

## **Footpath Report for Newton Poppleford & Harpford Parish for the Annual Report 2024.**

We have been fortunate this year to have had a volunteer to assist with general maintenance work when Ian Kimber joined me last year. It has been invaluable to have another pair of hands and as Ian has now completed his brushcutter course, he is able to use all the available tools and has become an indispensable team member.

The flooding in the village last May caused havoc on the lower section of footpath 3 with the surface being completely broken up which necessitated its closure on safety grounds. Devon County Council (DCC) were however quickly on the scene and completely resurfaced the affected section. There are two other problem areas on this path, one being where large rocks have fallen into the Brook and need to be repositioned. There has been some argument concerning who might have the responsibility for this area which has not been helped by staff changes at DCC rights of way department. At the beginning of April a P3 Liaison Officer was appointed and it is hoped that he will be able to sort this issue out in due course. There is a similar rock slippage issue in the vicinity of Chestnut Way which is the responsibility of East Devon District Council. Despite assurances that this will be dealt with, the problem remains.

The same flooding situation washed away the footbridge over the Back Brook on footpath 6 on Harpford Common. The path has been officially closed though it is accepted that users are able to ford the watercourse should they feel able and the water not too deep. The bridge has apparently not been destroyed but swept further downstream from where it is hoped it can be repositioned back into its original position.

Earlier this year a working party gathered on footpath 1 (the path from the Toll House to School Lane) to improve the surface of the route to make it wider and flatter in an attempt to make it better for children (and others) to use. The hard work by the volunteers certainly made a big improvement and made a successful outcome, but unfortunately there is a short section of this path where there is a ten-foot drop into adjacent gardens that has no safety rail. DCC has put in a claim for finance to address this issue for this new financial year, but it is by no means certain that money will be made available as it is likely to be an expensive repair.

We were not helped when just days after completing the footpath 1 improvements, a large ash tree fell across the path partially blocking it. We managed to get DCC's contractor to saw up the large trunk, but there was considerable work to do to clear all the branch debris that had fallen into an adjacent garden.

The very wet winter that we have all endured these last months have also caused serious problems on some of our Parish footpaths. In January, bridleway 37 on Venn Ottery Hill had a collapse in the central section of the route caused by water run-off from the old quarry site. The resulting huge void has necessitated closure as the route is now not in a safe condition. The closure order means that the bridleway cannot be used until at least the end of August.

The footbridge over the river Otter at the southern boundary of our Parish with Colaton Raleigh has also had to be closed due to erosion problems which have undermined the foundations on the eastern side of the structure. It is hoped that a temporary construction can be erected to make the way usable, but so far this has not been completed.

The Red Bridge situation has unfortunately not really changed since last year other than a worsening situation with the two joining footpaths (17 and 19) on the western bank which have been seriously eroded behind the rock armouring positioned there a few years ago. The amount of usable path

between the fence and the riverbank has steadily become less and less and there is real concern that these two paths will be lost in the near future. The Red Bridge replacement does not seem to have made any headway despite the best efforts of many interested people. In frustration I did manage to get our member of parliament to look at the situation and we had a meeting on the bridge when Simon Jupp was informed of the long and sorry running saga. He did promise to see if he could help to speed up the process and very recently there has been correspondence from the Environment Agency (EA) who are minded to urgently give DCC a licence to add more rock armour in order to secure the two at risk footpaths. Even if DCC are given the go ahead by the EA, the current saturated ground conditions would not allow the heavy plant needed to affect a repair any access until the summer at the earliest. We will just have to hope that the erosion situation does not deteriorate before this repair can be completed.

Ted Swan

Honorary Parish Footpath Warden