

Notes for Parish Meeting 15 March 2022

My apologies for not being here in person.

Dereham Walkers are Welcome has continued to function even during the lockdown phases of the pandemic: it helped that most of our activities were outside. There were times when the number of walkers had to be restricted, but for some time now, we have been able to accept as many as wanted to come, and to abandon the need for booking. The physical health side of things has therefore continued, but the social side has been affected - for a long time we could not end a walk as we often had with somewhere offering refreshments; even now restrictions have been lifted, some are understandably cautious about this.

Similarly, our work in keeping paths walkable and inviting has been constrained: both the vigorous growth of vegetation last year, and the extensive wetness and flooding presented challenges. Normally, we undertake light clearance work, and refer bigger problems to Norfolk County Council, which is responsible for maintaining public rights of way; they too were affected first by working restrictions in lockdown, and now by the backlog of work, exacerbated by the greater use of paths as people have taken local exercise. Things are creeping back to normal, but if you do experience a problem, please let me know. I should add that, during the current year (1 April 2021 to date), we have put in 88 hours of work and 59 hours of monitoring, which NCC would value at some £2960.

'Normal' also includes some long standing issues, affecting three paths in particular. The path across Rushmeadow was badly affected by flooding, which has subsided, though it is still prone to considerable muddiness after rain; its continuation on the boardwalk through the woodland and on towards Sandy Lane is also affected as many of the boards are now broken. NCC has closed the path pending repair (though people do still use it): that repair was delayed from last year to this, and will be difficult as getting access for materials and plant will not be easy. The much shorter boardwalk from Stone Road to the A47 also suffers from broken boards, and a patch near the road which gets very muddy after rain - extending the boardwalk would be ideal, but needs various permissions as it fringes the Scarning Meadows SSSI. Finally, we have been concerned for a long time about the state of the Restricted Byway which runs as Hall Lane from Greens Road, alongside the A47 and up to the bridge which crosses the A47 giving access to Tesco on one side, and the Badley Moor area to the east. This route was recognised as a public right of way a few years, one of a group which were added to the Definitive Map following claims made by Dereham Town Council. As a Restricted Byway, it is legally open to use by walkers, cyclists, horse riders and non motorised carriage drivers. However, its physical condition has not been touched since legal recognition, making it barely usable by walkers and cyclists, impossible for others, mainly because of intrusive vegetation limiting the usable width. It is also not the most pleasant to use. It has Orbit's less than ideal security fencing on one side, and a broken fence on the other, which marks the boundary with National Highways' land - including a layby from which all manner of rubbish finds its way on to and alongside the path. We have been urging co-operation between National Highways (to erect a better fence), Norfolk County Council (to clear the vegetation), Breckland District Council (to deal with the litter) and Dereham Town Council (to facilitate and press for co-ordinated action), but as yet there is no progress.

As voluntary Footpath Warden for the Town Council, I have continued to attend and report to Heritage and Open Spaces Committee meetings, providing information for the Council to pursue issues to promote the safe and enjoyable use of its public rights of way and other walking routes and areas (such as The Neatherd). As part of this, WaW has last year used funding from the Co-op to produce a booklet of short (under 4 miles) walks, freely available to anyone - including supplies made to the GP surgeries in the town.

Sadly, Dereham is now the only town left in Norfolk holding Walkers are Welcome accreditation, as both Aylsham and Cromer have left this year for very different reasons.

Ken Hawkins
11 March 2022