

History of the WESSEX WANDERER RAILWAY WALKS

Walks led by members of the Ramblers starting from and finishing at railway stations along the Bristol/Weymouth Railway Line known as the Heart of Wessex Line.

1994

With the Bristol/Weymouth railway line from Westbury, Wiltshire, down to Weymouth, Dorset, under continual threat of closure the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership (HoWRP) was formed. This followed a decision by the relevant local Authorities along the line to do whatever they could to promote, support and enhance the line.

1995

Peter Gould, Avon Area of the Ramblers, organised half a dozen summer walks from stations south of Westbury based on the southbound railway timetable.

These were led by Ramblers Members from Avon Area and were incorporated into Bristol Group's walks programme.

These walks were the first major promotion of the line.

1996

A leaflet called 'Something for Everyone!' was published by the then Train Operating Company (TOC), Wales and West Passenger Trains.

This included details of eight Sunday 'Wessex Rail Rambles' using Bruton, Castle Cary, Chetnole, Maiden Newton and Dorchester West stations, again organised by Peter Gould.

The TOC issued Leaders and Co-Leaders with rail tickets to use for undertaking a pre-walk and leading on the day of the walk.

1997

A simple one page programme, headed 'Wessex Wanderer' was produced. This consisted of seven walks organised by Peter Gould and seven walks organised by Susan Blake of Dorset Area. These were shown separately based on the southbound timetable (from Bristol) and the northbound timetable (from Weymouth).

1998

This format continued but with a double-sided publication which included additional information.

The programme consisted of ten walks based on the southbound timetable and five walks based on the northbound timetable.

Twelve walks from stations along the Bristol Temple Meads to Severn Beach railway line (covered by the Severnside Rail Partnership) were included which Peter Gould also organised.

1999

Susan Blake, Dorset Area of the Ramblers, took over as Programme Co-ordinator.

The HoWRP Officer, Catherine Phillips, with the support of the TOC, arranged the design, printing and distribution of the programme and continued to cover all the costs involved. The programmes were distributed to railway stations along the line, as well as many other outlets.

Both the southbound and northbound departure and arrival train times were included for each walk, thus combining all the walks into one programme of nineteen walks. June to September.

This added to what became (and still is) quite a complex and time-consuming exercise having to take into account the departure and arrival times of trains from Bristol and from Weymouth.

By now Ramblers members from each of the four Areas along the line - Avon, Wiltshire (now Wiltshire & Swindon), Somerset and Dorset - were leading walks. People from along the line were coming on the walks, usually travelling outside their local areas.

2000

A fold-out more glossy programme was published.

This consisted of twenty walks June to September.

2001

Nineteen walks were scheduled to take place between July and October but didn't go ahead as planned because of an outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease.

The first walk took place on the 19 August 2001.

2002

Wessex Trains took over from Wales and West Passenger Trains. They too supported the WWW programme together with the HoWRP.

Twenty walks June to September.

2003

Twenty-eight walks June to September.

2004

The programme continued to flourish with photographs being added to the printed programmes.

Thirty-one walks June to September.

2005

Thirty-two walks June to September, featured on the programme including all but one of the stations along the line.

2006

First Great Western TOC secured the franchise which included the HoW Line.

Rebranded as the historic Great Western Railway (GWR).

All arrangements continued as before apart from a couple of years when Leaders and Co-Leaders didn't receive passes or tickets. Other than that, tickets and passes were issued to those Leaders required them until 2019.

Thirty-three walks June to September.

2007

Thirty-four walks June to September.

2008

Cuts to local authority funding meant that the HoWCRP could no longer continue with designing, printing and the distribution of the WWW programmes for us.

Until this time no financial support had been received or sought from the Ramblers.

Even though the walks have always been part of the Ramblers as we were not a traditional Ramblers Group we didn't qualify for automatic funding.

Not wishing to see an end to this popular annual programme of walks, I contacted staff at Central Office with regards to obtaining funding but to no avail. This, despite a member of staff having specifically come on one of our walks to get a feel for what we were doing. Impressed, he wanted to take it forward with other Areas.

Financing was then sought from the local Ramblers and each of the four Areas involved agreed to give an annual, equal and modest amount, which commenced in 2009, with each of the four Areas taking turns in

looking after our finances (ring-fenced in their Area's accounts. These arrangements continued until 2019.

The HoWCRP also gave an annual grant.

With the restricted funds, the programme had to revert a paper version, rather than the glossy colourful programme it had become thanks to Catherine Phillips.

We then had the task of getting the programmes type-set, printed and distributed ourselves.

2009

Thirty-four walks May to October.

2010

Thirty-three walks May to October.

2011

Ann Light, Avon Area, took over as Programme Co-ordinator.

Thirty-four walks May to October.

2012

Thirty-four walks May to October.

2013

The WWWs won the Ramblers President's Volunteer Partnership Award in recognition of our partnership with the four Ramblers Areas, the Rail Partnership and TOCs. Trophy and certificate presented (to me) by Kate Ashbrook at General Council 2013.

Thirty-five walks May to October.

2014

Ann Light set up and ran the first WWW website. It later became an official Ramblers website linked to the main Ramblers website.

Still the WWWs were not really acknowledged as part of the Ramblers simply because of how we operate (covering four Areas and not being a traditional Group). We kept our heads down and got on with it.

Thirty-one walks May to October.

2015

Thirty-one walks May to October. Walks continued to be popular and well supported by members and non-members. Many going on to join the Ramblers.

2016

Twenty-two walks May to October.

2017

Joy Harrison, Avon Area, took over as Programme Co-ordinator.

Twenty-eight walks May to October.

2018

Twenty-nine walks May to October. The final entry on the programme included, for the first time, the Dursley Walking Festival. These walks started from and finished at Cam & Dursley Railway Station, Gloucestershire. Whilst not on the Heart of Wessex Line, the Weymouth train's route at that time went as far as Great Malvern and not Cardiff as it did when the walks first began.

2019

Thirty-three walks May to October.

Planning began with regards to celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the WWWs in 2020.

Despite the arrangements with regards to our finances being in place since 2009, one of the four Areas involved contacted Central Office with queries regarding funding. A little more had been requested as a one off to help cover the extra 25th Anniversary costs.

Despite operating successfully one way and another as part of the Ramblers for twenty-four years, winning the Partnership Award involving a display at GC; being known by (some) members of staff; and a face to face meeting I had at Central Office, the WWWs were deemed 'Another Charity' and therefore 'could not be funded by the Ramblers'!

2020

Despite this setback, a great deal of planning for the anniversary had taken place during the preceding months by a small sub-committee.

Support pledged by station volunteers, Ramblers volunteers, as well as GWR, the Heart of Wessex CRP, Severnside CRP and the Association of Community Rail (now known as Community Rail Network).

Events at stations were to be held, pens had been designed, produced and delivered. A glossy colourful and interesting commemorative souvenir programme, leaflets and posters were already with the printers. These were to be displayed at General Council which was to take place in Bristol that year, and the traditional Sunday afternoon walk was to be in the name of the WWWs.

Then came lock-down.....

Project and programme abandoned, and I gave up the battle to try and get recognition that the WWWs are part of, and always have been, part of the Ramblers.

2021

Programme resumed with one or two walks held during the summer.

Programme now web-based only mainly because of the financial situation and post Covid problems, fewer volunteers.

Internal administrative changes were taking place within the Ramblers.

Agreed at our annual End of Season/Leaders Meeting in October that it would be difficult to continue as we had been doing very successfully since 1995, that is keeping our heads down and very successfully getting on with it.

As a way forward, I offered to investigate the possibility of the WWWs becoming a Flexi-Group even though the standard Flexi-Group agreement doesn't cover four Areas and their Groups as the WWW programme does. I was hoping that a bespoke agreement could be arranged for us.

2022

The hoped for bespoke Flexi-Group agreement not forthcoming.

Standard Flexi-Group set up. WWW Flexi-Group hosted by Dorset Area who had also been taking care of our finances for some time.

Seventeen walks were scheduled to take place during the summer. Some walks affected by rail strikes and didn't take place.

At the Leaders meeting in October it was agreed to extend the programme from April to October.

Leaflets and Posters printed for publicity purposes to be used in place of the printed programmes.

A PDF version of the programmes available to print from our website.

In November, a member of Severnside Group, Avon Area, agreed to become the WWW webmaster. Website updated and developed.

2023

For the first time in twenty-eight years the train timetable changed drastically which has adversely affected the service between Bristol and Weymouth, making it even more difficult to co-ordinate the 'up' and 'down' trains.

Despite this there were twenty-four walks on the programme.

Industrial Action by Rail Works again led to several walks being cancelled, including the one which Ed Wilson and some of his Team were going to go on.

2024

Programme consisted of twenty-four walks. One affected by a rail strike. Numbers attending the walks the highest since 2019 despite some adverse weather conditions.

Given all the problems we have always faced, and still do, in keeping the WWW programme going, we plan to mark the thirtieth anniversary next year. However, given the cuts to funding everywhere and the apparent lack of Ramblers interest centrally to help us celebrate such an achievement, it's likely that at best we can produce and have printed a number of souvenir programmes to be used as publicity in place of the leaflets for 2025 only.

It's heartening to know that Community Rail and GWR continue to recognise what a great asset the WWW programme has become over the years.

Changes within the Rail Industry over the last few years

Franchises replaced by contracts.

GWR secured a contract for up to six years, to be reviewed after three (2025 but they have had to cut back on what support they can now give us. However, they continue to offer passes for Leaders and Co-Leaders to pre-walk and for the day of the walk.

With a change of Government and the prospect of renationalising the railways in some form or another, what happens in the future remains to be seen.

It is believed that Community Rail Partnerships will continue in some form or another.

The Heart of Wessex CRP has been disbanded. Severnside CRP was extended to cover Bradford-on-Avon. Trowbridge and Westbury stations

come under the TransWilts CRP. Newly formed South Wessex CRP covers from Frome downwards.

The CRPs have links on their websites to the WWW website.

The Heart of Wessex Line has seen an unprecedented rise in passenger numbers over the years, despite the inadequate (and now worse timetable as far as we are concerned).

We are proud to have helped secure the future of the line between Westbury and Weymouth, whilst promoting the use of public transport to access walks, benefiting communities along the line; enabling those without their own transport to go walking, whether outside their area, or close to home, as well as gaining new Ramblers Members/Leaders over the years.

Taking words from Catherine Phillips HoW Rail Partnership 2004 annual report:

'It would be impossible to organise a programme of such superlative quality, variety and regularity without the intensive voluntary work of the Ramblers involved. In addition to their encyclopaedic knowledge of the most seductive routes into our regions' countryside, they have become experts in planning and pacing itineraries to synchronise with train times - not easy'

In Summary

The WWs which blend informality with democracy and financial accountability, show how enthusiastic members can work outside traditional Ramblers practices and succeed.

Although these very sociable walks have always been aimed at the general public, resulting in people jointing the Ramblers, the walks are also popular with existing members.

Compiling the programme entails far more work than it normally does for other Groups, covering four Ramblers Areas and all their Groups, with Leaders from any of them.

Train times must be checked, making sure south bound and north bound train times are as compatible as possible; times of arrivals at stations for the start of the walks and departure times at end of the walks, be it the same station or if a linear walk, a different station. The walks need to be tailored to the time available to catch the return trains.

There isn't an official committee, simply a Programme Co-Ordinator and now an Assistant/Co Programme Co-Ordinator. Support is also forthcoming from the Leaders and other members, on an informal basis.

Dorset Area's Treasurer continues to deal with our ringfenced funds which we rely on to cover our expenses. Much of the ringfenced funds relate back to 2020 when we were to celebrate twenty-five years since the first walks took place.

As FlexiGroup only, on our part, set up to cover ourselves, we only receive £95 pa from the Ramblers. We do not have or seek members as all our Leaders belong to their own Groups.

Also, as the programme only runs between April and October, it is more beneficial for anyone seeking to join a Group, join their local Group and then come on our walks if they wish to do so.

We hold an annual End of Season meeting to assess the current year and begin planning for the follow year's programme. We also arrange an annual Winer Get Together at a venue as much as possible equal distance from both ends of the line. There is normally a short morning walk followed by a self-funded lunch.

*Sylvia Popham
Co-Programme Co-Ordinator*

November 2024



Wessex Wanderer Rail Walks

Winners of the 2013 Ramblers' President's Award in the Partnership Category

Kate Ashbrook, Ramblers' President, presenting the Partnership Award certificate and trophy at General Council 2013

Said Kate: 'We can only achieve our vision for a better walking Britain through the energy and activity of our volunteers. A staggering amount is done locally and thousands of volunteer hours are spent, but much of this work is a well-kept secret. We need to publicise and celebrate what we do. It may seem like everyday work to our members but every activity is a story. For some, involvement with the Ramblers is a life-changing experience, but more people need to know about us

My warmest congratulations to the Wessex Wanderers for winning the Ramblers' Partnership Award, for their fantastic and innovative work in organising the Heart of Wessex railway walks. They have set an example to us all in transcending Ramblers' boundaries to achieve a truly effective partnership'



Partnership Award Trophy



Wessex Wanderers

Has been awarded the
The President's Partnership Volunteer
Award

Kate Ashbrook

Kate Ashbrook
Ramblers President
14th April 2013 at the Ramblers General Council

