



Chairman's Report (Richard Fletcher)

A year ago we were honoured by the attendance of Ros Maloney, the newly appointed Rambler's CEO, at our Regional AGM. We were also treated to an excellent talk on Northern Saint's Trails given by Craig Wilson from Visit Durham. I'd like to record my grateful thanks to Derwentside Group for hosting such a successful event.

Although cases of Covid are still being reported, restrictions have been completely lifted. Now we are free to walk normally as before. However, I'm sure you will agree walking this year has been compromised by so much rain. My group has had walks cancelled and rerouted to avoid deep mud, floods and landslips. Recently I lead a 10.7 mile paddle along part of Dere Street and the Deerness Railway. Singing in the Rain! So much fun!

In the early morning of 28th September 2023 we lost a tree - such a devastating event its loss was reported around the World.

During 2023 the Keelman's Way along the south side of the Tyne between Wylam and Clara Vale was reopened. Coastal Access has been officially completed (see Access Officer's report below). The Coastal path has been included on OS maps with a purple shaded border. Hopefully we will have a chance to celebrate the conclusion of such an amazing project later this year. Tyne and Wear Heritage Way continues to attract many walkers. The guide book has sold out and hopefully it will be reprinted this year. The two issues reported last year continue to be problematic; the Duke of Northumberland refusing our use of a short length along an old waggon way instead of the dangerous Backworth Road and South Shields Council not reinstating access to a section of Coastal access and TWHW as previously accepted.

General Council on April 1st was a short one day affair held as before at the NEC Birmingham. The feeling of many delegates was that it was too short. Not enough time was available for prospective Trustee candidates to speak; not enough time to discuss amongst ourselves or debate any issues. Put up. Shut up. Don't ask Questions. Motions seemed to have been chosen for their triviality or irrelevance. No mention of insurance, risk assessments or replacement policies. In essence this meeting could only have been sufficient to comply with our charitable status or constitution.

On Saturday 25th November, Wendy Maxted, our Northumbria Region Secretary, and I attended the Extraordinary General Meeting held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Manchester. This was also a one-day event to present and discuss a Refreshed Strategic Plan for the next decade. It was well attended by delegates from the Rambler's regions including Scotland and Wales. I wasn't optimistic, cynical even. After all, what was so urgent that couldn't wait for the next General Council a few months away? The explanatory papers, sent beforehand, were impenetrable management speak. Hard to

read; eyes just glazed over. Whilst the urgency issue was never fully explained the sense of the plan started to become clear.

Ross Maloney began by telling us that members' subscriptions accounted for a little over 50% of Ramblers funding. As an organisation we were very dependent on money from other sources that recognised the value and principles of the Ramblers as a charitable organisation. Increasingly to achieve funding we have to satisfy various criteria to justify their donations. To this end, Ramblers have to ensure they comply. Tick their boxes.

So, what happened next? Rebecca Dawson, chair of the Board of Trustees, started by telling us about the completion of the Coastal Access to England and Wales, how many lost paths had been found, how many gates replacing stiles, all good, positive stuff, all attributable to the efforts of Ramblers. She told us about the degree of discussion and consultation that had gone on prior to this Extraordinary General meeting to develop a Refreshed Strategic Plan. There was then a presentation supported by a few short videos to introduce the four ambitions, or 'outcomes', on which the plan was based.

I'm still sceptical at this stage as to how these were to be achieved. There were mutterings around the room about why we should bother about unfit urban dwellers, illegal immigrants and those with mental issues. After all they weren't members, nor were they likely to become members. Facilitating walking for those with physical disabilities was entirely different and more to do with how to provide care, leaders' training and how to manage. Questions were forming around the room. Are we guilty of being selfish? elitist? privileged? lucky? ignorant? careless?

We were told the average age of Ramblers was 52. In recent years the age had risen. If we don't attract more younger members we will become extinct. We need to continue to be relevant. Not just to potential members but to the media and more especially to other sources of funding. Within the Strategic Plan are four 'Outcomes' to be achieved over the next ten years. These were identified as:

1. Improved provision, quality and information on access, paths and rights of way
2. Improved confidence and knowledge to walk outdoors.
3. Improved participation of communities that have the least access and barriers to the outdoors.
4. Improved support for the Ramblers charitable cause. The impact of these 'Outcomes' is to be measured over the first year.

There was no consideration given to global warming, sustainability or who and how these 'Outcomes' were going to be achieved. Budget and cost? Not a clue. We were told the *Pathwatch* app had been scrapped.

However, obscured in the draft plan were the positive ambitions which were:

1. To continue to be attractive to other organisations and authorities to secure funding.
2. To be attractive to minority groups.
3. To be relevant as the go-to walking organisation.
4. To ensure governments continue to support, manage and fund all Rights of Way.

It would have served no purpose to nitpick and negatively criticise when actually we were in agreement with the substance of the Plan. It was accepted by the Trustees that the Strategic Plan would be redrafted in plain English for general distribution amongst the membership.

On behalf of Northumbria Region Wendy and I voted in favour.

The Future - as before....we'll walk. There'll be wonky stiles and fences and muddy ruts left by off road vehicles, there'll be things we don't like. I hope though, we'll find much, much more to like.

Annual Accounts 2023 (Steve Edwards)

Income and Expenditure Account Year Ended 30th September 2023			
Income		<u>2022/23</u>	<u>2021/22</u>
	Central Office Allocation	1200.00	1200.00
	Training (Donations)	-	-
	Publication Sales	145.34	595.44
	Total Income for Year	1345.34	1795.44
Expenditure			
	Group Allocations	2371.01	1235.98
	Walks Programmes	-	-
	Walks Leader Training	-	-
	Practical Work	-	-
	Publicity	-	111.75
	Meetings	81.95	90.00
	Administration	40.80	-
	Publication Costs	37.67	65.28
	Total Expenditure for Year	2531.43	1503.01
	Surplus/(Deficit) for Year	(1186.09)	292.43
Balance Sheet			
	Opening Balance	4802.99	4510.56
	Closing Balance	3616.90	4802.99

Independent Examiner's Statement

Having carried out procedures in accordance with Area and Group Independent Examination Guidelines, I consider the Northumbria Area accounts to have been properly prepared and give a true and fair view of the Area finances for the year ended September 30th, 2023.

Signed

Gary Kennedy
Independent Examiner.

Date 17/11/23

Area Footpath Secretary (Neil Allender)

It's been a quiet year for footpaths. While Ramblers (or at least Central Office) has been busy introducing a new website, arguing about risk assessments, suggesting that new walk leaders should have compulsory training, and now seeks to extend "diversity" for walking, little if anything has been done to improve the footpath network. We would all like to have more members from all sections of society. We would all welcome a website which works and is easy to use. Walk leaders should be competent. However, one of the core aims of Ramblers is the protection of the footpath network, and any new members we recruit will not thank us if there are fewer and fewer usable footpaths, and we still cannot walk in most parts of the country. I appreciate that Central Office is trying to find extra funding, and currently fashionable "aims" have to be met, but it will all be for nothing if we forget to protect our paths.

Turning to specific footpath matters, Ramblers has announced that Pathwatch has been brought to an end. For most local Ramblers this will not be a blow-it was little used, and, in my opinion, not taken seriously by the local authorities receiving the reports from Central Office. The system was not well publicised by Ramblers.

However, in an age when most Ramblers have a smartphone, I would like to see a better problem reporting system introduced - local authorities have websites which can be used to report footpath problems, but, I would argue, we are more likely to see remedial action if complaints were also submitted by a national organisation. It would also be good if Central Office used some of its staff follow up any reports! This would not replace individual members or Groups making reports.

The Don't Lose Your Way campaign has seen some renewed impetus in the Area. We now have a DLYW co-ordinator for "Northumberland" - for some reason, Central Office prefers local authority areas to their own "Areas"!

Volunteers to do DLYW work are being sought to do research work and to make applications to get "missing" footpaths onto the Definitive Map. As you all probably know, it was hoped that the 2026 deadline would be abolished completely, but the Government had a change of mind, probably as a result of lobbying by landowners, and the deadline has been moved to 2031. Paths that have not been made the subject of an application by 2031 will be lost forever.

If you would like to get involved with DLYW work, please see the national website or (if you are in Northumberland) contact the co-ordinator, Andrew Palmer. I can put you in touch with him if you don't have contact information.

There has been increased publicity about "right to roam" in England, with a number of organised trespasses having taken place during the year. Comparisons are made with the situation in Scotland. In principle, of course, all Ramblers would welcome the right to walk in more places than we can do now, although an extension of Access Land, and making it easier to get to Access Land, might be a quicker and easier alternative. Access Land should have been reviewed at least twice since it was introduced by the CROW Act, more than 20 years ago, but as with most footpath matters, little or nothing has been done!

The problem I have with a “right to roam” is that local authorities might use it as an excuse to abandon the maintenance of footpaths, and save some money. We would have a theoretical right to walk anywhere, but in practice, footpaths would be left to deteriorate, and, no doubt, we would see more barbed wire everywhere - see Scotland!

Finally, there is footpath maintenance (or the lack of it). Every year I suggest that groups could set up small working groups to monitor and help to maintain footpaths. Every year I report that only Tyneside and Hexham Groups are doing this-and again I thank those involved for their hard work. I know Ramblers are busy people, but I am not asking that work should be done every week. Do something even if it is once every 3 months! A Group walk can become a foot path maintenance walk-take secateurs, record problems, fix way marks and so on. Training can be given.

I started this report complaining about Central Office’s apparent neglect of the footpath network. Surely, we, as individual Ramblers, should be doing something to improve our paths?

Access Officer (Nuala Wright)

COAST ACCESS

The last stretch of the King Charles III England Coast Path in Northumberland opened in August 2023. The new stretch connects Bamburgh with the Scottish Border, so we now have a continuous path, together with spreading room on the cliffs and adjoining land from Bridlington in Yorkshire, to Scotland.

Whilst we welcome this new addition to the National Trail being developed around England, there are sections that are not totally satisfactory for walkers, including sections on roads, and those that have been obstructed or currently affected by erosion. We hope that this route and associated access land will continue to be improved for public use.

There are a number of sections that have been approved in whole but not yet open, as well as a few sections where proposals have been published but not yet approved. There are also a couple of sections where proposals are still to be published. It is hoped that the entire National Trail will be open in 2024.

ACCESS TO OPEN COUNTRY

There have been a few consultations concerning changes to Access, mainly connected to forestry operations. We also have a continuing number of closures to both access land and rights of way, resulting from damage by Storm Arwen, which are taking much longer to reopen than we had hoped. Hopefully this winter’s storms will not add to our problems of access.

Alnwick Group (Ian Lord)

Membership status – Currently 84, a net increase of six over the year so stable. 28 new members and 22 left.

Variety of walks offered - Walks are arranged on the 1st, 3rd and 5th Sundays of each month.

The routes offered vary from the Cheviot Hills to the coast of mid Northumberland, from the College Valley to the area around Rothbury, from leisurely to strenuous and from 5 to 10 miles in length. Average attendance is about 8.

Number of leaders – 16 formally recorded on Assemble but some are inactive and some joint leaders so effectively 8. This is very much a limiting factor.

Highlight of the year – Some walks in new areas to the group and some new members joining walks.

Lowligh of the year – Recent cancellation of two walks due to the very bad weather and ground conditions, reduced numbers attending walks and the continuing struggle to obtain walk leaders.

Berwick upon Tweed Group (Josie McChrystal)

Membership: 71 - steady

We have had a full programme of walks. However, bad weather this year has caused too many of them to be either cancelled or curtailed.

Berwick was one of the towns chosen to partner the YHA in a walk for the public. Only two members of the public attended but they said they enjoyed it.

The income generated by our walks books paid for First Aid training and a course in Leadership and Navigation for 10 of our walks leaders

We could do with more leaders, some people are leading two or more walks every six months.

Derwentside Group (Vaughan Davies)

Membership – 57. This is a reduction of 5 since last year.

Walks – unfortunately our Walks Secretary, Rob Green, had to retire from the post due to ill-health. However, we managed to put together a programme from Aug 23-Jan 24. Many thanks to Rob for his years of service to the group.

Number of leaders – 7.

Highlight – In June Sue Patterson led a great walk from Allendale Town which was full of interest, including a visit to the Doctor Who museum, alpacas and a waterfall.

Lowligh – we could not have a bus trip this year due to insufficient numbers.

Our Annual Dinner was held at the Jolly Drivers at Leadgate in April and was a great success

Durham Group (Mary Falconer)

Variety of walks offered and statistics

The table below shows the statistics for walks during the year compared to last year. We walked on most Wednesday's, Friday's and alternate Sunday's, and on Monday evenings during the summer.

Overall we had a magnificent 124 walks in the year, a slight decrease on 2022, one reason being that we did not have any away breaks this year and we had 8 walks cancelled due to wet weather which is an unusually high number . . .

The average numbers attending and length of walks was similar to last year. The numbers on individual walkers varied enormously from 41 (Xmas lunch!) to two.

As usual we covered County Durham comprehensively with our walks, from moor to coast and from Tees to Tyne. We also ventured further afield on occasions to Northumberland and North Yorkshire, but probably less so than in past years as we are aware of travelling costs increasing.

We also held a memorial walk for our colleague, Richard Piechocki, who sadly passed away this year.

	Durham RA Walk Statistics 2022				Durham RA Walk Statistics 2023		
Day	No. Walks	Length (mi)	No. people		No. Walks	Length (mi)	No. people
Monday	10	42	89		8	33	71
Average		4.2	8.9			4.1	8.9
Wednesday	50	412	819		51	445	847
Average		8.2	16.4			8.7	16.6
Sunday	24	196	349		24	199	309
Average		8.2	14.5			8.3	12.9
Thurs.	46	237	408		41	206	434
Average		5.2	8.9			5.0	10.6

Away Days	4	32	55				
Average		8.0	13.8				
Total	134	919	1720		124	883	1661
Average		6.9	12.8			7.1	13.4
	Four Friday walks were cancelled due to wet weather, one Monday walk due to heat, one Wed. walk due to leader's sickness				Four Friday, one Wednesday one Monday and one Sunday walks were cancelled due to wet weather		

Number of qualified leaders

We currently have 37 walk leaders registered with RA, more than 25 of whom led for our group in the past year. Most leaders are experienced so have not necessarily completed 'formal' training. It will be interesting to see what changes are made following the current Safety on Group Walks project and how these impact on the number of walk leaders in the future.

Membership status

The table below indicates the steady rise in our membership over the last few years. As at 17th November 2023 our membership was as follows:

	Total membership	New members	Leavers/movers
2018	139		
2019	166		
2020	177	28	23
2021	186	33	18
2022	196 (4 'life' members)	43	33
2023	202 (4 'life' members)	52 (of which 10 left within a year of joining)	45

Highlight of the year - nothing specific has been suggested, just lots of comments on what a great year of walking and good company it has been, in spite of the weather!

Lowlight of the year – the growing deterioration of paths and stiles has been a bit of a challenge at times.

Chester-le-Street Group (Mike Webber)

Chester-Le-Street group are doing well regarding membership with the highest number ever recorded for the third year in a row. Now standing at 134 + 3 Associates.

We walk four times a month, every other Sunday and Thursday. The Sunday walks always include a shorter walk of around five miles. Our Thursday walks are five miles and finish in a coffee shop. We normally walk within a thirty mile radius of Chester-Le-Street and we are averaging 21 members on every walk.

Our Section 7 of The Heritage Way is walked each year to ensure any defects are reported to the local authorities PROW Officers. This is now a designated 'National Footpath'

We are still short of Walks Leaders and this is reducing the number of walks that we would like to provide each month. At the moment we have 12 walk leaders registered but many only contribute a few times each year.

We continue to provide a good variety and range of walks despite this shortage.

We offer 'buddying up' on recce's and walks to provide coaching for anyone who may be interested in becoming a walk leader.

The improved national on-line Walk Leadership training course does not appear to have encouraged any more walk leaders to come forward from our membership.

Our monthly social events are well attended and continue to bring together members in a different environment and allow interaction with those members who are no longer able to walk with us.

The group remains in a financially sound position.

We continue to car share as our contribution to a cleaner/healthier environment which also allows non car owners to take part in all of our walks. This means much less road congestion and problem parking at the starting points of our walks.

The high point of our groups year was probably the coach trip on 8th October to Kendal in the Lake District when the weather was good to us.

We have had another good year so no 'Low Point'

We had another successful AGM in a local pub on 5th November with a pleasant walk before the meeting. Free soup and a bun was provided to all 34 members who attended.



Hexham Group (Julia Forster)

Membership status - 157 + 3 Affiliates

Variety of walks offered - weekly walks, sometimes two walks and occasionally a mid-week walk mainly in Northumberland and Durham. A number of these attracted over 20 ramblers and sometimes, on days when we have two walks organised, 24/25 ramblers may be out with the Group.

Number of qualified leaders - we have a hardcore of 16 leaders with 3 more from a



neighbouring group leading on occasions. New leaders coming forward would be most welcome.

Highlight of the year - to just have one is very difficult so thinking back perhaps two - the week-end at Cober Hill, Scarborough which was enjoyed by those who went and working with the YHA on their walking festival before the "lowlight".

Lowlight of the year - our last walk to visit Sycamore Gap (see above) before the deliberate act of vandalism, the felling of the much-loved tree.

Our Waymarking Group continue to go out in the area once a month and is now meeting with Northumberland County Council twice a year with a view to seeking more ways that the public rights of way network can be improved. Hopefully, by working together this can be achieved.

Morpeth Group (Vicky Ludbrook)

Member Numbers: 93 as at end of September 2023. Membership down slightly from last year. Average number on walks is around 10 – 12.

Variety of Walks: Our walks cover a wide area from north Northumberland down to south of the Tyne. Mainly between 7 and 10 miles, easy to moderate.

Leaders: None of our leaders has completed formal training but they have years of experience. We are fortunate to have around 10 leaders in our group, all of whom lead at least two walks a year.

Highlight of the year: No one walk stands out as they have all been enjoyable, some easy and others moderate.

Lowlight of the year: A circular walk from Vindolanda on 8th October took the walkers past Sycamore Gap which was a sad spectacle. The leader had recce'd the walk the previous week two days before it came down and had actually photographed the tree as he went past.

Social Activities: Last December we enjoyed a Christmas lunch at the Sun Inn, Morpeth when over 20 members attended. Plans are in place for a Christmas lunch at a different venue for this year.

Northumbria Short Circuits Group (Julie Brown)

Membership status – 97, remains static

Variety of walks offered – we walk around the Northumbrian areas with a variety of walks from leisurely to moderate. Walks are around 6 miles in length, every 2 weeks on a Saturday. We average around 17 per walk with the highest number being 26.

Number of qualified leaders – we have approximately 10 walk leaders.

Highlight of the year – our annual away day to Danby with 30 members attending. Our social secretary arranged a coach trip from Gosforth travelling to Danby for a 6 miles walk around the picturesque area. We then travelled to Newton under Roseberry where the group had a meal at the King's Head Inn before returning to Gosforth.

Lowlight of the year – due to ill health our Chair has had to step down from his role.

Ponteland Group (Steve Edwards)

We have offered a full walks programme with the only a couple of cancellations for inclement weather.

Group size on our walks has increased this year.

Membership has increased slightly from 88 to 94 although we actually attracted 20 new members to join the group.

The walk leader situation has improved with 4 new leaders now sharing the responsibility

Sunderland Group (Gillian Darbyshire)

I am pleased to report that our membership has increased to 147, an increase of 20 over last year. This is demonstrated in the increased number of members walking on the Wednesday walks which usually is in the mid-twenties. The attendance on the Sunday walks is usually in the teens. As there are a number of long-standing members who can no longer manage a long walk, efforts are made to include shorter walks on the programme. Walks in the winter programme tend to be in the local area.

The highlight of our full programme was the group holiday to Tenby, a coach of 46 members and friends spent an enjoyable trip including walks as well as trips sightseeing.

Due to weather forecasts in the summer two walks had to be cancelled

Tyneside Group (Gill Dallow)

Tyneside Group is centred around Newcastle, so welcoming members from such a wide area means that we are a large Group; 601 members (October '23). We split into 4 smaller groups with two walking on Sundays and two on Wednesdays and, the icing on the cake, is that we travel to our destinations by coach. This in turn gives us the opportunity for linear walks and a social half-hour at the end of the day in a pub or tea shop. The furthest we travel is to the Borders, the Lakes, the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors, mainly during the summer months, as well as round our wonderful countryside nearer to home.

Approximately 150 members go out walking each week and, after a slow, consistent decline, numbers do seem to be on the increase.

Our website and more recently Facebook page are very important to us, both for sharing information and attracting new members. Each coach publishes details of their forthcoming week's walks and the biggest hurdle has been adjusting to the new Ramblers Walks Manager website. Michael Manwell (Website Manager) and recently, Brian Kram, put in hours of effort liaising with Ramblers I.T. so as to ensure that the new Walks Manager was compatible with Tyneside's needs and then that Walk Leaders and members could have as smooth a transition as possible. Success does seem to have been achieved.

Our Group benefits from a lot of very committed, experienced ramblers who are willing to take on the extra responsibility of leading walks. Unfortunately there will always be a mismatch somewhere between the availability of Walk Leaders for every grade of walk but generally, with some co-operation, all walks can be covered and some grades with larger numbers, may even include two or even three Leaders. It will be interesting to see how the draft 'Guidelines for Walk Leaders' is received, in particular the thorny topic of Risk Assessment.

Coach Organisers and their helpers play very important roles in the Tyneside Group and along with Walk Leaders do much to keep enthusiasm and momentum going. Grateful thanks are due to them and all other members of the committee.

Each coach has had at least one special event during the year including special meals, ceilidhs and a very enjoyable 'drink and scone treat' in celebration of Wendy and David Maxted's 50th Wedding Anniversary. One of our coaches received a very special legacy from Hector Langley, a stalwart walker and supporter of Ramblers. This was sufficient to cover a free coach to Braithwate on a beautiful, sunny day.

The final bittersweet memory for Tyneside was that one of the walks with the 'Wednesday Hancock' coach went past Sycamore Gap, only hours before the tree was felled - an icon we will all miss.