

## Root and branch

April of this year brings the thirtieth birthday of *Byway and Bridleway*, with the Trust itself not much older, and, looking back at early copies of B&B, through to today, perhaps we all have learned everything and nothing. That thirty years is book-ended by the forward-looking and well-thought Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981, the lamentable Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, and the debacle of ‘*Discovering Lost Ways*’, with most of the time in-between seeing the active voluntary sector constantly up to its waist in alligators and largely failing to drain the swamp at the same time.

Now the active voluntary sector – the people who did the research, who argued the case at public inquiry, who took a stand on condition and obstruction – have woken up one day and found that they in turn are not as young as they used to be, and their joints and brains not as flexible as before. In just over a year, all but one of the current generation of Trustees and editorial crew will qualify for their bus passes, and there is no ‘young generation’ of voluntary sector stepping forward to provide replacements. Why not? The trite answer is that (to mis-quote Margaret Thatcher) ‘there is no more society’, but a deeper investigation suggests that this is not the whole reason.

The ongoing renewal of the voluntary sector depends upon a fundamental compact: the reward for unpaid effort will be a worthwhile, tangible and reasonably quick result. In rights of way work, over the last dozen or so years, tangible results have become ever more elusive and ever-slower when they do come. So of course people drift away, and of course recruits do not fight to join the ranks, because once they take the shilling and kiss the (Blue) Book, they will be plunged into a complex and bottomless mire, not only dealing with actual cases, but also with heavy and often unrewarding time burdens, like LAFS, LTPs and RoWIPs.

In some areas there is a new generation of volunteers – in mountain biking, for example. These people are generally not bashing their heads against trees with rights of way work, but are out there ‘building trails’ in forestry plantations, with spectacularly successful results in terms of immediate return on effort, and the number of persons benefiting. This does suggest that volunteers will step forward where that results-for-effort compact still exists.

So, where do we go from here? This Trust was founded on the premise that our ancient highways – our byways and bridleways – are a unique and valuable heritage and public asset, and nothing has changed in that. Thirty years ago, and twenty, and ten, the future lay in the ‘big solution’ – the project, the Act of Parliament, the national investment – that was going to find all the unrecorded rights, and create more new, to build a network that serves the places that most people live and ride. The big solution never arrived, and it probably never will. The outcome of the post-*Discovering Lost Ways* Stakeholder Working Group may be one final opportunity to record ‘lost ways’ (and even that will probably be dependent for success upon an operational voluntary sector) but beyond that (and coastal access for walkers) whatever public money there is for ‘the outdoors’ is likely to be aimed squarely at the ‘obesity issue’, and, like it or not, arcane rights for a relatively few horse riders or classic vehicle enthusiasts will not cut much ice there.

The future is bleak? It rather depends on whether you view your cup as half full or half empty. The network of recorded byways and bridleways (leaving aside the stupidities of NERCA) is considerably greater than in 1979, not from any ‘grand plan’, but by the steady drip-drip-drip of local authorities and the voluntary sector in getting definitive map orders made and processed through. The condition of

rights of way is, overall, far better than in 1979, largely due to the leadership and funding provided by the old Countryside Commission in getting local authorities to haul their networks up to a reasonable baseline standard by 2000 – and in some cases well above that. Of course, all this improvement led quietly and inexorably to higher expectations from the public – maybe expectations that an historic highway network just cannot provide?

The Byways and Bridleways Trust would dearly love to welcome a well-funded ‘grand plan’ solution to there being more and better byways and bridleways, but on the lessons of the last thirty years, we do not think that this is likely to happen. That is not the end of the world. The current network needs considerable voluntary sector input – for example, it is hard to believe that there is still a considerable mileage of recorded byway and bridleway that is unusable by riders and cyclists due to obstruction, surface condition, and defective gates. The tools largely exist but are not taken up. As the old question posed to first year law students goes, ‘what does a person with a defective roof need: a lawyer, or a ladder?’

The Trust firmly believes that the future of our network of historical byways and bridleways (as well as additional routes to serve the places where most people live) can only be safeguarded by the reinvigoration of the voluntary sector. To be an active part of this, the Trust needs more people willing and able to work with the Trustees, both on national policy issues and in local matters. We are also investigating appointing additional Trustees to help take us forward towards our fiftieth birthday and, knowing how fast the last thirty years have flown, that is not very far away. If you feel that you could be a part of the Trust’s future, please look at our website for more information, and then write or e-mail to the Chairman of Trustees at our usual address.

# Byway and Bridleway