

# THE *Meresman*

## & Exploring East Sussex

### Bridge over Flooded Waters

#### Post flooding repairs commence

The severe flooding across East Sussex in October last year and through the winter saw the demise of many rights of way bridges large and small, at least two damaged fords and several path surfaces washed away. Since April the Rights of Way Maintenance Team led by Alan Hart and Michael Diprose have been working hard to repair and replace as many bridges and surfaces as possible.



Bridge at Isfield church during the floods

"It's a daunting task" said Alan when contemplating the considerable number of bridges that need urgent attention. "That's not even thinking about those bridges that haven't been reported to us!" However both Alan and Michael agree that the challenge each job presents should make the East Sussex Rights of Way Team expert bridge builders. Alan continued, "Although some of the team have been building bridges for many years they are all gaining valuable experience week by week".

Sessingham Bridge on the Wealdway near Arlington had spanned the Cuckmere River just north of the reservoir probably since the reservoir was built in the 1970's. After the floods the decking had become very unsafe and was dangerous for horses to use. Two of the four large beams also needed replacing. The bridge, 40 feet long and 5 feet wide, took four weeks to rebuild. New concrete abutments with reinforced bridge holders to keep it in place in future flooding were built slightly raising the height of the bridge.

The cost of repairing Sessingham Bridge came to about £5,000. A new footbridge across a ditch at the same site was also installed.

At Isfield a large footbridge near the parish church had been washed several yards down stream on the River Uck and only kept completely washing away by an oak tree on the riverbank. Hundreds of video cassette cases littered the site washed there from flooded 'Blockbuster' in Uckfield. The original 30-year-old 40 feet long greenheart beams could be reused as they were in near perfect



The new Sessingham bridge and nearby footbridge

condition. New brick abutments have been built 18 inches higher, which should avoid any further floodwater.

The emergency Government funding of flood repairs will run out in December. We are hoping to employ two experienced maintenance workers who will be dedicated to flood repair work until mid-December. Contractors will also be used for some projects and the existing four-strong Maintenance Team will continue to carry out flood repairs as well as their normal work.

Other major bridges completed recently include one of 26 feet span and two 33 feet bridges between Crowhurst and Sidley and a 33 feet footbridge south of Heathfield.

Andrew Whitnall



New bridge near Isfield church

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## The Meresman & Exploring East Sussex

Welcome to Issue 12 of The Meresman, containing the new and improved Exploring East Sussex. Exploring East Sussex now incorporates the East Sussex Environmental Calendar, produced by my colleague in the Environment Group. By merging these two publications we are hoping to attract a wider audience to walks and environmental events across the County, and to give those who have an interest in the environment more events to choose from. Please take the time to have a look at the booklet, you will find a wide variety of walks and environmental events inside.

Work in the Rights of Way and Countryside Management group has gradually been getting back to normal after last winter's flooding and the closure of rights of way and countryside sites due to the Foot and Mouth epidemic earlier this year. We have had a busy summer of bridge repairs, clearance work, work on long distance routes, kids events and recruitment of new volunteers and trainees. Much of the work that we have been doing is reported on in this edition, however if you would like any further information about anything that we do please give us a call on the contact numbers on the back. Also in this edition we have an update on work on the South Downs from the Sussex Downs Conservation Board, and various snippets from around the County.

I hope that you enjoy this edition of The Meresman & Exploring East Sussex. If you would like to comment on any of the articles or any other issues relating to rights of way and countryside management in the County please do not hesitate to write to me at the address on the back. *Marion Hamilton, Editor*

[marion.hamilton@eastsussexcc.gov.uk](mailto:marion.hamilton@eastsussexcc.gov.uk)

East Sussex County Council publishes 'The Meresman & Exploring East Sussex' twice a year, in April (Spring edition) and September (Autumn edition).

If you have any articles or letters that you wish to be considered for publication please submit them to the address on the back page at least two months prior to the month of publication.

For further information please contact Marion Hamilton on 01273 481654.

Any views or opinions expressed in 'The Meresman & Exploring East Sussex' are not necessarily those of East Sussex County Council.

# What's Happening on the South Downs?

The rights of way within the Sussex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are managed on behalf of East and West Sussex County Council by the Sussex Downs Conservation Board. The South Downs AONB extends from Eastbourne to the Hampshire border and was set up to manage the distinctive landscape of the South Downs. You may be familiar with the roadside signposts that have been designed which go some way towards helping people recognise that they are in an area of particular landscape importance. The design of all furniture, including signposts is standard throughout the South Downs AONB to ensure familiarity and recognition when walking or riding the Downs.

Other differences in management include annual surveying, which includes employing trained volunteer rangers who are responsible for walking the paths within a designated parish during the summer. Anyone who is interested in helping out, give me a call on the number below. The information from the reports is entered onto a database, contracts are produced and the work carried out using local contractors. The South Downs Voluntary Ranger Service also helps us implement a lot of rights of way maintenance work such as replacing gates, stiles and waymarks; for more information call Ian Hartle on the number below.

The rights of way database records all paths that require regular annual clearance so if you are aware of any paths that you think need clearance and currently are never cleared do let me know. One way of contacting us is via the internet. Visit the Virtual Information Centre for the South Downs; [www.vic.org.uk](http://www.vic.org.uk) where you can find information about the Downs, join the South Downs Voluntary Rangers, or send us details of a problem associated with a path via the path report page. Improvements to the network that have happened recently include resurfacing a steep and slippery section of the South Downs Way at Bunkershill Plantation near Housedean Farm, north of the A27, (see photograph). The bridleway that branches off the Ditchling Beacon road just below the Beacon has also been resurfaced with chalk. Improvements are also taking place at Balmer Down on the South Downs Way.

With work being carried out to designate the area as a National Park and the implications of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act, these are exciting times on the Downs. The first draft of the boundary of the National Park will be available for public viewing by the end of October, following the Countryside Agency Board meeting on 20 September. Papers on the administrative arrangements and the draft boundary will be available for viewing one week before the meeting. Three months of public involvement will then be encouraged with all comments addressed to the Countryside Agency. The implications of the CROW Act will be felt on the South Downs, perhaps more than anywhere else in East Sussex, although eligible land will not be accessible until 2005 so we're not likely to see much of a change in the



Seven Sisters Country Park in the Downs

Photo: Sam Ridge



Resurfacing work at Bunkershill Plantation

amount of accessible land on the Downs until then. (For more information on open access mapping, see page opposite). Contact Simon Culpin telephone: 01273 625242, or e-mail: [sculpin@southdowns-aonb.gov.uk](mailto:sculpin@southdowns-aonb.gov.uk)

# COMMENT – Foot and Mouth – The Aftermath

On Friday 8 June 2001 all public rights of way in East Sussex reopened after 100 days of path closures due to Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD). Similarly the path network in many other counties also opened after the Government withdrew local authority emergency powers to close paths in unaffected counties.

Did the closure of the path network help stop the spread of the disease? As a Rights of Way Officer working at the 'front-line' of the County Council's response to the threat of the FMD I have heard and read every argument for and against path closures.

First of all, and most importantly, FMD never came to East Sussex. Whether the closure of paths had any affect, we shall never know. However, in Yorkshire path reopenings were quickly followed by the spread of FMD to a previously unaffected area. Coincidence maybe, but very few local authorities were willing to take the risk of keeping paths open. The last thing we wanted were the pyres burning across the Sussex Weald.

There were those, some very tenacious, that insisted that local authorities were wrong to close paths, that FMD could not be spread by walkers. Some callers and emailers even resorted to abusing County Council staff. Then, once paths had started to reopen we had similar calls and emails from farmers wishing everything to stay closed. Either way, we couldn't win with everyone.

The implementation of the closures and the information given to the public may not have been perfect. Remember, none of us had been in this situation before. We were learning day-by-day, hour-by-hour. The position could change without warning and we would have to immediately implement the County Council's response. Sometimes we were probably as confused as most of the public seemed to be!

Secondly the withdrawal of the public's right to walk and ride across the East Sussex countryside showed how valuable a resource the rights of way network is to the residents of the

county and most especially to it's visitors. Enquiries flooded in from all over Britain day after day. "Which paths are open?" "When would they all be open?" "Can we holiday in Sussex and walk in the Downs?" I felt like I'd become a tourist information officer overnight.

So, how vital is the availability of countryside sites and the path network to the rural economy of East Sussex? Apparently it is extremely important, especially in the South Downs. The Downs attract more visitors per year than any of the National Parks in England and Wales, about 32 million people. The South Downs Way is also the UK's most popular National Trail.

A strong argument against path closures was that tourism is worth more to the local economy than farming. This may be true but the spread of FMD to East Sussex would have damaged both farming and tourism. Whilst I may have my doubts about the effectiveness of the path closures in containing FMD, I don't think that keeping the path network open would have been a risk worth taking.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the Council's response to the FMD crisis, we now have a serious maintenance problem across the county. The floods during October and subsequent bad weather through the winter resulted in numerous bridges being destroyed or damaged.

The weather followed by the path closures meant that much of the network had not been walked or ridden for about eight months. Problems that may have existed for months are only now being reported. The County Council has also been unable to carry out its normal maintenance programme. We are only now able to repair and replace bridges. This has resulted in the sacrifice of most other work, including our regular summer clearance.

The cost of FMD to East Sussex has been one of unavoidable neglect of the rights of way network. It may take a long time for the path network to recover from its 'double-whammy' of severe flooding and FMD closures. Not a situation that any of us are happy with. *Andrew Whitnall, Rights of Way Officer*



*An illegal closure sign seen after restrictions were lifted*

## Open Access Mapping Update

Work is continuing on the on the mapping of 'open country' as the implementation of the Countryside And Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 continues. The 'open country', which, as reported in Issue 11 of The Meresman, includes mountain, moor, heath and downland, is being mapped by Binnie Black & Veatch, on behalf on the Countryside Agency. The first maps are expected to be ready this autumn and will be subject to a three public month consultation period, including road shows and map displays countrywide Provisional maps will be created following consultation, and landowners and others with a legal interest in the land will still be able to appeal against a decision at this stage. Conclusive maps will then be produced and access granted by commencement order from the Secretary of State. Open access land is expected to be open to us to use freely in 2005.

For more information visit the Countryside Agency's website [www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk) or call 0845 100 3298 for the national access helpline (office hours).

*Source: Countryside Focus Issue 15*

# West Park Local Nature Reserve

West Park Local Nature Reserve in Uckfield was designated as such in 1996. Despite being sandwiched between the A22, the West Park housing estate and the Bellbrook Industrial Park, the Reserve is a haven for wildlife and is ideally positioned for the local community to access. The existing Local Nature Reserve (LNR) is managed by the Countryside Management Service of East Sussex County Council, on behalf of the West Park LNR management committee, however it is owned and mainly funded by Uckfield Town Council.



*Sandstone outcrops are an attractive feature of West Park LNR*

Currently, one of the most exciting projects in the pipeline is the proposed designation of new LNRs in the area. Uckfield Town Council has earmarked some parcels of land (3.65 hectares) right in the heart of Uckfield bordering the River Uck as possible areas to enable them to extend the Town's LNR network. Habitats include riparian woodland, ancient marsh and wet meadow. These areas will be easily accessible to a large proportion of the local community for recreational and educational use and it is also hoped that a Riverside Walk will be incorporated. The LNR status will hopefully provide protection for these habitats from further detrimental urban development on the floodplain. Between Hempstead Mill and the Uckfield bypass, there is another 18.2 hectares of land, incorporating the River Uck and its banks. Discussions are currently taking place with the 50 or so landowners who have industrial units bordering this land to see whether they would be willing to enter into an agreement to manage their land as part of a LNR. Mixed opinions have been received, so far, but if all goes according to plan, the community of Uckfield will have access to a fantastic resource twice the size of the current West Park LNR right on their doorstep!

At present the Reserve consists of 11 hectares (approximately 27 acres to the old school!) of

diverse habitats including semi-improved and improved grassland, wet alder carr woodland, mixed woodland including areas of coppice, a wet meadow which contains a variety of orchids and other wild flowers, a pond and a number of impressive sandstone outcrops which have been in existence for 125 million years. These outcrops harbour many lichens, mosses and ferns, and stunted trees can be seen literally growing out of the Rocks.

There are 12 entry points into the Reserve, which has free open access. Although there are no designated rights of way over the site, wildlife needs wild spaces, so please keep to the main paths. Please also remember to clean up after your dogs – if they poop, you must scoop!

Over the coming months, a number of projects are planned. For the previous two years, a number of speckle faced Beulahs have kindly been loaned to the reserve by English Nature during the Autumn months. These are hardy welsh mountain sheep which will munch on almost anything. They are secured in the marsh conservation area with electric fencing and help with the task of controlling rank coarse grasses and the infernal fern, bracken. These species otherwise flourish to the detriment of less dominant wild flowers such as the orchids which can be seen on the Reserve. All being well after the foot and mouth crisis, the sheep will be showing their furry faces again in the not too distant future.

Progress with the pond will also be made during the Autumn. Because of the extremely sandy soils, water held in the pond during the winter rapidly disappears during the summer, reflecting the level of the water table. To rectify this problem the management committee have decided to install a pond liner to attempt to keep the pond level high all year round. This should enable watery critters and plants to spread and colonise more permanently into the pond and surrounding marshy areas. News on the proposed extension will appear in future editions of The Meresman, meanwhile if you would like further information about West Park LNR, please contact Jo Heading (Countryside Ranger) on 01273 482670 or e-mail [jo.heading@eastsussexcc.gov.uk](mailto:jo.heading@eastsussexcc.gov.uk)



*Hardy Beulah sheep help control bracken and grasses*

# Stewardship – a Gateway to Hidden Corners



A little known treasure exists in East Sussex, giving people access to areas of countryside which might otherwise remain hidden. The Countryside Stewardship scheme offers payments to farmers and other land managers to enhance and conserve English landscapes and their wildlife and history, and to help people to enjoy them. The scheme, which has been in existence since 1991, aims to make conservation part of farming and land management practice. Through offering incentives to farmers and land managers to provide public access to their land as part of the scheme, conservation on the ground is linked directly to opportunities for people to enjoy the results.



In East Sussex there are currently 44 sites listed in the Conservation Walks register (which lists all land with access under the Stewardship, Countryside Access and Environmentally Sensitive areas schemes) and they encompass a great variety of wonderful countryside across the County. The register is available online at [www.countrywalks.org.uk](http://www.countrywalks.org.uk) or at your local library or tourist information centre. For information about walks in your area you can get also get in touch with the Countryside Stewardship team at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA previously MAFF) on 020 7238 6907.

Under these access agreements, hundreds of 'conservation walks' have been set up across the country, mostly displaying maps and interpretation boards to help people understand the particular land management that is occurring in the area. Many conservation walks link with existing rights of way and some areas include new bridleways and paths suitable for those with less mobility.



Photo: Sam Ridge

## Staff Changes

There have been a number of staff changes in the Rights of Way and Countryside Management Group since the last issue of *The Meresman*.

**Julia Scanes**, Rye Bay Countryside Officer, left us in June to pursue a career (of sailing mainly!) in Cornwall. Julia was with the Countryside Management Team for an admirable seven years and will be missed by rangers and stool ball players alike! Julia has now been replaced by Simon Fathers who joined us at the beginning of August. Simon was previously working for Basildon District Council in Essex and is settling in well to the East of East Sussex.

**Gareth Ellis**, who was our trustee Rye Bay Ranger for about three years, decided to trade in the sunny Sands of Camber for the even sunnier sands of the Philippines, and he left us in July to work as an expedition leader with a team of conservation volunteers. We expect to appoint a new guardian of the Sands in September.

**Michael Rowland**, who was also with us for about three years, firstly as Definitive Map Officer and then as Rights of Way Officer for Rother, decided that with fatherhood on the horizon it was time for pastures new. Michael has moved to Dorset where he is working on Green Links projects across the County, and Matthew Harper has been appointed as Rights of Way Officer for Rother in his place. Matthew leaves vacant the post of Definitive Map Officer which should be filled in late September.

# RYE BAY NEWS

News from the Rye Bay Countryside Office  
A satellite office of the Rights of Way and Countryside Management Group

## Building Bridges

In March we were involved in building a bridge at the Beech Estate near Battle. The bridge was to replace one that was all but washed away by the floods last autumn. There has been a crossing at that point for nearly 500 years and is part of a guided walk run by Keith Datchler the Estate Manager. These guided walks are an excellent



opportunity to explore new access under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and are listed in the 'Exploring East Sussex' leaflet. For further information on the guided walks at the Beech Estate please contact Keith Datchler on 01424 772313. So why not go along and test out our bridge! For further information and maps of Countryside Stewardship Access see the article in this edition of The Meresman or log on to [www.countrywalks.org.uk](http://www.countrywalks.org.uk)

## Parish News

**Sedlescombe.** In August we installed a picnic table, bin, seating and an interpretation board in Red Barn Field Nature Park. This is part of on-going work being done in Sedlescombe with funds from the High Weald's Special Initiatives Fund. A disabled kissing gate is also in the process of being erected to help encourage access for all to this exciting new park.



## Beach Clean-up

The Rye Bay team will be organising a beach clean at Camber on Sunday 16 September. This project, begun by the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), is an annual national event which not only does the good job of removing any rubbish, but also catalogues the rubbish. This information is used by the MCS to lobby Government and other bodies to reduce the amount of pollution in the seas around our coast, and to produce 'The Good Beach Guide'. If you would like to help, please contact us for further information.

## Old Time Camber

We are currently researching the history of Camber Sand dunes and need photographs to help us put together how things have changed over the years. This will help us to better understand the creation and previous management of the dunes. So if you have any old photographs (dated if possible) please send (or email) them to us. Any information and stories to accompany them would also be very interesting. We will return any photographs to you so please make sure you also send us your address.

## Camber

In the last six months our Trainee Ranger Team has surveyed and drawn up an extensive species list of plants found on the sand dunes. This information is to be included in the Camber Sands Management Plan and has helped with choosing future management techniques. We found a number of interesting species including Hounds Tongue and Biting Stonecrop.

During this summer we have been assisting the Environment Agency with regular wire clearance on the access paths across the dunes. The wire is the remains of old chestnut paling used to maintain the dunes as a sea defence and is a hazard to holiday makers who can trip or cut themselves. Work has continued on the area previously cleared of Sea Buckthorn, including the removal of thousands of Ragwort plants. This area will be closely monitored in the future to assess the impact of this work, and to hopefully add some new names to our species list for the Camber dunes.



Colleagues from Lewes joined the Rye Bay Rangers for a 'Wildlife Wonders' day at Camber to promote South East Marine Week in partnership with the Sussex Wildlife Trust. The event gave local people and visitors to Camber a chance to learn about the marine wildlife they might spot when visiting the coast. Families took part in environmental games and seaside exploration to gain hands on experience of camber wildlife.

## Wave Goodbye, Say Hello

There have been a few team changes over the summer at the Rye Bay Countryside Office with Julia Scanes and Gareth Ellis moving on to pastures new after many years of dedicated work. They will be missed but we wish them every success in the future. Simon Fathers became the new Countryside Officer in August. A ranger will be appointed soon along with a new trainee team. If you are interested in joining the trainee team or would just like to volunteer your help, then please contact the Rye Bay Office for more information.

**Enquiries** For further information about the work we do in the Rye Bay area, please do not hesitate to contact us at:

Rye Bay Countryside Office, 111b High Street, Rye, East Sussex TN31 7JF tel. 01797 226488 or fax 01797 223753 or e-mail [rangers@ryebay.demon.co.uk](mailto:rangers@ryebay.demon.co.uk) or visit our website [www.ryebay.demon.co.uk](http://www.ryebay.demon.co.uk)

# The Volunteer Meresman...The Volunteer Meresman...The Volunteer Meresman **Back to Work!**

It is now the end of August and it seems that it was only yesterday that the foot & mouth restrictions were lifted and we were all allowed back out into the countryside. I only realised last week, as I was juggling a backlog of projects and trying to decide which to work on first, how much an effect that the flooding and the subsequent foot and mouth episode has had on the work of everybody working on rights of way maintenance. It is good to be back on track.

Many groups are now picking up on 'special' projects that were in hand whilst others are looking to carry out general maintenance work. Several groups are starting to assist with making good bridges and stiles that were damaged during the floods.

If you or your group are contemplating working on flood damage problems please let me know. The County Council is putting in a claim to the Government for grant aid to cover the cost of this work. Photographic evidence of the condition of the bridge or stile is required before and after the repair (even if the bridge is missing). We will need to know the TQ reference, name of the landowner if possible and path number. A film can be sent to you on request!

## **'Access for All'**

Over the last six months research has continued on projects that will improve the level of access to the path network. Following the conference at Ashburnham Place last year I had hoped to have a network of discussion groups set up by the spring. Regrettably this was another aspect of the work that was disrupted.

My message to everybody who attended the conference last year is that 'I will be in touch with you all very soon to arrange discussion sessions and exploratory surveys of paths that have potential for improved access'. The range of access will vary according to the terrain and location and provide walks with access via easy climb stiles, through to kissing gates. They will also include paths with good surfaces and gates accessible to all. The number of paths to be investigated in the first instance will be limited as the project is still at an experimental stage.

On the positive side, work to complete a 'kissing gate' route in the Burwash area is near completion. Details of these improved routes will be made available when the work is complete and the paths tested for levels of use.

If you did not attend the 'Access for All' conference last November and would be interested in taking part in the project or would like to know more about the scheme, please let me know. There will be opportunities for people to contribute on all levels and for various activities including path surveying to the production of publications and promotional literature.



## **No More Disasters Please!**

I for one am looking forward to and hoping for an autumn and winter free from storms, floods and disasters. Foot and Mouth has fortunately stayed away from East Sussex and we do not want to return to the situation experienced between February and June.

With a period of calm and stability hopefully on the horizon, I aim to make progress and complete the long list of outstanding projects and schemes.

*Mary Moulton,  
Parish & Volunteer Liaison Officer  
(01273 482354)*

## **The Monday Group**

What a challenge this stile presents to the walker! How to get across without a first-aid kit? Perhaps this is a rather extreme example, but we've all encountered ones not much better, and nowadays many volunteers devote time to replacing them with something less lethal.



One such body is the Monday Group, active in the area north of Brighton between Hurstpierpoint and Chailey. With origins in 1961 and organized as a team in 1982, its present 25 retired members work every Monday throughout the year to build and renovate stiles and bridges in close cooperation with local farmers and the County Council. Extensive footpath clearance is also carried out by a team which includes several lady members.



Determined to let such stiles as the one above disappear into the mists of history, Harold Rowling, the Group's originator and designer, has now reached his fifteenth 'mark' – a four-legged stile and dog-gate (see above) which doubles as a seat and is easy to step straight over. For the Group members, its great advantage is that it doesn't involve digging the usual four holes to install it. For this reason it's known as the 'Mark 15 Digless'. With bated breath we await the Mark 16!