day. Dave B thought we should work towards twice a week. If walk numbers are getting to about 12 then this becomes less enjoyable. He understands the problem of getting leaders to run two a week.
- Jane will email co-ordinators as we ought to look at the next stage when we come out of lockdown. She personally doesn't want to draw up a six month programme. She will draw one up for three. But if co-ordinators wish to draw up programmes of different lengths then this is entirely up to them. At present she is just keen to get some programme up and running.

- Melanie wondered whether the system of walk bookings would continue if people want to. She understood that some walk leaders thought that it was beneficial if the walk started a distance away to know that others were going to join the walk. Jane said it would be up to walk leaders to adopt whatever system they preferred.
- Jane Collorick had two issues she wished to air. For her the booking system's main purpose was to provide contact details to save taking a walk register at the start of the walk. This had worked pretty well but she imagines this will not need to continue. Not having a booking system takes the pressure off people booked on feeling committed if the weather is poor. The programme had always been previously done on a 6 month basis. There is currently a problem of many former walk leaders not wishing to lead for understandable reasons and this puts pressure on leaders prepared to lead. Should the new programme be started now or left for a while and for how long a period?
- Dave B thought a programme could be drawn up to run from January and if the restart was delayed then a list of walk leaders would have been prepared and different dates could simply be given to them. Jane Collorick thought this unlikely to work because of leaders' other commitments.
- Ian Mabon pointed out that there had always been a six month programme because traditionally a six month programme had always been printed and distributed. Nowadays there was no need to have a six month programme since people just checked the website for walks.
- Sue Thersby said she was heavily dependant on a small group of people and is doing it on a month to month basis. You have to respect it if people do not wish to lead. She would prefer to continue on a month to month basis. She also has liked the booking system as she knew how many would be joining her.
- Any walk programme of whatever length should go to Roger to put on the website.
- Maggie Swindells likes to get names before a walk to put a face to names, useful with large groups. She prefers committing to lead a walk well ahead of the date and then working around that so ideally prefers a longer schedule. Jane suggested, in the absence of a long programme, she could email the co-ordinator with the dates she would like to lead.

- John Galligan. In October when he led a walk he decided not to require booking. He had been dissatisfied with the system as walks could be marked on the website as “fully booked” and then some of those booked on wouldn’t turn up for the walk thereby denying someone else the place. He was going to suggest in future booking in advance but not making it a requirement.
- Melanie pointed out that walks were full because numbers were limited to 10 instead of 30. If the limit was set higher they wouldn’t become full.
- Sue Thersby pointed out that fewer long walkers would offer to lead walks if this were the case and she had to work from a small pool of people as it was.
- Dave Barraclough saw the benefit of a booking system of having a register of names but thought leaders should be discouraged from fixing a limit (other than the specified 30).
- Jane Gay expressed the view that some people are only comfortable with low numbers but there could perhaps be more flexibility, maybe increase the limit a little, to avoid people being turned away.
- In summary Jane said that co-ordinators could choose what length of programme they wished to draw up as everything is so fluid. Additionally it is entirely up to walk leaders as to whether they adopt a formal booking system and whether they choose to limit numbers. The important thing is to get a programme up and running when allowed to.

The meeting closed after about 1 hour 20 minutes and the Chair thanked all for attending.