

RAMBLINGS OF A RIGHTS OF WAY VOLUNTEER Part 1

(The following words have been extracted from Steve Cieslik's story)

'It is now six months since I volunteered for the "heavy brigade" and so I thought I would put pen to paper and let you share my experiences.

The Thursday ROW team (or, as we like to be known, the A team) was carved out of the Pathcare team from Lower Wye Ramblers. George, Ron, Ken, Tony and myself, together with our respected leader, Major General (Rtd) Allan Thomas DSO DSC, G & T with Bar, head out in all weathers (okay that bit is not quite true) to dig holes, bash in large nails and generally improve the Monmouthshire countryside.

Six months have sailed by and numerous holes have been dug and what do I think? Well, I'm having a great time thank you, which must mean A) I need to get a life B) I have a fetish for holes C) I'm a complete liar. Yes, I actually look forward to our Thursday forays into the fields and backwaters of our great county and am somewhat deflated when the day is cancelled at short notice.

Somewhat nervously, I turned up at Penlan Farm for my first hole digging experience. Now I'm no stranger to hole digging, having installed a lot of fencing and gates on my property, but could I dig a "British Standard Hole" as I was convinced there must be such a thing? I was pleasantly surprised to find a hole is very much a hole. Having said that, there do seem to be many varieties of hole, which range for "What an absolute ..." to "That was dead easy" and just about every phrase in between depending on the ground conditions!

The next task was to fit the gate hinges. Now this is a byzantine procedure involving hinges that don't line up on the post and one hinge that is fixed upside down. Being naturally curious I had to ask why. "So the gate closes by itself and to stop it from being stolen" said Mike" with the air of someone who had given this explanation many times before. I suddenly had a vision of a doubtful character in a shady pub whispering to a customer "Psst want to buy a nearly new gate". I had no idea there was a market in stolen gates. Fitting these hinges is definitely a four person job - one to hold the hinges, one to hold the gate, one to drill the holes, one to hold the level and one to fix the bolts. Actually that's five people! How Mike and Andy manage on their own I don't know.

So the gate was hung and a hole was dug for the slamming post. This time Allan and I got it spot on and the post was installed in no time at all. We congratulated ourselves on a job well done only for Andy to say we had not finished as we had to fix "The Box". Now most ramblers know this as a kissing gate, but I am told that certain regulations do not allow the use of such a phrase as it might encourage promiscuity in the countryside. So we had to dig two more holes! Our skills already honed, we knocked these off in no time and then fitted the rails, which I particularly liked as it involved banging in large nails. Mike then nailed up the way marks and the sign that said "Erected by MCC Countryside Service *with the assistance of volunteers*" which is what it is all about. Allan harrumphed a couple of times, as is his wont, my chest swelled with proprietorial pride at our achievement and a tear welled up in my eye – our very first gate. One of many I hoped.

And by then it was lunchtime and we still had two more gates to install...'

Steve Cieslik
Lower Wye Ramblers