

## *The Ashford branch of the Ramblers' Association*

### *A brief history by Prue Stokes, wife of former chairman Michael Stokes (written October 2013)*

This branch was founded in 1971 and a regular programme of walks, from to 15 miles long, usually on Sundays, was begun. Footpaths all over Kent were explored. In the 1980s a programme of field work was begun, usually on Tuesdays. With the approval of KCC Highways department and with tools and materials supplied by them, volunteers repaired and built stiles, fences and bridges over streams in the Ashford Borough area.

Farmers were urged to keep the tracks of the definitive footpaths open and cleared but volunteers also did much of this work. Kent became one of the best counties for well-maintained footpaths.

A book "21 walks around Ashford" was published in 1992 to mark the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the club.

For many years social events, such as Christmas parties and annual meetings were held in the 'Pop In' club building in the Vicarage Lane car park.

Several surveys of the footpath network were made and lectures given to Young Farmers' clubs and others.

In 1985 contact was made with the walking groups in Ashford's twin towns of Bad Munstereifel and Fougères.

Walking weeks were exchanged annually until 2000 and many firm friendships were formed between hosts and their guests in all three towns.

Close cooperation was formed with other RA branches and in August 1995 a large group, not only from Kent, made a 25<sup>th</sup> Jubilee walk from Greenwich to Dover taking a month to complete on several Sundays. Support was given to the formation of cross country footpaths such as the Greensand & North Downs Ways.

In May 1997 a group of 850 French walkers joined a series of guided walks all ending in Canterbury. Contact was regularly made with the French Rambling clubs of Northern France.

Other activities included supporting a group of Italian pilgrims walking the ancient Papal route from Canterbury to Rome and a successful campaign resulted in the footpath beside the Royal Military Canal being made fully open for walkers.

A collection of photographs and documents was made by Michael Stokes of Biddenden who was chairman of the Ashford Ramblers from 1986-1994 and of the Kent area 1995-1998. He died in 2011. This collection was deposited with the Ashford Museum in October 2013.

Note KCC no longer supports or allows volunteers to build or repair bridges, stiles and footpath surfaces. They believe any accident however minor might result in the victim making a claim on KCC. This is a pity, as it used to save the county money and the work was much enjoyed – done mostly by retired men and women.