

# Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum Annual Review 2009-10



**This is the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum outlining its work and advice between April 2009 and April 2010.**

The Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum is the statutory advisory body on all matters relating to access to the countryside in Buckinghamshire. It provides informed strategic advice to the teams in the council responsible for rights of way and access. This document provides a background to its work and achievements over the last 12 months.

## Chairman's Welcome 2010

*John Elfes*

*Chairman, Bucks Local Access Forum*

In presenting this latest Annual Review of the Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum, my hope is that it will remind you that 'the great outdoors' is in good shape in Buckinghamshire, that it is there to be enjoyed and that access to it is generally easy and rewarding.

Our routine advisory work continues and, amongst other things, we have discussed with the Slough Local Access Forum their aim to improve access from Slough to the Bucks Rights of Way network; we have supported the bid to gain 'Walkers are Welcome' status for Chesham; and advised the County Council on action to end the impasse over access to Gray's Lane Bank. We have considered the impact of plans to upgrade existing Chiltern railway lines and given support, in principle, to the proposed Thame to Haddenham cycle route. Within the South East Forum we have been involved in the response to Forestry Commission proposals to charge for access by horse riders.

We were unable to hold a Parish Council Conference, due to financial constraints. Indeed, looming over all our discussions this year has been the knowledge of the impending – now implemented – cuts in the budgets for all County Council departments. We wrote formally to the Council urging caution in cutting Rights of Way and Access budgets and stressing the value to the public of these services.

Ed Tamkin who has represented the disabled interest for the past year has moved away from the area and resigned from the Forum. In his short time with us, Ed had been very active and enthusiastic and we shall miss him. However, we have found an equally experienced member, Gavin Caspersz, to replace him. We continue, as noted last year, to lack representation from the tourism sector and from ethnic groups. If you know of any likely candidate in these fields, or any other for that matter, please make a nomination.

This review includes a further selection of contributions from individual members of the Forum, which I think you will find interesting.

We are always interested to have comments from members of the public on any issue, positive or negative, and if you have any proposals which you think would improve public access to the countryside, please do not hesitate to bring them to us. Write, e-mail, or attend one of our meetings.

Lastly, heartfelt thanks to my fellow forum members and, of course, the Council's Rights of Way and Access teams, for their sterling work throughout the year. A year which ended with the loss of colleagues made redundant by the cuts and the knowledge that the year ahead will present severe challenges.

## Membership

The Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum meets three times per year and has 12 members. It represents a range of bodies with interests in rights of way and access to the countryside. It has a balance between those who use the countryside, those responsible for its management and elected members of county and District Councils.

Meetings are structured so the Forum can hear informative talks and presentations from guest speakers from within and outside the Council. It has updates from the County Council teams responsible for Rights of Way and access on issues relating to the definitive map, maintenance and enforcement and strategic developments. In addition, members have the opportunity to raise their own agenda items.

In 2009/10 the Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum recruited a new disabled rambler, Gavin Casperz, who actively participates in organised rambling events around the country. His disability relates to a horse riding accident, so he also has experience in equine access to the countryside. This takes membership up to 12, with the possibility of additional representation from the newly formed 'Community Impact Bucks', who have good experience sourcing local funding for projects on behalf of parish Councils and local organisations. It is hoped to use their knowledge in future to channel more funding towards rights of way and green infrastructure projects in the county.

### **Current Membership**

David Briggs	Chilterns Conservation Board farmer (vice-Chairman)
Diana Bird	National Farmers' Union
Gavin Caspersz	Disabled users
Peter Challis	SUSTRANS
John Coombe	Chiltern Society
John Elfes	Ramblers' Association (Chairman)
Neil Harris	National Trust, Gardens and Countryside Manager
Chris Hurworth	Off-road users
Brenda Jennings	Buckinghamshire County Councillor
Alan Lambourne	Farming/ ex-Right of Way Officer
Viv Lynch	British Horse Society
Richard Pushman	District Council Member

## Walk your Local Paths Initiative

*Alan Lambourne  
Farming/ex-Right of Way Officer  
Clerk to Westcott Parish Council*

The County Council first contacted Parish Councils by letter in November 2009 introducing the 'Walk your Local Paths Initiative'. This letter stressed the importance of ensuring that the rights of way network across the Bucks countryside remained free of obstruction and available for everyone to enjoy.

The letter reminded everyone that resources are becoming less available and partnership working is the best way forward to keep the network in good condition. Westcott Parish Council discussed the Initiative at its December meeting and, as it has always been keen to keep its local paths available for use and has worked with the County Council to achieve this over the past twenty or so years (the Parish Paths Partnership Scheme - P3), decided to take the project forward. It planned to issue a local newsletter in January and agreed to include an item asking for volunteers to walk and survey all the paths in the parish. There was a limited response, but as a number of parish Councilors were also keen to be involved, it was decided to go ahead.

A meeting was arranged for a Saturday in April to which all those interested were invited. This took place on a lovely spring morning at the Cricket Club pavilion, an ideal place to consider countryside issues. The County Council had already provided detailed maps and

survey forms and people had an interesting discussion on who would do what. One or two agreed to survey paths that they regularly walk



whilst others were more interested in walking in new areas beyond the village limits. Some people decided to go off straight away and walk that same morning whilst others wanted to spread their walks over a period of time.

After about three weeks, all the reports were returned to the Clerk - a 100% coverage. These are now being collated for return to the County Council, but the first impression is that generally the paths are in good condition and hopefully the few faults found will be addressed. A couple of anomalies were found and these are being investigated now as a separate issue.

The feedback from the walkers was that they enjoyed the experience and felt they were doing something useful which would benefit the local community and others beyond. It also shows that better results can be achieved by partnership working and would recommend that other parishes who have not yet done so, will take up the "Walk your Local Paths Initiative".

## Coombe Hill Access-for-All track

*Neil Harris  
Gardens & Countryside Manager  
National Trust*

The National Trust has with generous funding from Natural England through its Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, upgraded the wartime brick track at Coombe Hill to a proper surfaced track. This will enable greater access to the fantastic viewpoint and the war memorial (owned by Buckinghamshire County Council).

The track has been designed to allow wheel chair, push chair and less able visitors to access the site at all times of the year and with much greater ease.

The tracks meanders its way across the plateau, through Oak/Ash woodland and gorse to the Ridgeway path. The stunning views across the Vale of Aylesbury jump out at you as you wend your way through the gorse. At the viewpoint a toposcope shows all the important landscape features that can be seen on a clear day.

During the Second World War a compound was set up around the monument to operate search light batteries to protect nearby Chequers. The track was put in to allow vehicles to access this compound. After the war the area was restored by the National Trust to grazing land.

We now graze the area with Belted Galloway cattle, a native breed that thrives on poor keep (not very nutritious grass) and is vital in maintaining a good habitat for plants and butterflies.



## LAF Disabled Rambler Representative

*Gavin Caspersz  
Disabled users*

*Gavin Caspersz is the new member for disabled users. He has a disability scooter that he can split apart, without tools, in less than one minute and which is light enough to be carried over stiles.*

*Gavin has attended several Disabled Rambler events and enjoys using his mobility vehicle on public rights of way in Buckinghamshire. Here he describes one of his walks.*

Coombe Hill is a newly improved visitor site in Buckinghamshire overlooking the Vale of Aylesbury. I was asked to review the site and new path to the monument as representative of disabled users on the Local Access Forum.



It was a warm sunny July day. I arrived by car, bringing with me my trusty mobility scooter. At the entrance to the site I found a good surfaced car park where I was able to unload the scooter in safety.

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The site itself was well fenced because there were grazing animals. There was a service gate for maintenance vehicles that remained locked and next to it was the entrance gate for pedestrian access. I recognised this as one of the new type of wooden gates specially designed to provide disabled wheelchair access.



I had never actually encountered one before and spent some time trying to work out how to use it. While it was not difficult to open, it was awkward to keep the gate open sufficiently till I could get my scooter through. Eventually, I was rescued by a member of the public

who came and held the gate open enabling me to drive through. Personally, I felt disappointed. I wished it could have been different. It felt like a bad start...but then, disabled visitors would not normally be travelling entirely alone!

Once inside, the newly developed path was clearly visible. It was well made and wide enough for wheelchairs, push chairs, prams and mobility scooters. However, pedestrians seemed not to use the path and went off in every direction, no doubt taking advantage of the open access freedoms. Driving my scooter on this surface was safe and pleasant.



The area consists of woodland, grassland and very attractive native mature trees. I made my way through very attractive and pleasant scrubland on one side and some fenced-off woodland on the other. Arriving at an opening in the fence, I began to see the panorama of the Vale of Aylesbury unfolding over the ridge. I could identify lots of local landmarks like the Halton House, RAF Halton Officers Mess, the

County offices in Aylesbury and Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

I followed the path as it traversed the ridge toward the monument which now came into view. Another 800 metres and we were at the foot of this intriguing edifice. The view from here was absolutely spectacular. I could not decide where to look first....there was so much to see from here. I do not think there is another spot in Bucks that offers a view such as that at Coombe Hill Monument.

*Recommendations:*  
pick a sunny cloudless day. Come prepared to spend a long time here and bring a picnic!

*Verdict:* well worth the effort and highly recommended.



**The Chiltern Society marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chiltern Way - The Chiltern Way Walking Festival**  
**April – October 2010**

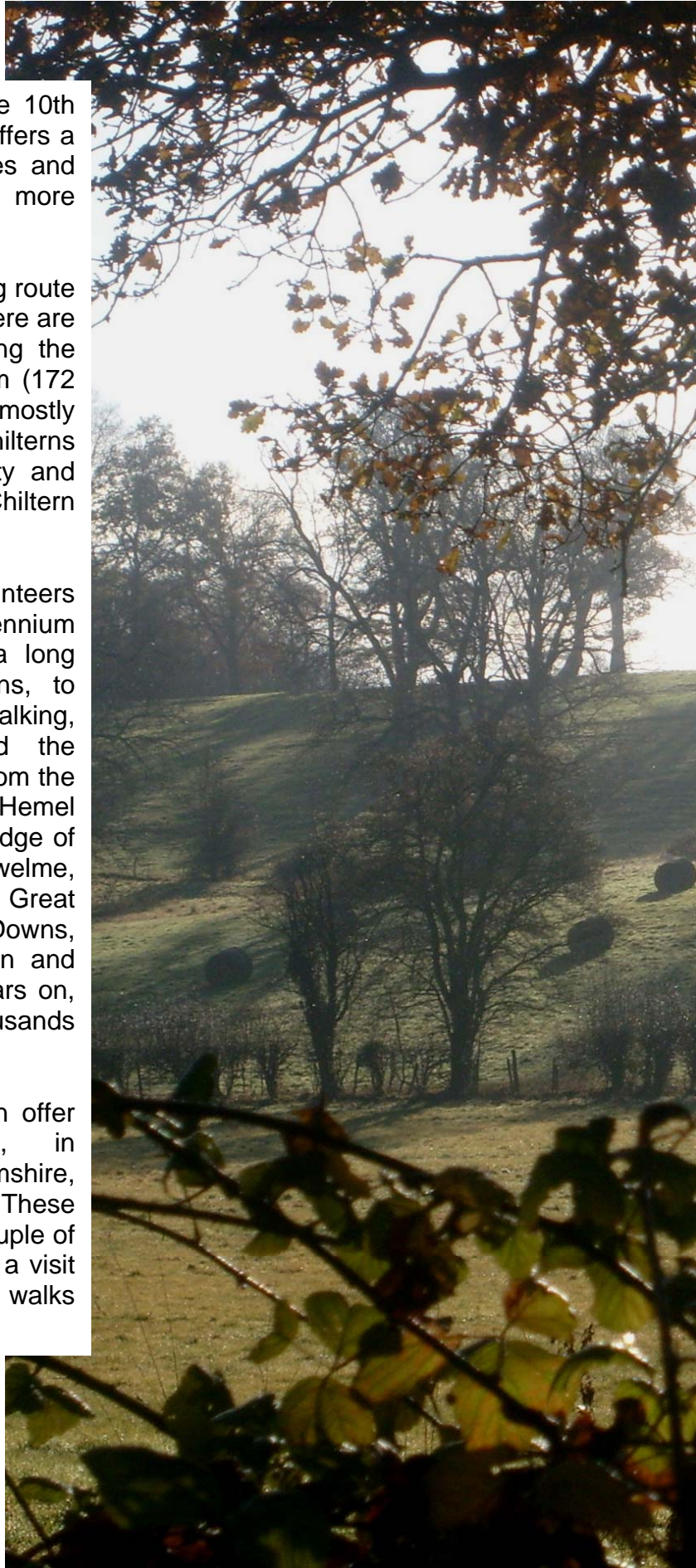
*John Coombe*  
*Chilterns Society*

This Walking Festival celebrates the 10th anniversary of the Chiltern Way. It offers a wide range of walks to suit all ages and abilities, and aims to encourage more people to walk the Chiltern Way.

The Chiltern Way is a circular walking route of around 200 km (125 miles) and there are now three optional extensions taking the total route to a maximum of 278 km (172 miles). It is a wandering, varied and mostly rural way stretching around the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and passing through many pretty Chiltern villages.

The Chiltern Way was set up by volunteers as the Chiltern Society's millennium project. The plan was to create a long distance path around the Chilterns, to encourage more people to enjoy walking, both local people living around the Chilterns and those who travel out from the London area. The route goes from Hemel Hempstead, Chalfont St Giles, the edge of Marlow, Hambleden, Bix Bottom, Ewelme, the Ridgeway, Stokenchurch, Great Hampden, Aldbury, the Dunstable Downs, Sharpenhoe Clappers to Harpenden and back to Hemel Hempstead. Ten years on, the footpath is now enjoyed by thousands of walkers each year.

There are over 60 guided walks on offer during the Walking Festival, in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire. These range from shorter walks taking a couple of hours, themed walks combined with a visit to a local attraction, and day walks covering 10 -13 miles.



There are opportunities to walk the whole Chiltern Way over a series of longer walks on Sundays between May and September, and from 29 May - 13 June we are offering “a walk a day on the Chiltern Way”

All the walks are open to the public-All are welcome. Full details of the walks are on the Chiltern Society website;  
[www.chilternsociety.org.uk](http://www.chilternsociety.org.uk)  
where there is more information about the route, walking distances and details of accommodation near the route.

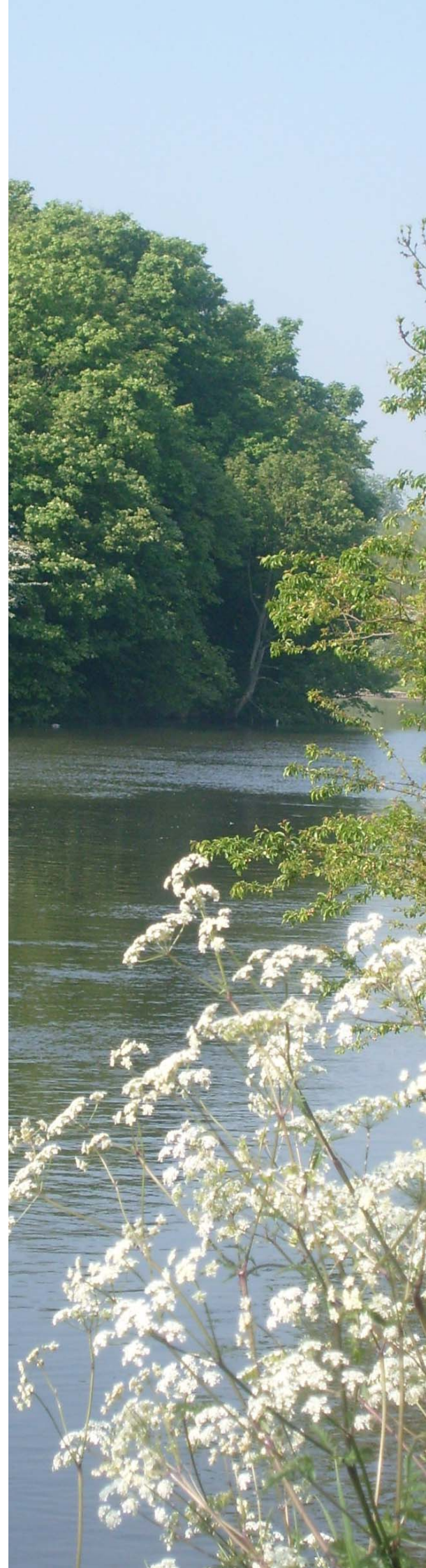
John Taylor Chiltern Society Chairman said “ we have been delighted to launch this Chiltern Way Walking Festival. Many people have taken the opportunity to join the walks and to explore the beautiful countryside of the Chilterns. Our walking festival is running at a very relevant time, as the government has just announced plans to build a high speed rail link across the Chilterns. This countryside is a precious resource enjoyed by millions of people as it is easily accessible from the London area, and once again this area of outstanding natural beauty is under threat”.

Jenny Gilmore Director of the Chiltern Society said “the Chiltern Way was launched by a group of local volunteers as a wonderful idea to encourage people to walk the Chilterns. It is one of the closest long distance paths to London. This is a great community project, and we are grateful to all the volunteers who have offered to lead walks; Chiltern Society members, local parish Councils and heritage and walking groups”.

The Chiltern Society,  
White Hill Centre,  
White Hill,  
Chesham HP5 1AG  
01494 771250

Registered charity 1085163  
[www.chilternsociety.org.uk](http://www.chilternsociety.org.uk)

*The Chiltern Society is a registered charity which relies on membership subscriptions and gifts in wills. Please support our work to care for the Chilterns.*



## Work of the Forum 2009/10

### **Advice to the Council**

#### Rights of Way Improvement Plan

One of the main areas of scrutiny was the first annual review of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan, which was presented to members in July 2009. The Chairman complimented the team for a good report and thought progress had been made in most areas. The Chairman said he would like to see an increase in the number of new footpaths and bridleways to improve the connectivity of the network.

#### Parish Councils

The Forum put forward that it felt a Parish Council conference would enhance closer working with local communities and asked the Council to give it serious thought. However, a decision was made that there were insufficient staffing resources to organise such an event. Alternatively, Members were invited to comment on a Parish Council newsletter to facilitate better communication with Parish Councils, partner organisations and local communities. Since its launch in September 2009 it has been a great success. Moreover, Carole Burslem, Area Co-ordinator in the Localities Team, attended the July 2009 meeting and highlighted that any important messages that they wished to convey to Parish Councils could be raised at Local Area Forum meetings, which included attendance from the public, Parish Councils and Buckinghamshire County Council members.

#### Sponsor-a-gate'

The Forum was asked advice on a possible 'sponsor-a-gate' scheme, similar to the donate-a-gate scheme run by the Chiltern Society. Although members were not able to commit personal volunteer time to coordinator such a project, they were able to furnish advice on costs and possible volunteers within user groups. The Council decided not to take the project forward, for now, in the light of the Council's resources committed to the Chiltern Society's donate-a-gate scheme.

#### Cattle Attacks

The Forum gave useful advice and contributions to the debate over cattle attacks, which received much publicity in the media during this year. The Council is proposing to produce signs that can be posted on footpaths informing the public, in a friendly way, how to behave with their dogs on land grazed by cattle and sheep. The member representing farmers warned that he'd heard of advice to farmers indicating that signs may be seen as an acknowledgement the animals are dangerous, therefore making the landowner more liable. Further investigation from Health & Safety Executive Guidance suggests it is good practice to inform the public if there are cows with calves in a field. The forum also advised the Council to adopt a leaflet, similar to that produced by North York Moors National Park, to be posted on the website. This subject is to be discussed further in 2010/11.

### Open Access Maps

The Forum provided advice to the Council on draft open access maps in A4 sized 'clip frames', similar to those used on Countryside Stewardship access managed by Natural England. These make available information on-site and on Parish Council notice boards.



### Annual Review

#### Walkers are Welcome

The Forum member representing disabled access sat on the Chesham Environment Group, a committee that achieved 'Walkers are Welcome' accreditation for the town. This is a community-based initiative with goals to improve conditions for walkers and illustrate, through practical examples and publicity, how recreational visits can help support the local economy. It is hoped the status will raise the profile of Chesham and promote tourism.

#### Disabled Access

The Forum member representing disabled access surveyed a number of routes in his wheelchair and gave feedback to the Council. In addition, he researched and provided walking notes and photographs for a promoted wheelchair walk on public rights of way through 'The Riverside' in Chesham.

#### Major Railway projects

The major national railway project 'High Speed 2' (HS2), has proposed 3 routes running through Buckinghamshire. Details were made available to the Forum, but comments will be made in 2010/11. The Chiltern Railway project 'Evergreen 3', aiming to improve line speeds between Marylebone and Birmingham, resulted in proposals for two new bridges and 5 diversion applications. Details were presented to the Forum, who made comments on the more controversial countryside impacts. The 'East-West Rail' line was discussed at the forum which

proposes a renewed railway line from Bicester to Milton Keynes, on currently disused tracks in north Buckinghamshire.

#### Joint Working

The Forum member representing the Chiltern Society met with the Chairman and Secretary of Slough Local Access Forum to discuss possible cross-boundary work and identify opportunities for improving and promoting the network in Buckinghamshire for residents in Slough. A way forward was agreed in which the two Forums and Councils would work together more closely and look at possible new links. Short circular routes would be preferred, targeting the sedentary and occasional walkers.

#### 'Walk your Local Paths initiative'

The Forum welcomed the Council's 'Walk your Local Paths initiative', launched in November 2009. The aim is to invite Parish Councils and local communities to walk and survey their local paths, reporting back any issues to the Rights of Way Operations team. This would give residents more confidence to walk their paths and indicate to the Council local priorities on the network. In all, 42 Parishes committed to be involved, with nearly all aiming to cover their

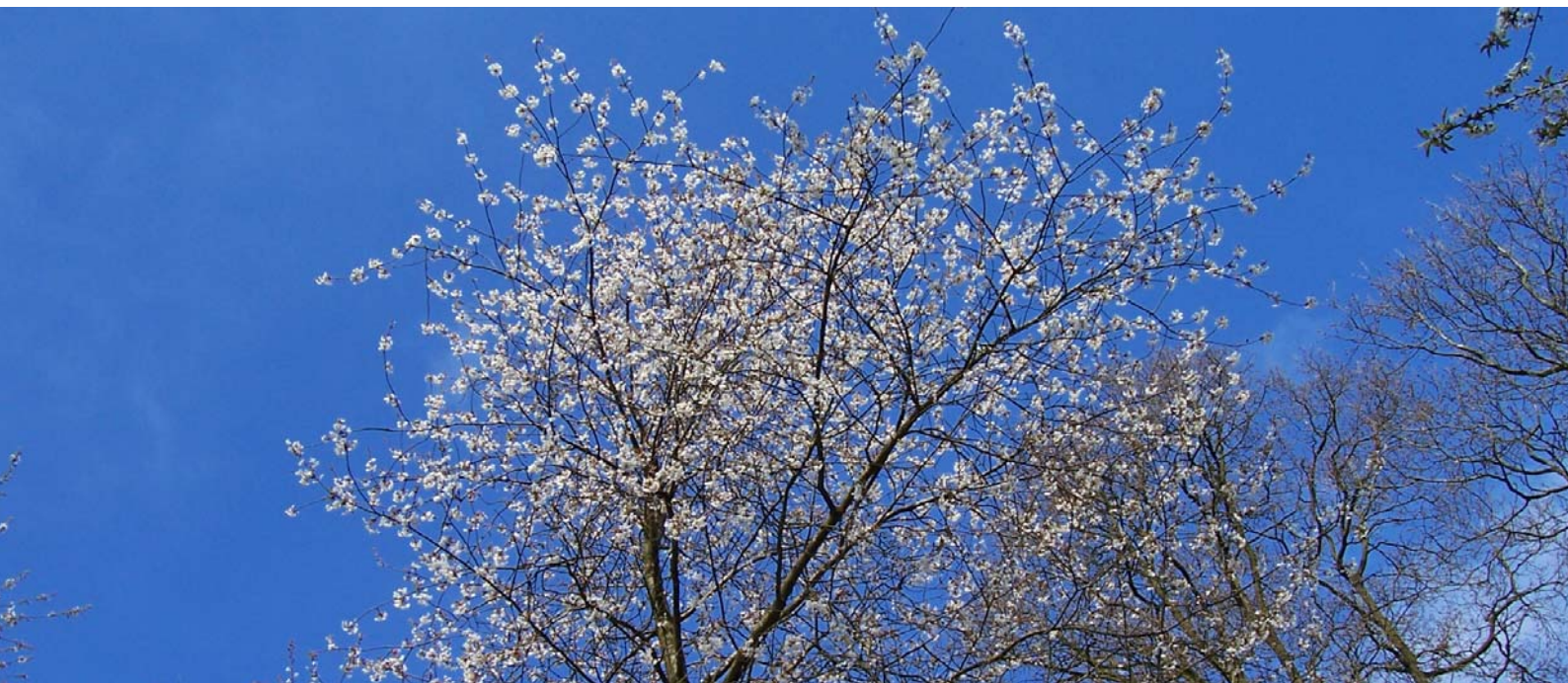
whole rights of way network. The Forum member representing Parish Councils surveyed Westcott Parish, with the aid of volunteers, and writes of his findings in this report. The Forum informed the Council of the importance that issues reported back from parish Councils must be addressed.

#### Ramblers' celebration

The Chairman of the County Council and LAF member representing county and District Councils, together with an officer from Strategic Access, celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes and West Middlesex Area of the Ramblers', with a walk to Beacon Hill in the Chilterns. The event achieved good publicity in the local press and for walking in general.

#### Forestry Commission consultation

The Forum member representing the British Horse society has made strong representation to the Forestry Commission on its proposals to charge horse riders for access to their woodlands. A piece of work has been started to assess the position of riding in Wendover Woods, Buckinghamshire, as an example of how access management could be improved.



## Representation to the Council

### Funding

This year the Forum made strong representation to the County Council Leader, Chairman, Chief Executive and Cabinet Member for Transportation to persuade Members not to take forward proposed cuts in staff and budgets within the Rights of Way Service. The Chairman, John Elfes, wrote to support the achievements of the Group and warned of the consequences in terms of health benefits to Buckinghamshire residents, path maintenance, statutory duties, complaints and response times, reduced use of the network and damaging public relations. Unfortunately, in February 2010, the Council determined that the budget would be reduced by £68,000 and a £100,000 capital investment programme would end.

### Open Access

The Forum Chairman made representation to the Cabinet Member for Transportation to ask for the resolution to the *impasse* at the open access land called Grays Lane Bank, Ibstone, Buckinghamshire. Land, currently mapped as open access, but vigorously opposed by the landowner at every stage, is still not accessible to the public by gate or stile. The member for Parish Councils reminded the Council of powers to create public rights of way under Highways Act s.26.

### Local Transport Plan

The Forum Chairman made representation to the Head of Transportation for Buckinghamshire following draft strategy guidance from the Department for Transport

to local authorities and advice from Natural England to Local Access Forums. The Chairman stressed the vital importance of the Buckinghamshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan (2008 – 2018) being integrated into Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3) and the rights of way network being fundamental to the overall highway asset.

### Path diversions

The Forum raised the issue regarding the criteria for accepting rights of way diversions at the Council, as it was felt there had recently been an increase in the number of applications. The Forum was advised by an officer that the Highways Act 1980 allowed diversions in the interests of the landowner. Officers decide whether to accept a diversion application, after a site visit, ensuring the proposed new route is not substantially less convenient than the existing one.



## Presentations

### Haddenham to Thame cycle route

The Forum received a presentation from Transport for Buckinghamshire's Cycling Officer on the off-road Haddenham to Thame cycle route, proposed as a safer alternative to the busy A418. A 1500 strong petition had been submitted to the Council, who were consulting on possible route options. Members explored the issues surrounding land owner interests, debating flooding problems experienced on the Oxfordshire side at Scotsgrove Mill and stock control problems with horses and cyclists using the proposed route. LAF Members supported the project in principle and suggested that lack of money for surfacing should not be seen as an obstacle to moving the project forward. The outcome of the public consultation is awaited.

### Chilterns Conservation Board

The Forum asked questions and gave advice to the Access Officer of the Chilterns Conservation Board who gave a presentation on their new website 'Countryside Closer to Home' and the 'Chiltern's Cycleway'. The new interactive website provides the public with specific information about different categories of routes in the Chilterns, such as stile-free routes, pushchair/wheelchair routes and those of varying difficulty. The Chiltern's Cycleway is 150-miles long with a series of shorter linked routes which provide opportunities for experienced and leisure cyclists.



## Local and Regional LAF representation

### Forestry Commission

The Chairman and Forum member representing the British Horse Society attended a regional meeting to discuss issues across the south east. The main subject addressed was the Forestry Commission (FC) proposal to charge for horse riding on their land and the meeting saw this as a good opportunity to engage with the FC on a regional basis and put forward alternatives to their proposals.

### England Access Forum

The England Access Forum represents LAFs across England and deals mainly with Natural England, but also with DEFRA and other governmental bodies. It has not met regularly, and its Chairman expressed concerns about the lack of support it had received from Natural England. The LAF has expressed its support for the EAF as a potentially very useful channel to Government, and has backed the

EAF Chairman's request for improved support.

### Rights of Way reorganisation

The Council's Rights of Way Group was restructured in 2009/10. The teams now comprising rights of way work are the Definitive Map Team and Operations Team. The Strategic Access Officer falls within the Natural Environment Team and the Simply Walk Officer in the Definitive Map Team. The post of 'Rights of Way and Access Group Manager' no longer exists and a new post encompasses a wider remit.

### Issues in the coming year

In 2010 the Buckinghamshire LAF will be involved in monitoring and acting upon the findings of a completed survey by the Ramblers' Association on all the open access land in Buckinghamshire. It illustrates

areas requiring improved access facilities and signage.

Negotiations on housing growth proposed around the north and east of Aylesbury and south-west of Milton Keynes will be discussed and the LAF will be monitoring progress towards the Council securing developer contributions to improving public access in and around these major development areas.

The Forum will also be looking into appropriate signing in order to help manage the problems of dogs worrying sheep and the safety implications of the public walking through fields with cows and calves.

The developments of the National railway projects 'High Speed 2', 'Evergreen 3' and 'East-West Rail' will be closely monitored throughout the year, as they will potentially have a massive impact on public rights of way network.

### **Future Meetings**

The public are welcome to attend Local Access Forum meetings. They are held at 10am in the Mezzanine meeting rooms at County Hall, Walton Street, Aylesbury, HP10 1UY. If you would like to attend to raise any issues regarding Public Rights of Way or Open Access land, please phone 01296 387695.

Future meetings will be held on:

**3<sup>rd</sup> November 2010**  
**9<sup>th</sup> March 2011**  
**6<sup>th</sup> July 2011**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> November 2011**