



The Disabled Rambler

The Newsletter of the Disabled Ramblers

July 2006

A charitable company : Registered Charity No. 1103508

Making our Views Known !

'You and Yours: Radio 4, Friday 19th May BBC features Disabled Access to the Countryside

It was very refreshing to find issues of countryside access featured on BBC radio. The popular midday consumer programme, 'You and Yours' did just that back in May! Guests invited to take part were Dr Helen Phillips, soon to become CEO of 'Natural England' at its formation in October 2006, Richard Mabey, author of a popular book 'Natures Cure', detailing the help given to the author while recovering from severe depression, and Dr Mike Bruton, Chairman of the Disabled Ramblers.



The programme started with recordings made on the Kent Viking Coastal Trail, where an extensive stretch has been improved, with grants from the Countryside Agency. A number of disabled users, mainly of adapted cycles, talked about their experiences of frustration and a lack of real countryside experience because of the usual difficulties of gaining access. However, where paths like the Viking Trail were available, disabled people experienced much freedom and joy when using them. Dr Phillips talked about the Countryside Agency Diversity Action plan to be launched also in May: this will contain many practical measures designed to improve the situation.

A further recording was then played featuring the installation of wheelchair friendly 'kissing' gate at Westbury on Severn. Using this with the help of a 'RADAR' key, a local wheelchair user explained how this has allowed him access to a considerable stretch of a Severnside trail, with wonderful scenery and great views.

Mike Bruton followed up this point by saying that in the experience of the Disabled Ramblers, there were two very particular needs to be answered. These were firstly, tackling the huge problems presented by stiles – the single most common obstruction to disabled people of all abilities right across our land, and secondly, providing information of use to disabled people about places where they can go and

not suffer the frustration of finding impassable barriers, or very bad going. Mike pointed to the miles of routes suitable for many disabled people that already exist provided by statutory or voluntary bodies like the Forestry Commission, British Waterways and Sustrans. These facilities are rarely promoted, but could constitute a substantial proportion of the National Paths and trails networks. Dr Phillips said that the Diversity Action plan included a project designed to move this information need forward.

Richard Mabey spoke movingly about his love of the countryside and explained how he had been helped recover from a severe depression. He felt the countryside should not be developed too much, as much of the enjoyment was to face up to the challenges it presents. The other speakers agreed. Mike talked about the sense of excitement and the adventure of exploring new places. All agreed that path improvements were necessary to enable disabled visitors fully to share in the joys of the Countryside!

Editor' Note: most of the presently constituted Countryside Agency merges with English Nature to form the new body 'Natural England' to be set up in this coming October. Watch out for this and also look out for the impact of the new Diversity Action Plan as it evolves!'

Letter from Mike Bruton, Chairman of the Disabled Ramblers

Dear Friends,

As I write this, summer seems at last to have arrived! The sun is shining and the temperature is around 23 degrees. Our rambles season has started, and I have been on several to date. I always get a great uplift of spirit and mood when I can get out, mount my buggy and set off.

Interestingly, in addition to actual rambling, the Disabled Ramblers has increasingly become involved in a wide variety of other activities. You will see two activities reported in this Newsletter which have involved me personally. These were, first, taking part in a BBC Radio 4 Programme, one of the 'You and Yours' series. We discussed access to the countryside for disabled people. The programme pointed to progress made, but highlighted the need for much more work to be done. The second activity involved a trip to Sheffield to interview candidates to take over as Chairman of a long standing informal consultative group, called 'Countryside for All'. This is supported by virtually all the statutory countryside bodies, but scantily attended by Disability Organisations. The new Chairman we appointed, Geoff Hatfield, we hope will seek to remedy this situation.

In addition to myself, other members of our Executive Committee have been involved with other bodies and activities. For example, Robin Helby and Rosie Norris have worked with the National Trust helping with some promising seminars and Alan Edwards continues to work with Welsh connections including the 'Cross Border' project, the CCW (Countryside Council for Wales) and the Snowdonia Society.

My contacts and our own experience have shown an appalling lack of information about where we can go and what paths we can use in the Countryside. This area is being looked at by our friends in the Sensory Trust and also by the Countryside Agency as part of their diversity review activities. Within our organisation, our friend John Smythson is busy compiling data and information, and we also moving towards establishing our own library of routes which we hope to begin to publish shortly on our web-site.

Our web-site can be viewed at :
www.disabledramblers.co.uk

We very much want to hear from YOU, members and

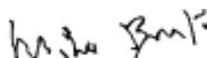
friends. Please write or email us with articles for publication, your views and queries. These ventures are for you, and we need your contributions!

Please email to: mike@thebrute.freereserve.co.uk, or write to:

The Disabled Ramblers, 14 Belmont Park Road,
Maidenhead, Berks SL6 6HT.

You can also phone Mike Bruton on: 01628 621414.

Signed



Mike Bruton
Chairman,
The Disabled Ramblers
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Web-site: www.disabledramblers.co.uk



Accessible Routes in the United Kingdom

Several of our members have written articles about the pleasures of taking a powered scooter or wheelchair to France to enjoy the freedom of kilometre after kilometre of accessible routes - unimpeded by man-made barriers. The situation is slowly starting to change in the UK, but it is a very slow process. Over the coming months, we hope to progressively add details of 'tried and tested' accessible routes in various parts of the UK to the 'Routes' page of our website.

In the meantime if you are looking for information about accessible routes in Scotland, then I would highly recommend Eva McCracken's book 'Walking on Wheels'. The information has been meticulously researched, and is beautifully presented with maps, photographs and 'fact files' for each route in a ring-bound pocket-sized book.

The book costs £10.99, and is available from Cualann Press, www.cualaan.com or telephone: 01383 733724
Or contact Eva directly by e-mail on:
eva.mccracken@getreal.co.uk

Alan Edwards

The Countryside for All Forum appoints a new Chairman

Geoff Hatfield takes on this important role

For several years the Disabled Ramblers has been represented on a National Forum designed to promote and take forward the all-important subject of access to the Countryside by Disabled People. The Forum under the name of 'Countryside for All' was originally set up to help steer the BT sponsored project of that name. BT put substantial funds into this project, with a twofold objective:

1. to fund a number of small scale projects around the UK providing improved physical access to sites of interest to disabled visitors
2. to produce standards and guidelines detailing good practice again towards improved physical guidance.

The Fieldfare Trust led this work, and produced the standards and guidelines under the name "BT Countryside for All a good practice guide to Disabled Peoples Access to the Countryside". An updated version of this document, with Fieldfare's own extra sections can be purchased on CD Rom directly from the Trust. BT Sponsorship finally ended just after the end of the millennium, with a final project called 'Millennium miles'. This final project was designed to publish details of 1000 miles of completed projects or existing paths which conform to the full BT Standards. Unfortunately, this project was not a success, and its failure underlined the difficulties in trying to achieve the published guidelines.

The Forum continued after the completion of the BT Sponsorship, and has attempted to move the access issue forward in the new situation. Unfortunately, this has proved difficult and disagreement resulted particularly over separate but related work sponsored by the Countryside Agency. Recently the CA published excellent new guidance under the name 'By all reasonable means' (can be obtained free from the Countryside Agency Publications Department at Wetherby in Yorkshire). Finally, the Chairman of the Forum resigned late last year. This could have marked the end of the Forum, but the members, consisting of most of the statutory bodies dealing with Countryside issues and voluntary bodies like Sustrans, the National Trust, the Ramblers Association and ourselves felt the Forum should continue with a new Chairman to provide new perspectives and a new direction.

We have now appointed the new Chairman, after conducting interviews during May this year. We are very fortunate to have the services of Geoff Hatfield, who has served as CEO of the Forestry Commission in recent years, but is now taking a career break. Geoff worked at Board level within the Commission at a time of unprecedented change, with the whole purpose and direction of Forestry operations in the UK moving from intensive production to conservation and recreation. The former resulted in visual monotony and environmental damage: this is now being reversed with emphasis of varied and more open planting, management of open spaces and the encouragement of visitors. Geoff welcomes the new policy and the ability it brings to disabled people to make full use of the Forest infrastructure like haul roads and good quality tracks. Many visitors centres have been built with refreshments and toilets and a wealth of information about woodlands and natural life. In fact, Forestry areas currently offer some of the very best access and recreation for disabled people who wish to visit unspoiled and natural places in our countryside.

Geoff has also gained considerable further insight into disability issues through voluntary work with severely disabled local people. Geoff, we are delighted to welcome you as our new Countryside for All Forum Chairman. We wish you every success and look forward to working with you on the all important subject of disabled access in the Countryside!

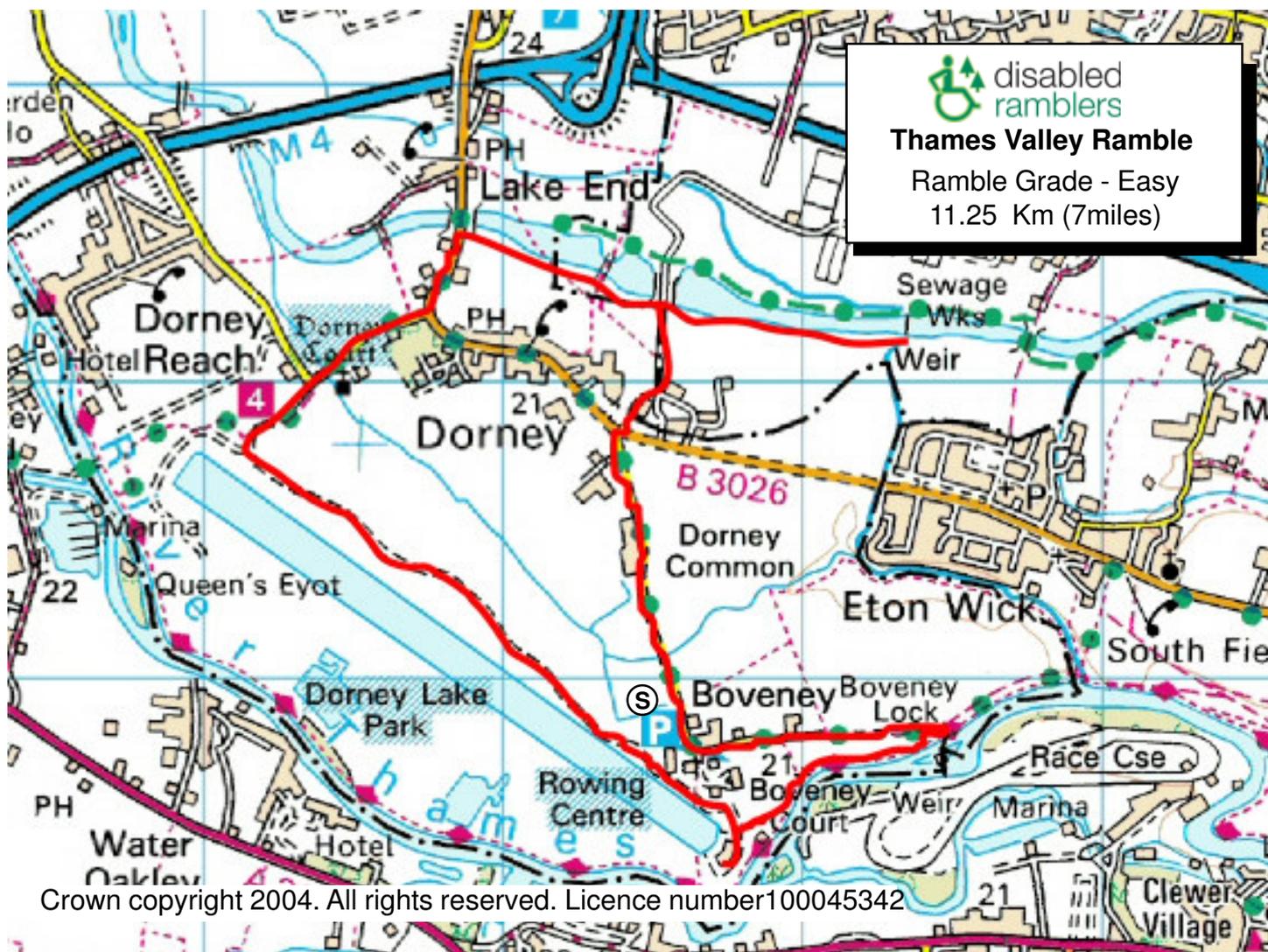
Mike Bruton

Large Ramble Launched by Two Mayors



The launch of one of the three Thames Valley Rambles this year

On May 30th, the Disabled Ramblers held the first of this season's three scheduled rambles in the Thames Valley. The easy ramble was attended by 17 disabled people, including five from the local Windsor and Maidenhead Shopmobility and twelve of our own members. The ramble was launched by two mayors – the Mayor of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, and the Chairman of the local South Bucks District Council. The day proved bright but cool, but the ramble was a great success and enjoyed by all who took part.



The route starts at Boveney Car Park (S) and first follows the lane over Dorney Common. At the junction with the busy main B3026, turn right and, with great care, follow the road for approximately 100 metres, before turning left along a wide track leading to houses. After leaving the Common, continue along a gated concrete roadway to the Jubilee River. This was constructed a few years ago as a flood relief channel to protect Maidenhead and Windsor. Next turn right along the cycleway through an area called the Dorney wetlands to view a weir. At this point, retrace your route and continue along the river bank until you reach another point on the B3026. Exit through a kissing gate with a large refuge designed to take the biggest buggies. Cross the main road, turn left along the pavement until you reach the edge of Dorney village. Take the first road to the right, leading away from the village. Very soon you pass a Garden Centre which has a disabled accessible toilet attached to a coffee shop, which serves a variety of food, including lunches. Continue along the road until it turns sharply right. You will see the entrance at this point to the Eton Rowing Lake. There is a bridle route entry to this site on the left. After a short distance, the lake opens up to the left. Go left along the lakeshore on a tarmac path. This lake is newly constructed but is already world famous as a centre of rowing championship events. At the end of the lake, go past the boathouse/pavilion down a short connecting footpath to join the Thames Tow Path National Trail. Follow this left, past a beautiful mediaeval church until you reach Boveney Lock. Turn sharply left along the access road, which is lined with horse chestnut trees, known appropriately as 'conker' alley! At the end, go through a side gate on to the public road, and very soon turn left to the starting car park. This is also the finishing point for the ramble.

Toilets: There are no toilet facilities at the start (and end) point. Disabled accessible toilets are available at the Garden Centre referred to above...

Ross-on-Wye Buggy Route

The Ross-on-Wye Group of the Ramblers' Association is planning a circular route around and through Ross-on-Wye that will be accessible to wheelchairs, electrically powered invalid vehicles, pushchairs and buggies. The route will be about four miles in length with numerous entry and exit points for those who do not wish to complete the full distance.

Although organised walks have been arranged locally over many years, there has always been the problem that wheelchair users could not come on these walks as the terrain was unsuitable. It was agreed that a "Wheelchair Friendly" route around Ross would be a great benefit. This concept developed so that users of pushchairs and electrically powered wheelchairs could also use it. A route was devised, and members of the Ramblers' Committee did a preliminary survey, and approved the plan. A small sub-committee was then given the task of making the idea a reality.

Local Councillors gave their enthusiastic support to the project, and among the points discussed were ideas for possible funding - as well as suggestions for involving other local organisations in the planning and implementing of the project. Local Doctors have seen the potential benefits of using the route as a basis for what they term "Prescription Walks". These are relatively short walks and will be "prescribed" for patients who would benefit from gentle exercise as a means to improving their health without using drugs

Herefordshire Council Rights of Way Department surveyed the route, and during this exercise potential problems came to light. The sub-committee decided that the project could be split into two parts, with a suggested "cross-town" link. One half of the route would be considered as Phase 1, and the problem section as Phase 2 that would be completed later.

One of the Council Officers and Alan Edwards of the Disabled Ramblers were invited to survey the proposed link route and this identified some problems that required some modifications to the original idea for the link route.

The Rights of Way Manager, Rob Hemblade, suggested that a full feasibility study of the whole project should be carried out and offered to set aside some money as a contribution to the costs in the fiscal 2005/06 budget.

Assuming that the funding outcome is positive then construction could start in fiscal year 2007/08

France

Last year I set myself a challenge, to extend my holiday in France to beyond Normandy, Brittany and the Dordogne. It is not difficult for a wheelchair user like myself to find via disability magazines or the internet self catering accommodation which meets my needs in these 3 areas. I am a paraplegic and as the terminology goes, "self propelled" - what a clumsy description. I wanted to revisit the Central Massif. I still have glorious memories of a 3 week exchange there over 40 years ago. I came from London and discovered the joys of living in the heart of the countryside. Wine was bought by the jugful, the cows wore bells and fringes round their eyes, going round hairpin bends on the mountain sides whilst the driver took both hands off the wheel and turned round to talk to me sitting in the back of the car.

A friend recommended gites. These are self-catering accommodation which meet certain standards. They can be booked via agents or directly through the gite organisation for the province. Their web address is www.gites-de-france.fr/eng/. I chose to make arrangements through the 'Departement' having first obtained the booklet listing all gites in that area, including those adapted for disabled users. I stayed in 2, one near Le Loire and the other in the Auvergne. I needed primitive French to talk to the owners and English with the agency, although for the agencies I contacted their English was as good as my French ! Both gites were a great success.



Maria enjoying the peace and solitude of the forest

Exploring the countryside was fun. I went with a friend and neither of us did any prior research about the areas we were staying in. There were farm tracks, country lanes, forest paths, windy mountain tops, chateaus to

wander round, restaurants to discover, shopping for food. I could go on. Disabled loos whilst intermittent were not a problem. Supermarkets are a good place to start looking. Incidentally I didn't get used to shop opening hours. By the time I had finished a leisurely breakfast the shops were closing for their 2/3 hour lunch break. A different pace of life. I loved it and will definitely be doing this type of holiday again.

Maria Davies

The Ramblers' Association's Annual General Council

Campaigning was the theme of the Ramblers' Association's Annual General Council this year, which kicked off with a media launch for local press in Staffordshire of the Use Your Paths Challenge (www.useyourpaths.info).

Over 300 delegates descended on the tiny but picturesque village of Keele in Staffordshire to welcome in Kate Ashbrook, the new chairman, as well as shape the work of the organisation for the coming year.

The conference included the obligatory annual ramble before the Area representatives got stuck into the earnest work of deciding some of the priorities for the Association which included climate change, footpath improvement plans, coastline and riverside erosion, coastal access and campaigning against YHA closures. Important changes to the way Areas receive funds were also approved – the new funding system means that Areas (the county branches of the RA) will submit budgets for their work and funds will be allocated according to need.

The RA's core charitable objectives were also discussed in workshops throughout the weekend with delegates invited to what were called 'Big Think sessions' on the energy challenge, promoting walking to a wider audience, coastal access in England and Wales, empowering ordinary walkers: the way forward for rights of way and recruiting new members and keeping them.

Sharon Woods,
Media Manager, The Ramblers' Association

Alternative Summer Activities for Disabled People

On leaving a Spinal Unit in 1998 and looking for new activities, I came across the Calvert Trust, named after Raisley Calvert, who lent his house to William and Dorothy Wordsworth in 1794. 180 years later this house became the Calvert Trust Centre on Bassenthwaite Lake near Keswick, organising activities for the disabled. Some Ramblers will have become familiar with the Centre, providing support and offering accommodation for some Lake District Rambles. I have participated in a number of activities organised by the Trust, of which I will outline three.

The first was a "multi-activity holiday" at the Centre, which happened to coincide with one of those rare events in the Lake District, a week of uninterrupted sunshine! We started the week with a ramble up Latrigg, one of the lower hills above Keswick, all in manual wheelchairs, but with some assistance on the steeper parts. The summit offers spectacular views.

On some days there was a choice of activities. One day was spent canoeing from halfway down Derwent Water to a jetty north of the Centre on Bassenthwaite, including a section of the River Derwent. Another half day was spent abseiling down a cliff near Keswick, a frightening experience for a beginner! The penultimate day involved a camping expedition to a site at Stonethwaite, near Borrowdale, again a new experience for me since becoming wheelchair-dependent. The last evening included a barbecue at the Centre while watching the sunset!

The Calvert Trust arranges a multi-activity holiday in the Pyrenees annually in late summer. There, all is on a bigger scale. The first day's trip took us, after a fairly long drive, up a couple of chair lifts for a ramble through magnificent scenery high in the Pyrenees, to Lac de Gaube in the Parc National. Another day involved some 'white-water rafting' down the River Pan, fortunately not in full spate when we went there! Then there was a day of canoeing on Lac de Lourdes, a half-day doing a form of dogsledding, and another quad-biking on a large farm. One day was spent microlighting over a large valley of mainly duck farms! But the most frightening was paragliding, with an instructor, from a mountain ledge to the valley floor. I found it a bit less alarming when I shut my eyes firmly until we were well away from the mountainside. The wonderful views emerged as we remained buoyant in the strong thermals that day, eventually descending towards the valley floor as the instructor kept shouting 'les vaches'. I thought he must be a keen farmer until I realised that he was trying to get someone to shoo away the cows that had found that the landing area provided good grazing on which to settle!

Our accommodation had been booked in Lourdes, which has plenty of hotels with disabled room, and lots of flights used mainly by pilgrims. But the town is hilly with many high pavements without run-offs for wheelchairs! Our leader lived locally, and knew many good local village restaurants for gastronomic evenings.



Jim takes to the air !

My most momentous activity holiday, however, was rafting down the Grand Canyon in 2003. Once every two years the Calvert Trust arranges for a small group to fly to Las Vegas to join up with a similar American group. At the start of the 15-day trip, the huge contrast was evident between the glitz of Las Vegas and the extreme isolation of the Canyon floor at Lees' Ferry, not far away. (A 'ferry' is a place where the river water is usually sufficiently low and placid for horses to cross!) Here we began our 220-mile river journey. The pattern of a typical day was getting up at sunrise, a quick breakfast, packing up, a few hours' journey down the river, a leisurely lunch on the shore using any shade available (it was about 35 degrees C by then), further rafting until late afternoon, then setting up camp on the shore, and a substantial meal. I found the ever-changing but always spectacular scenery, the peaceful flow of the river, the complete absence throughout of any building or other sign of civilisation, a wonderful experience, contrasting with some very fierce rapids!

The vegetation is sparse and mainly confined to the river bank, along parts of which American Indians farmed around 1000 years ago, when the banks were more fertile. A 'campsite' consisted of a sandy bank on which camping was permitted; everything had to be brought in and all refuse taken away next morning. Consequently, of the six boats in our party one was a large motorised raft full of equipment and supplies for 15 days, and of increasing amounts of refuse later. The equipment included a network of matting to facilitate the movement of wheelchairs over the campsite. There were four other boats each manned by a leader, and one boat manned by members of the group in rotation, and a couple of inflatables for single occupancy along quieter stretches of the river. 92% of the journey was in

relatively gently flowing water, and the other 8% of fast flowing water including 93 rapids with varying degrees of severity graded from 3 to 10. After going under the road bridge at Lees' Ferry at the start of the trip, there was only one other river crossing in the 220 miles, a footbridge crossing the river along a Canyon path on Day 7.



The spectacular landscape of the Grand Canyon

No mobile phones nor radios are allowed, and the number of people allowed on the river at any one time is strictly limited, leaving one to fully appreciate the quiet solitude of much of the river's course, and the full fury of some rapids. The Americans have a rich heritage here that they are determined to preserve. In appreciation of this, our last morning involved rising long before dawn, packing up and heading down the river in complete silence except for the numerous bird songs, as the sun rose above the Canyon walls. Three hours later the river journey ended at Harper's Ferry with a hearty breakfast and a long and dusty bus journey back to civilization !

Jim Robinson

HOLIDAY ACCOMMODATION

Have you ever looked at a really old map and noticed how the compiler labels an unknown part of the world? He puts "Here be dragons."

Holiday accommodation is a bit like that. What you book is probably unknown and although there won't be dragons there, other nasty surprises may well await you.



A good example is what happened to me last year. We wanted a self-catering cottage which slept four and was suitable for wheelchairs. We spotted one that sounded right in a brochure but before booking my wife took our usual precaution of phoning to make sure that their understanding of "suitable for wheelchairs" was satisfactory. They phoned the owner and were told it was "definitely suitable: many people in wheelchairs had used the cottage". Thus reassured we booked. When we got there we found the outside door difficult but possible to get through. Not so the bathroom door; its door was much too narrow. (How had the "many wheelchair users" who had preceded me managed? Every one of them must have had a narrower wheelchair than mine.) The owner can't have known - or cared perhaps - that wheelchairs come in more than one width.

All was not lost. The owner was away but the lady who was standing in for her came round soon after we arrived to see if everything was all right. On hearing about the problem and what we hoped would be a solution - removing the rims - she disappeared and came back with a selection of screwdrivers likely to include one that fitted. One did; off came the rims and into the bathroom I sailed - or rather scraped: even with the most careful maneuvering I couldn't do it without scraping paint off the door frame.

I've only come across that problem once but there are plenty of others. A favorite among B & B providers is a bedroom which is too narrow for a wheelchair to get alongside the bed. How the wheelchair user gets into the bed is of no concern to them.

A different kind of problem came with a booking I made without thinking of the trouble it would cause my wife. It seemed fine to me as there was a stairlift up both flights of stairs. I had overlooked the fact that there wouldn't be a wheelchair at the top unless someone hauled mine up. (It didn't help that when we got to the bedroom we found it was permeated by the smell of the adjacent pig farm. Luckily the wind blew the other way for all the rest of our stay.)



So to be on the safe side you have to make sure the provider is asked about every detail that matters such

as the width of not only the front door, but the bedroom, bathroom, loo and dining room doors as well.

If you think you will be embarrassed by asking the sort of questions which may cause the owner trouble you can avoid it by booking through an agency and getting them to do it.. Even that doesn't always work: we did book the Harrogate cottage through an agency and they were reassuring about the suitability of the cottage for wheelchairs. We must have assumed that they had done their homework. But why be embarrassed? After all, it's your money they're after and they need your booking. You may not know of any alternatives in the area but they don't know that.

Another thing that some vendors don't know is what makes a place 'suitable for wheelchairs'. That includes hotels! We booked a hotel in Rheims (for one night only, luckily) which a guide book said was suitable. Oh yeah! Irritatingly, the lift was almost too small but the real killer was the four sets of stairs that the lift didn't avoid. Only 2,2,2 and 1, admittedly, but they were by no means shallow. Fortunately my wife is strong. So even if there ought to be no need to ask questions, ask them anyway and be specific. (In French? Perhaps. But what if you are staying in Well, sometimes you just can't.)

Things can go wrong even when you think you've taken every precaution. DFDS (Danish Seaways) went to the trouble of adapting the tour of Denmark they offer so that we would have a wheelchair-friendly room in a suitable hotel in each town - five altogether. In due course DFDS phoned us to say that all that had been done. And yes, the first one was fine. But not the other four. The only course was to speak nicely to the receptionists. Three of them made the obvious reallocation of rooms; the other one was so disgusted that she upgraded us to a suite at no extra cost. When we got home we spoke to DFDS about it and it turned out that they use another agency to deal with hotels and had been misinformed by them.

We have found a silver lining in the home countries in the form of Premier Travel Inns - a chain of over 200 fairly basic hotels which all have good disabled facilities.

Are we unusually unlucky - or incompetent - or do all disabled people have problems? Do write and tell us. And don't forget to tell us your recommendations and any silver lining you've found.

John Smythson