

**“Who is that Blind Person” – Implications of the Disability Discrimination Act
28th October 2008.**

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed in 1995, following years of campaigning by disabled people and supporters, and is a Government measure intended to reduce discrimination against disabled people. The DDA, together with Regulations made under the Act is complex and far reaching covering all aspects of life for less able people; ranging from the home environment, social and occupational activities.

Southern Branch arranged a presentation by Mr Bill Pitcher, Safety Audit Team Leader with Gifford Consultants Limited who was accompanied by Paul Winchcombe, a former Engineer who is totally blind resulting from a degenerative illness that robbed him of his sight, and career, about 8 years ago. Paul is an active member of the Southampton Blind Association.

Bill demonstrated the affects of vision impairment by passing round various ‘visual aids’, that when placed over the eyes revealed only too starkly the massive impact that sight reduction can have. Paul spoke quite openly of the challenges that he faced once his sight diminished from the training he received in preparation to acclimatise to his attempts to continue as normal a life as possible as a blind person. Being a Highway engineer, it was inevitable that highway issues would feature highly in his interests and he has been able to bring guidance to engineers who are involved in designing new or improved road layouts.

Through pictures, Bill illustrated various development and highway schemes where it was quite evident that the needs of blind pedestrians had been completely overlooked. Footways lead towards a public terraced area where tactile paving was present across half the footway only. If a blind person missed the section, a few paces ahead was a vertical drop of 2 metres, completely unfenced. (See *picture right*). Another feature showed tactile paving on one footway leading across an uneven surface (including a sunken gully cover). Not a design problem, as such, but a combination of this and lack of maintenance. (*Picture below*). This was just a couple of examples that placed visually impaired people at high risk of injury.



Bill advised that the DDA and guidance notes issued as a result of this legislation was quite prescriptive, it was stressed that provided Engineers made reasonable steps to promote a safer environment for all classes of disability they need have no concerns that minor failures would result in the force of law. Research had found that generally, the road environment for disabled users was at an acceptable level but there was always room for improvement and with a little further consideration Engineers could achieve a lot to improve the lot of less fortunate members of the community. Perhaps the message could be ‘look, assess, plan and then close your eyes to assess the implications for blind people.

We are grateful to both Bill and Paul for giving up their time to make this presentation and for giving food for thought to the members who were present. Further information or particular guidance can be obtained from Bill Pitcher at bill.pitcher@gifford.uk.com