

# The serious side of a good LAF



**W**hile it's hard to resist the obvious pun on the acronym for Hertfordshire's Local Access Forum ("LAF"), it soon becomes clear that the job of promoting enjoyment of the local countryside is, deep down, a serious business.

The Forum, which was set up in 2003, is a diverse group of people who meet up regularly to discuss ways of improving public access to the local countryside – and then advise the county council and other organisations how such improvements could be brought about.

Although the LAF was formed as a direct response to government legislation, its 12 members in Herts are genuinely enthusiastic about what they do, whether they are walkers, cyclists, horse riders, trail bikers, 4x4 drivers, or land managers and owners representing their own special areas of interest. Such is their commitment that the members, who have all been through a rigorous application and selection process, receive no remuneration apart from expenses.

One virtue of the Forum is that it enables landowners and those with an interest in recreational access to get together and pursue a common purpose – and learn more about one another's concerns at the same time. Before the LAF was formed, landowners were not normally included in the ranks of other, non-statutory bodies involved in this kind of work.



## John Camp, Press Officer of Hertfordshire County Council hails the enthusiasm of the Local Access Forum



"Members of the LAF are attracted by the fact that its remit is to look at the generality of access to the countryside, rather than looking at specific issues and not getting bogged-down with the minutiae of footpath law," says Richard Cuthbert, the Forum's advisor and Head of the Rights of Way Service at Hertfordshire County Council.

"There is a need to be independently minded and to accept - while to some extent pursuing one's own concerns - that other interests, other user groups or land managers, can have valid points or issues. There is a need not to pursue to excess one's own hobby-horses.

"Local Access Forums were first involved with Open Access Land, which comprises almost entirely common land in Hertfordshire and the county council's development of its Rights of Way Improvement Plan. My own feeling was that the Forum was a very useful source of input to the plan. As they were generally constructive, this helped the plan to be one of the earlier ones to be completed by a Highway Authority - and indeed some of the improvements sought in the plan are now being implemented, a prime example being the Ayot Greenway in the west of the county."

Norman Jones, a Rambler and Forum member picked up the point: "I think the Forum makes progress by respecting the other members' positions and appreciating the possibility of minority positions. Generally any positive changes have come about through the actions of the Rights of Way Service (or Hertfordshire Highways) but I hope by providing positive input to any plans the Forum has helped suitable, well-planned improvements to occur."

During the summer of 2009, members of the LAF visited the Ayot Greenway, the old railway line from Welwyn Garden City to Wheathampstead and its extension to Harpenden and the county boundary at

Luton. They were there to review the improvements recently made to the off-road route for walkers, cyclists and horse riders, which include a new bridge, extensive resurfacing and signposting.

This beautiful route runs through the rolling countryside of central Hertfordshire, from the idyllic landscape of the Brocket estate, which inspired Lord Byron, through the heart of Wheathampstead and into the pastoral tranquillity of the Lea Valley beyond.

All of which may prompt some to wonder - with such outstanding countryside there for the taking, so to speak, what is it that members look at when they are out and about? It's an apposite question, which does not have a simple answer, but there are some useful clues in Richard Cuthbert's recollection of the Ayot Greenway visit:

"The main things we wanted to look at and talk about on our visit were how to cater for as many user groups as possible with minimal conflict (walkers, cyclists, horse riders and horse & carriage drivers if possible) all on one shared route with limited width in places," he said. "We also wanted to see how to make the best new links through the missing sections and how to get as many users as possible off the busy main roads.

"We walked the relevant sections of the route (hopping into a minibus to save time and cover as much ground as possible in-between) and gave some thought to what has already been done to make things easier for the different user groups as we went, including the new cycle bridge over the Lower Luton Road at East Hyde on the county boundary, which is an important safety feature on the route.

"As we passed East Hyde, it was good to see the new bridge glistening in its new coat of green paint - an attractive piece of civil engineering against the concrete backdrop of the sewage plant! While finishing touches were obviously still needed, the group

was pleased with the progress made and the difference that the bridge will make to so many people.

"Heading back towards Wheathampstead, a gentle climb up the valley side brought its own rewards of panoramic views from the Luton Hoo estate in the west to the edges of Wheathampstead in the east. Discussion turned to the lower than waist-high modern crops, and this led to memories of barley which used to be head-high - which might have been an advantage to the people whom we couldn't avoid spotting enjoying some informal recreation among the ears of corn in the field edges!

"Joking aside, though, the countryside means different things to different people and organisations, and their interests all have to co-exist, which is really where the LAF comes in as a representative body. By representing all those different interests in a co-ordinated way, we can work through problems and any potential areas of conflict that might arise."

Norman Jones also takes a pragmatic view of the role of the LAF in years to come: "A challenge for the future is to be constructive towards the high level of development which is planned in many areas of the county and ensure the provision of real natural country in close proximity to new developments and not an artificial over-managed country park type countryside," he said. "In the meantime, we'll stay positive and soldier on in Byron's footsteps!"

Applications to join the LAF are still welcome from members of the public especially those with experience in cycling, land management, access for people with disabilities and young people. Anybody interested in joining should call Richard Cuthbert or Bob Fenton at Hertfordshire County Council on 01992 555279.

(Special thanks are due to Richard Cuthbert and Norman Jones for providing the extensive information and interview material for this article.)

*February 2013*

*Hertfordshire Countryside - 39*