

# **HEATH AND REACH PARISH PATHS PARTNERSHIP**

## **Bedfordshire County Council Access Improvement Plan:**

### **A Vision for Heath and Reach**

#### **1. Introduction**

##### 1.1

These proposals were developed in response to a request from Phil Fox, Countryside Access Development Officer for Bedfordshire County Council, for input into the County's Outdoor Access Improvement Plan, being prepared in response to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

##### 1.2

The report was drafted by David Lambert, Dick Denton and Ian Freestone on behalf of Heath and Reach Parish Paths Partnership (P3)

##### 1.3

The needs of horse riders in the area were informed by discussion with Mary Cloake, an active horse rider who lives in Heath and Reach

##### 1.4

The draft report was discussed at a full meeting of P3 on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2003 in the light of which it was modified and endorsed.

##### 1.5

A map showing features mentioned in the paper is attached as Annex A.

#### **2. The Present Situation**

##### 2.1

The Parish has a number of footpaths and bridleways which, thanks to the County Council, The Greensand Trust, the Parish Council and P3, are on the whole well maintained and fairly accessible to experienced and strongly motivated walkers and riders.

## 2.2

However, the network is often illogical, with significant gaps. It is inadequate in a number of key respects. For example, it fails to provide a reasonable number of sensible circular routes for either long distance walkers or families with young children. It does not provide adequate links with rights of way in adjacent parishes. The needs of riders, cyclists and the disabled are not well catered for. Certain routes, which existed before 1950, have been lost, while others have been modified in a less than satisfactory way by quarrying activity.

## 2.3

While we are appreciative of the efforts of the various agencies in maintaining the existing network, it remains the case that it is not always fully accessible for the whole year and in some places it is not obvious to the inexperienced walker. In addition, the pursuit of landowners who fail to fulfil their obligations does not always appear to be as rigorous as is required to maintain access.

## 2.4

It is probably fair to say that usage of our current network is significantly below the ideal. However, we refute any suggestion that this reflects an absence of the desire to walk or of the potential to enjoy walking on the part of local people. The desire of local residents to access the local countryside is quite clear from the heavy usage seen by Stockgrove Park. The low level of usage of the rights of way network is a reflection of its poor accessibility, in terms of signage, condition, inappropriate routing and non-existent links.

## 2.5

A further limitation of the current network is the poor linkage with Rights of Way to the North, where adjoining parishes are in Buckinghamshire and we would like to see improved liaison with those responsible in Bucks County Council to promote more co-operation.

## 3.

### **The existing network**

#### 3.1

In our view, there are a number of principles which should govern the maintenance of *any* network of public footpaths, and we are particularly anxious to see these applied in Heath and Reach. The network should:

##### 3.1.1

Be accessible to all potential users for the whole year and for at least 50 weeks in the year over arable land

### 3.1.2

Give users confidence that when they start a planned journey, they finish it.

### 3.1.3

Be consistently accessible over both pasture and arable land and be consistent throughout.

### 3.1.4

Be clearly marked by road edge signs and way marks.

### 3.1.5

Be obvious on the ground without a map.

### 3.1.6

Be of the correct width where that is specified.

### 3.1.7

Have firm level surfaces, even over arable land (bridleways should be accessible to cyclists).

### 3.1.8

Be maintained so that obstacles are removed quickly and undergrowth cut back.

### 3.1.9

Be regularly inspected, and prosecutions undertaken when landowners fail to conform to legal requirements.

## 3.2

In addition, in the age of the car, there are several additional requirements:

### 3.2.1

Marked crossing points are needed on major roads.

### 3.2.2

Car parking should be provided at route starts, so that users may drive to them. This is particularly necessary in the current situation where there is a lack of pavement access to key parts of the parish network, so that people are obliged to walk on dangerous roads to access it.

3.3 Provision should be made for disabled people to access the network, paying attention to the Disabilities Discrimination Act, which comes into effect in 2004.

## 4.

### **The role of the County Council**

#### 4.1

Proper use of the rights of way network depends critically upon a planned programme of maintenance, development and publicity. In order to promote the footpath network and its use, we feel that the County Council should:

##### 4.1.1

Work formally and enthusiastically with footpath users

##### 4.1.2

Produce and publish a response policy for reports, comments and complaints

##### 4.1.3

Produce and publish its rights of way policies for maintenance, development, reinstatement and prosecutions

##### 4.1.4

Produce and publish a publicity and education policy to encourage use of the paths

##### 4.1.5

Show separately its annual rights of way budget, broken down into cost centres

##### 4.1.6

Produce an annual rights of way report

#### 4.1.7

Update and publish the definitive rights of way map on an annual basis

#### 4.1.8

Be pro-active in providing sensible linkage between the Bedfordshire Rights of Way network and those of adjoining counties, particularly Buckinghamshire in the present context.

### **5. Development of the Rights of Way Network in Heath and Reach**

#### 5.1

In considering how the Heath and Reach network should further be developed, we propose a number of principles:

##### 5.1.1

Anomalies such as paths stopping at boundaries should be removed

##### 5.1.2

Logical continuous routes should be provided by in-filling gaps and, where necessary, converting footpaths to bridleways

##### 5.1.3

New local, circular and long-distance routes should be provided for walkers and riders

##### 5.1.4

Routes should be provided to sites of historic, scenic and scientific interest

##### 5.1.5

Routes into CRoW access land should be provided

#### 5.2

In addition, it is clear that an energetically enforced policy should be operational whereby developers and mineral extractors are discouraged from disrupting existing rights of way, are compelled to restore rights of way at the end of development and are encouraged to provide new additional routes in return for planning permissions.

### 5.3

With these points in mind, we feel that the following developments of the Heath and Reach network are readily attainable, and would greatly improve countryside access in our area.

#### 5.3.1

There should be a link between the Miletree bridleways (nos. 3&9) and the Village. This link would take the form of a bridleway from Stonehenge Station (Grid. Reference 941275) to the water tower on Eastern Way (932281). It would more-or-less follow the route of the horse-riding route used up until about 1950. P3 has collected documentary evidence for this path from villagers who remember its use.

#### 5.3.2

A bridleway to be established linking Eastern Way near the water tower (932281) through Reach Lane quarry to the end of Thomas Street (925284). With the Miletree link (above) it would then be possible to walk or ride from the centre of the village out to the A5 near Battlesden, which at the moment is not possible without walking on some rather dangerous roads without roadside footways.

#### 5.3.3

Car parking should be provided in the vicinity of Stonehenge Station, to allow access to Bridleways 3 & 9 for walkers, cyclists and riders.

#### 5.3.4

As an adjunct to paragraphs 5.3.1 to 5.3.3, we note that local residents currently walk their dogs along the edge of New Trees Quarry, along a line from Shenley Hill Road at 929274, to 932278. This could be usefully converted into a permissive path and extended to join the Miletree link at 938277.

#### 5.3.5

Footpath 6, old *Cocoa Way*, should be converted to a bridleway to allow riders and cyclists to access Oak Wood and the Bragenham Lane-A5 bridleway from the village (see letter of 9 September 2003 from David Lambert, H&R P3 coordinator, to Phil Fox)

#### 5.3.6

There is a need for a circular route which allows villagers with young children to access Stockgrove Park on foot, without walking on Brickhill Road, which carries fast traffic, has limited visibility due to hills and bends and is dangerous. Previous enquiries have established that provision of a footway alongside Brickhill Road would be prohibitively

expensive, costing in excess of £100,000. However, it might be possible to establish a route from the road called Baker's Wood (925286), across Sheepcote Quarry and through Baker's Wood, and this should be investigated.

#### 5.3.7

There is a well-used path from Old Linslade Road (922281) across the allotments and round the Recreation Ground to the junction of FPs 5&6, near the British Legion building (920284). This area is administered on behalf of the Parish by Trustees and permissive access is granted. While in the current circumstances this situation is satisfactory, if there were any change of ownership or plans for change of use of the land in this area, there is a risk that this path would be lost, and it should become a public right of way.

#### 5.3.8

The path along the Linslade side of Copt Hill (from 919279), which goes on to join Footpath 5, is extensively used. Permissive access to this land is granted by the Trustees, who hold it in trust for the villagers. Currently a programme to convert this area to traditional heathland is in progress. Again, while in current circumstances this situation is satisfactory if, in future, circumstances change this path should be protected and made a public right of way.

#### 5.3.9

A bridleway should be established joining Red Lodge on Woburn Road (932294), to the Greensand Ridge Way, through King's Wood, using existing tracks and incorporating part of the current licensed horse-riding route.

#### 5.3.10

The end of the King's Wood permissive path should be extended to the Flying Fox on the A5 (933304), so that residents can walk from Stockgrove Park to the Flying Fox.

#### 5.3.11

At the termination of the current licences, Footpath 1 should be restored to its proper route.

#### 5.3.12

At the termination of the current licences, Footpath 2 should be restored to its proper route.

#### 5.3.13

Although it is outside our parish, a major benefit to the rights of way network in the area would be achieved by upgrading Potsgrove Footpath 7, north of the A5 (opposite Eastern Way), to a bridleway.

#### 5.3.14

The proposed permissive path from the end of Footpath 2 to Sandhouse Nature Reserve (937298) should be implemented, and extended to the A5 at 940298.

#### 5.3.15

Marked crossing points should be provided at a number of places on the A5:

□

957283 linking Bridleway 15 with Battlesden FP1

□

951288 linking Eastern Way with Potsgrove FP7

□

941297 linking the southern branch of the new Sandhouse permissive path from Heath and Reach village with Potsgrove FP4

□

937301 linking the northern branch of the new Sandhouse permissive path from Heath and Reach village with Potsgrove FP3

□

927308 linking the northern end of Kings Wood with Potsgrove FP1 (The Greensand Ridge Walk)

## **6. Concluding remarks on Rights of Way; Over-arching Recommendation**

6.1 The great majority of the proposals that we have made are readily attainable within the current framework and would not be costly to implement. They would, however, make a major difference to the quality of the rights of way network in and around Heath and Reach and greatly expand its usage by local people.

6.2 To make these improvements requires the will of the County Council, for it to show leadership in this area and to prioritise the time of its staff in such a way that they may be attained in a reasonable period of time. We therefore recommend that a 3-year plan is drawn up for the development of the footpath network in Heath and Reach along the lines of these proposals, and that the County Council works with other agencies in the area to implement them.

## **7. Our Open Spaces Vision**

7.1 In 1876 it was written of a house on the edge of Copt Hill in the southwest part of the parish that “It stands on a rising hill, having a commanding view of some of the most lovely landscapes and fertile valleys that the eye ever delighted to look upon”. The view from Copt Hill is now over a landscape scarred by quarries, the result of a century of mechanised mineral extraction.

7.2 But it is only necessary to look at the rolling fairways and immaculate greens of the Leighton Buzzard golf course, built over two former sand quarries and entirely within the parish, to see what can be achieved with vision and drive to turn the quarries into areas of scenic beauty. In effect, to recover the lovely landscapes and fertile valleys of the pre-industrial extraction.

7.3 Bedfordshire County Council and South Bedfordshire District Council have already agreed the basis for the future of the quarries in the Greensand Trust’s “Sandpits Strategy” document, but the creation of the County’s Access Forum should enable us firmly to earmark the quarries as environmental open spaces.

7.4 We believe that the open spaces of the sand quarries of the parish should be looked upon as a community asset for the whole of Bedfordshire and beyond. As they are worked out there will be conflicting pressures for their future use, with convincing demands being made for land for housing (as in Leighton Buzzard at Chamberlain’s Barn and Page’s Park) and industry (as in Leighton Buzzard at Grovebury Road), but with foresight and planning it should be possible to secure the parish’s quarries for use for farming, leisure, education and nature conservation. They are open spaces waiting to be claimed for future generations, with Heath and Reach becoming an environmental gem in the County’s open spaces crown.

7.5 Our first priority is to acquire some form of public access guaranteed in perpetuity to those worked out quarries along the line of the A5, from Pratt’s Pit in the south to the Fox and Hounds pit in the north, including the current Sandhouse Nature Reserve and the meadows adjoining it.

7.6 It is our vision that the quarries overlooking the Woburn Road valley, and which are visible from the village (New Trees, Reach Lane, Bryant’s Lane, Stone Lane, Fox Corner, Sheepcote and Thrift) will, once they are worked out, be landscaped to an approved plan, provided with a rights of way network and used only for farming and nature conservation. This is our priority two.

7.7 Those quarries on the A5 side of the Shenley Hill ridge (Nine Acres, Munday’s Hill, Double Arches, Checkleywood and Churchways) have potential for dramatic development. In the past they have been linked to Leighton Buzzard by the narrow gauge railway, and could be again. They are accessible from the M1 and the A5. They have water features and exciting geological deposits. The Miletree Station complex could be expanded to provide a Visitor Centre and Sand Museum, while the Double Arches, Churchways and Checkleywood quarries, with a new station, adequate car parking and a paths network could form a country park which would be larger and more scenically varied than

Stockgrove. With marketing to attract visitors from the local conurbations and from as far as north London, this area could be both environmentally sustainable and commercially successful. This would be our priority three.

7.8 In addition, it is necessary to look at the future development of the parish's existing open spaces:

□

It is planned to encourage Copt Hill (920283) and the Baker's Wood fringe of Sheepcote Quarry (923288) to revert to heathland under managed programmes. In time, these should both be designated 'access land' within the meaning of CRoW 2000.

□

Shire Oak Heath (917285) is an SSSI and is privately owned. English Nature is making efforts to institute a conservation management programme. This area is an important open space in the parish and the aim should be to designate this also as 'access land' within the meaning of CRoW 2000.

## **8. Conclusion**

8.1 In this paper we have set out our vision for a Heath and Reach of the near future. We have written the paper in a spirit of realism: with determination, organisation and above all vision all of our proposals are achievable, and the result will be a parish which will be an environmental credit and benefit to the whole county and beyond.

8.2 The County Council should ensure that these proposals are included when the Development Plan is next reviewed.

## **Annex A: Map showing the features mentioned in the paper**

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