

## **AGM - Saturday, 09 May 2009**

### **YDS Chairman's Report for 2008/2009**

This has been a successful year for your Society, though we are still dealing with the after-effects of the retirement of the founder-Secretaries Colin and Fleur Speakman and also that of the long-serving Treasurer David Smith. We were very sad that shortly after last year's AGM David, who had been extremely active as a walker and cyclist throughout his life, died after a relatively short illness. I would like here to record again our gratitude for all that he did for the Yorkshire Dales Society and to express our condolences to Judith, his widow.

Last year I introduced you to a very capable young farmer's wife and teacher who had agreed to become our Treasurer. She made a good start, but found that the increased demands of her job at Bradford College and her three young children made it impossible for her to continue. So the Society is very grateful that a current member of Council, Rhona Thornton, stepped in as Acting Treasurer and saw us through a period when it was necessary to examine our finances and especially our investments very carefully. We are even more grateful that she has agreed to continue in the role of Treasurer if, as I am sure you will, you elect her to that position in a few minutes.

I told you last year that we had instituted a system of three main committees of Council to oversee our areas of work. That system has now bedded in and generally is proving very successful. So I will continue this report by looking at some of the areas with which the Committees have concerned themselves this year.

First, since we are above all a **campaigning organisation**, the Policy Committee (or to give it the full title, which describes its areas of concern: the Environment, Social and Economic Committee) under the Chairmanship of Hugh Thornton. A major subject of debate this year has been "green energy". We have had little difficulty in supporting a number of initiatives in the Dales for using water to generate electricity. Indeed, one of the Society's most popular visits was to Gayle Mill, where we saw how the old water leat and turbine system had been revived to provide the power for the timber-working operations now reintroduced. We are proud that one of the members of our Council, John Cumberland, has been very involved in the restoration project for Gayle Mill. However, we are not so ready to support a number of recent applications to build turbines using wind-power.

We agree that there is a need – nationally, regionally and locally – for developments providing renewable energy, and we support some small-scale proposals. But in the case of the planning applications at Brightenber (near Gargrave), Chelker (above Draughton) and Armistead (on the ridge between the Lune and Kent Valleys), we do not consider that there is such a case for these highly intrusive wind farms, in those locations, as to override the need to safeguard the National Park and the wider Dales landscape and also the contribution which tourism makes to the economy of this area.

It is true that all the proposed sites I have mentioned are outside the National Park. But the experience of an area such as the Dales does not depend only on views within the area itself; it is greatly affected by its "setting" and by views outwards. The famous views down Wharfedale from around Bolton Abbey, celebrated by both the artist Turner and the poet Wordsworth, would be blighted by the gigantic turbines proposed at Chelker Reservoir. Moreover, research in several parts of the UK indicates that the presence of wind farms in close proximity to a National Park reduce the likelihood of tourists visiting the area. So, in addition to the direct visual impact of a windfarm, there is an indirect impact on potential tourists' perceptions, which in turn will have an adverse impact on the local economy, including B&Bs, self-catering accommodation, caravan parks and camp sites.

After several debates about these issues, a paper pulling together the Society's position on renewable energy was drafted by former National Park Officer Richard Harvey, whom we are fortunate to have as a member of the Committee. This will form the basis of any future statements on these matters.

This is just one illustration of the work of the Policy Committee. We have also given our attention to subjects including affordable housing, upland farming and the future support schemes (where we had a most useful briefing by farmer and archaeologist Tom Lord), and the new Three Peaks Project of the National Park Authority (which was outlined for us by the Area Ranger Steve Hastie).

The Events, Communication and Membership Committee has continued under the Chairmanship of Chris Wright and reflects our role as an **educational charity**, serving both our own members and the wider public. One of the best-attended events in the history of YDS was held at Bolton Abbey Village Hall in October: one of our Vice-Presidents, TV Weatherman Paul Hudson, gave an excellent lecture on Climate Change. Other lectures have covered bridges in the Dales, wildlife in grass verges and the deservedly-famous restoration projects at Gayle Mill and Hellifield Peel – both of which also provided the venues for well-supported visits. Indeed, Hellifield Peel has proved so popular that we have organised three visits and still have people wanting to go. Most of the lectures were preceded by a walk in the area, and other walks were organised especially during the summer months. Many of these had an educational element: for instance, looking at the flora around Ingleborough SSI or Oxenber Woods, or learning to use GPS to engage in “Geocaching”. We are grateful to all our speakers and walks leaders.

With regard to the “Communications” part of its brief, the Committee (under the editorship of Fleur Speakman) has been responsible for four excellent editions of *Yorkshire Dales Review*, which as usual has included a range of interesting and thought-provoking articles and some fine illustrations. We are very fortunate that our President Bill Mitchell, a long-time editor of the *Dalesman* and a prolific author, is a member of the Committee, and has himself contributed a number of pieces. We must also remember the equally valuable *DalesWatch Digest*, which gathers together press clippings from local and wider sources on matters affecting the Dales. Rhona Thornton has continued to produce quarterly issues of this important YDS publication. And the Society also maintains two fine websites: in addition to our own constantly updated site, we also operate the *Dales Heritage* website containing details of over 80 organisations representing a wide range of aspects of Dales heritage. This reflects one of the YDS main objectives: to bring together organisations with a love of and interest in the Dales.

The same Committee is of course responsible for Membership matters, and here two things deserve mention. First, the Society had a stand at several major shows in the Dales, including those at Kilnsey, Burnsall and Pateley Bridge. Second, it has recently conducted a postal survey of the membership, in an effort to learn more about our members and what they feel about the Society, and to use this information for future planning and recruiting.

The third Committee, that concerned with Finance and Governance, is chaired by myself – and I am sure it is the least interesting to most of you. But we do have to ensure that your Society continues to operate in a way which satisfies the requirements of the Charities Commission and also, because we are also a limited company, those of Companies House. This year it has been particularly important that we manage the YDS finances in the most efficient way. As interest rates have changed constantly, and much of our investment is relatively short-term, we have needed the regular advice of Rhona Thornton about how to achieve the best returns, and we are greatly indebted to her.

In addition to our roles as a campaigning organisation and an educational charity, we have in recent years developed a function of **public benefit delivery**. This has been achieved through our wholly-owned social enterprise company, the Dales and Bowland Community Interest Company. This provides YDS with a mechanism to work with other partner organisations to develop projects to benefit both local communities and visitors. As was to be expected in view of Colin Speakman’s experience and expertise, the main focus has continued to be on the provision and promotion of public transport to enable local people to get around the Dales or Bowland, and to make it possible for those without cars who live outside these areas to get into the countryside.

After a successful year in 2008, funding has now been achieved from a range of other organisations that will enable the company to run a network of Sunday and Bank Holiday services in 2009 that will be the most fully integrated network ever available in the Dales. Bus services in the Dales will connect with those from West Yorkshire and also with trains on the Settle-Carlisle and Wensleydale Railways, and for those who want them a series of walks will be offered in connection with some of the services. This is something about which the Yorkshire Dales Society can feel proud, and it is fully in line with our charitable object of enabling and encouraging “the advancing of public knowledge and appreciation of the special qualities of the Dales”.

I think you will also be interested in two matters outside our own recent activity, but where YDS has had an involvement over a number of years.

The first is the use of “green lanes” by recreational motor vehicles (motor-bikes and “4 by 4”s). The Society has supported a number of initiatives to limit this activity because of the damage it causes both to the surface of the routes – which can become unpleasant or even impossible for other users - and also to the tranquillity one expects to find in an area like the Dales. The Yorkshire Dales National Park was in the forefront of pressing for a change in legislation that would enable them to regulate this activity more effectively. The necessary powers were given through an Act of Parliament in 2006, and the Dales has been the first National Park to use them. It is necessarily a lengthy process, involving several stages of investigation and consultation for each particular route, but last year Traffic Regulation Orders were placed on 13 of the most sensitive “green lanes”, including such iconic routes as Mastiles Lane, Foxup Road and Lady Anne’s Highway. I am pleased to tell you that these TROs have led to a dramatic reduction in the use of these routes by motor vehicles, and that damaged sections have been repaired or are spontaneously recovering. Moreover, there is no evidence of “displacement” onto other routes in the Dales; in fact, the overall use of the area by motor vehicles is decreasing. The Society has fully supported the National Park Authority in what it is doing.

The second matter is particularly appropriate for me to report on in the presence of today’s speaker. You may have heard that there was a recent announcement that the South Downs is to be designated as a new National Park next year. We welcome this addition to the family of national parks - both for its own sake and also because it means progress can be made on a matter much closer to home.

Some years ago our sister organisation the Friends of the Lake District engaged in a project to press for the extension of the Lake District National Park into areas bordering the Park that fully merited National Park status. They were encouraged to extend their study to other parts of Cumbria, and this led them to examine parts of the county on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, including Mallerstang and Wild Boar Fell, the Northern Howgill Fells, and the fells to the east of the Lune Valley. Our Society gave moral and what financial support it could to this part of the project. Even before it was complete, the then Countryside Agency took it up and started to work on possible boundary extensions to the two Parks. In my first Chairman’s Report to you four years ago I told you that it looked as though we could see the extensions within two or three years.

Unfortunately, a legal matter concerning what could properly be part of a National Park was raised in relation to the new Park in the New Forest. This put everything else on hold, including the other promised new Park, the South Downs. Further detailed arguments relating to what was proposed for inclusion in that Park led to the stopping of all work on the possible boundary extensions to the Lake District and the Dales. Now that is all sorted out, we have been promised that it is full steam ahead for our two Parks. So I trust there will be some positive news by our next AGM.

I must draw towards a conclusion, by thanking some of the many people who have helped the Society over the past year. The Council of Management and its Committees have given valuable guidance and I am very grateful to them and especially their Chairmen. I have already mentioned those who are responsible for our publications, who continue to do a splendid job, and we are also indebted to those who help to ensure that our meetings are well arranged and that we get our refreshments. Our Administrator Anne Webster is a tremendous asset and has ensured the smooth running of the

Society at several levels, and I am also very grateful for the contribution of the volunteer helpers she has recruited, especially Bernard Peel who has put in many hours at the Society's office in Settle. Anne is line-managed by the Deputy-Chairman, Colin Speakman, who has continued to work as hard as he ever did for the Society.

You will shortly be asked to elect the Council of Management for the coming year. Sadly, we have to say goodbye to one of our members who has served for many years but now feels he should retire. It is John Cumberland, a former member of the National Park Authority who has also been our link with Gayle Mill. We are grateful to John for the work he has put into YDS.

Finally, I thank you all for your continuing support of a very active Society.