

## Mike Bruton

### When Was the Disabled Ramblers Group founded?

The idea of the Disabled Rambling was conceived by Mike Bruton in the late 1980s when he was forced by his disability (Marie Charcot Tooth Disease I believe) to retire early from BA. Whilst Chief Exec for the Disabled Drivers Assoc for 4 years from 1991, he established a nucleus of rambling enthusiasts and established its feasibility. In 1996 he was the key instigator in forming the "Countryside Access Group" as a formal interest group of the Disabled Drivers Association. In 2000 the name was changed to the "Disabled Ramblers".

### The Group's Aims

These are 5-fold:

#### **Social Activities:**

Organisation of rambles around the country, for people with mobility limitations.

#### **Campaigning:**

Locally and nationally to establish better access, underpinned as necessary by Disability Rights Legislation.

#### **Education:**

To raise awareness of the need and opportunities for country access locally and nationally, to planners, landowners and to disabled people themselves.

#### **Information:**

To channel information on standards, contacts, accessible places and ramble opportunities available and suitable for ramblers with mobility problems. To keep track of new equipment. To produce a regular members newsletter.

#### **Technology:**

To review existing wheelchairs, powerchairs and scooters able to help disabled people in the countryside and to promote new technology solutions.

### What part did Mike play in getting the Group going?

Mike essentially was the inspiration for the setting up the Group. In his earlier days he had been an active walker in the countryside, but had to give this up as his health deteriorated. In 1991 to raise money for his disability, Mike got wide sponsorship for a 50 mile journey along the famous Ridgeway. BA apprentices mounted a standard plane seat on a two-wheeled chariot. He sat in the seat whilst teams pulled him along. This was how the disabled were seen, i.e. passive passengers, but Mike realised that he could manage many ordinary country paths himself, if he had a suitable set of wheels and some support.

Mike then organised informal weekends with disabled friends in the New Forest. These were popular and successful, and established the potential at a time when the countryside was seen as "out of bounds" to the disabled.

In addition to being the Chief Exec of the Disabled Driving Association (DDA) from 1991-95, he and the late Peter Field, MBE, were active in setting up the Windsor and Maidenhead Users Network (W AMU), a local organisation of disabled people. Aided by a grant from BT, W AMU carried out a survey of a local stretch of the Thames Path (from Windsor to Maidenhead) and this was then upgraded to become accessible to suitably equipped and supported wheelchairs and scooters.

Leading on from this Mike prepared a report "The Way Ahead" which was presented at a conference in Ascot in 1996, attended by 140 delegates nationwide, including

Rights of Way Officers and Land Managers. A second conference took place in Ascot in November 2000 at which one of the speakers was Margaret Hodge, the then Minister for Disabled People.

In 1996 Mike was the key instigator in forming the "Countryside Access Group" (CAG) as a formal interest group of the Disabled Drivers Assoc. Elected Chairman of the CAG, he was the leading light in organising a busy programme of rambles on a national basis. At the same time he was a local councilor and lay preacher, but still found time and energy to inspire his fellow trustees to take the campaign for better access to central government.

In 1998, in the face of skepticism and discouragement, he organised a party consisting of himself and three other disabled ramblers, plus four helpers, to undertake a 62 mile trip along the Thames Trail from Oxford to Maidenhead. All finished and Richard Simmons, Chairman of the then Countryside Commission, acknowledged that this had fundamentally changed the Commission's attitude towards access.

In 2000 Mike and Peter Field organised another conference *"New Millennium: New Horizons for Disabled Ramblers"* with the keynote speech given by Margaret Hodge MBE, MP, Minister for Disabled People. Also in 2000 the CAG changed their name to the "Disabled Ramblers".

The number of rambles has gradually increased over the years: in the early 90s Mike organised an annual ramble in the New Forest, in 1996 there were two rambles (Thames Path and New Forest), a third was added a year later (Kielder Forest) and from 1998 onwards the number has grown from 10 a year to 25 days rambling in 2003. These rambles are around 7 - 10 miles in length, taking place anywhere from Cornwall to Northumberland, the Brecon Beacons to the South Coast..

From the formation of the CAG in '96 and the Disabled Ramblers Mike has been the Chairman. He has also had direct responsibility for organising the programme of rambles each year, which involves much research and checking into potential routes, as well as finding volunteers to support the ramblers. Mike still finds the time to go on most rambles.

The DDA Countryside Access Group was formed in 1996 and was run by an management committee which also included Peter Field MBE (Treasurer), Lazo Koncar MBE (Secretary), Roger Fitzwater and Robin Helby (Technical Advisors on manual wheelchairs and powered vehicles respectively), and Roy Thompson MBE. The Group's Constitution was established in 1996. The Group itself was officially launched at a general meeting in 1997 and achieved registered charity status in 1998.

### **How Widespread Is the Group's Membership?**

As a national Group, the Disabled Ramblers attracts members from right across England and Wales, plus a handful from Scotland and Ireland.

### **What Part Does Mike Play in the Group's current activities?**

As Chairman of the Disabled Ramblers since its inception, Mike has inspired loyalty, friendship and interest. He has also managed to organise the day to day details of

running the Group (initial reconnoiter of rambles, organisation of rambles programme, provision of ramble and accommodation details to members), helped by his secretary and from March 2003 by the Vice Chairman, Robin Helby.

Over the last 10 years or so Mike has continued to enthusiastically promote the cause of countryside access for people with mobility problems. He has forged strong contacts with the Countryside Commission and its successor, the Countryside Agency, the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Areas (DEFRA) and the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP), the National Trust, British Waterways, the Ramblers' Association (to which the Group is affiliated, again thanks to Mike's efforts) and to legion Rights of Way Officers and Land Managers. With Roger Fitzwater and Robin Helby, Mike gave a presentation to the All Party Disablement Group at Westminster (House of Lords) and to the Disability Rights Task Force, a government led group seeking to improve the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. Mike was also actively involved in producing proposals for the Countryside Rights of Way Bill (The CROW Act), supported in the House of Lords by the Group's President, Baroness Darcy de Knayth.

As a Councillor in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead for many years, Mike has continually had to juggle with the many demands on his time. As Mayor of Windsor and Maidenhead (from May 2003) Mike has this year naturally, and temporarily, had to reduce the number of rambles he would normally have attended. We look forward to seeing him at many more rambles in the 2004 programme. His commitment to countryside access for people with mobility problems has however never wavered and he continues campaigning whenever opportunities allow. Most recently Mike has been supporting a new Code of Practice for Land Managers (at meetings with the Countryside Agency), undertaking discussions both with the DWP, with a view to possible improvements in the 1995 Disabled Discrimination Act and with private landowners, seeking an extension of estate access for people with mobility problems.

Over the years Mike has constantly demonstrated a most persuasive way with words, from speaking at many, many public meetings, to seeking out a way forward for countryside access at committee meetings where the outcome might be in doubt. He is essentially a diplomat, always trying to take people with him. He is charming, with a lovely sense of humor, energetic, determined and completely focused. His interest in achieving country access for people with mobility problems has given our members a great freedom: to be in the fresh air in places they either thought they would never be able to get to or, in some instances, never imagined they could ever return to. Through his quiet enthusiasm and example he has brought hope to disabled people who otherwise saw their life as in decline.

Rosie Norris 15-10-2002