

## PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with April/May 2015 Programme

### OUR HERITAGE

**New Year Walk - Pangbourne (January):-** The 2015 programme of walks started well with our first walk being completed on a beautiful sunny morning beneath a blue sky, more reminiscent of a spring day than the wintry forecast given by the weather man! After crossing the glittering Thames via the new toll bridge we wandered through the Churchyard in Whitchurch, spotting snowdrops bursting through their protective green sleeves and also daffodil shoots. A winter jasmine added its cheerful yellow flowers to the 'feel good' scene and as we walked beside some of the cottages in the village we even saw some daffodils in flower! We took time to attempt the Whitchurch Millennium Maze, looking all the while for names of several of our members engraved on the bricks which make up the maze design. The sunny day meant we were able to stand at the human sundial and tell the time! We continued along Hardwick Road with its lovely view across fields of alpacae and over the Thames Valley. The position of the bench commemorating the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth extended this view being set on a raised pathway. We said 'Good Morning' to a fine scarecrow guarding a well-tended vegetable plot. How surprised we were when it returned our greeting in a deep voice! The mystery was solved, however, when the gardener uncurled from his bent position tending the beds and popped his head over the fence! As we walked along we were thrilled with the wonderful sight of alpacae grazing the green 'pillows' of Boze Down with a dozen Red Kites gliding in the very blue sky above. Brilliant! Our route took us up beside the alpacae before we retraced our steps along Hardwick Road back to Pangbourne where we piled into the Cross Keys for our New Year Celebration Lunch.

**Theale/Englefield (January):-** It was a dry day when we met in Theale and, although rather dull, within seconds of leaving the High Street our route was lit by the host of cheery catkins beside us. A grassy expanse took us to Blossom Lane where our route was further lit by the bright yellow of aconites. Soon we were walking across the golf course, spotting the Wilder Folly away up on its hill. We admired the many fine trees majestically showing off their winter skeletal forms. From their branches much bird song could be heard - a welcome distraction from the hum of the M4! We disturbed a green woodpecker which took off from the Fairway, but rather than heading for the Green with its flag it made its way to the shelter of trees!

Reaching the hamlet of North Street we wandered past its interesting cottages and houses, their gardens showing the first patches of snowdrops in flower. After crossing the busy A329 we were soon back into peaceful surroundings, walking through the village of Englefield. We took our break at the Church, its spire, added in 1868 making for a prominent feature. The oldest part of the Church, the Nave, dates from about 1190. Snowdrops scrambled throughout the churchyard from where we gained a good view of Englefield House, home of the Benyon family for over 250 years. Elizabeth 1 dined here, but more recent Royal connections were made with Kate having her wedding dress fittings in the mansion before her marriage to Prince William. On her big day she wore earrings made by Richard Benyon's wife!

We were kindly permitted to walk down the driveway towards the impressive estate gates, spotting large numbers of deer in the deer park beyond the blue shimmering lake. We made our way back to Theale, passing its Grade 1 listed Church reputed to be one of the best 19th century pre-Victorian Churches in England. We spotted a VR postbox on the wall, and noted the variety of architecture along the High Street. This was once a busy thoroughfare being an important halt for a change of horses for travellers on this main route from Bristol. Several coaching Inns sprung up at that time and by 1840 there were 11 in Church Street and High Street alone! The name, Theale, is therefore very apt - The Ale! We headed for the Bull which, like some of the old coaching inns retains its coaching yard. Like travellers of old we enjoyed lunch - but without the ale!

**Aldworth (January):-** We met in Aldworth dressed as if ready for an Arctic Expedition having heard the forecast warning of snow showers and wind-chill. However, the sky was blue and the wind non-existent so we set off in good spirits, gradually removing layers! As usual the air here was fresh and clean as we made our way across the Downs. From our lofty path we enjoyed clear, far-reaching views - on one side towards Compton, and on the other towards Streatley. Red Kites joined us, flying low over our heads, showing us their rich colours against the blue sky. We entered a field grazed by sheep which, startled by our large group, followed each other in a long line in an attempt to avoid us. Quite a sight!

Eventually we returned to the village where we paused by the Victorian well-house over the now-closed well. At 372 feet it is one of the deepest in England. The 14th century Aldworth Giants lay peacefully inside the Church while the ancient yew tree stood firmly in its position in the Churchyard where it has stood for centuries. It is famed for supplying wood for King Alfred's bows and is mentioned in the poem, In Memoriam, by Tennyson who married Emily Sellwood of Aldworth. Continuing to the far end of the village we finished with lunch in the welcoming Four Points.



**Chazey Heath/Mapledurham (February):-** This first walk in February heralded the start of our 2015 theme of Our Heritage around which our walks and trips will be geared. We joined the Chiltern Way which twists and turns along the boundary of the golf course at Chazey Heath. In the past we have walked this route with a stream of water running beneath our feet, but on this lovely winters morning we took childish delight in breaking the ice on puddles with our sticks! Our thoughts turned to the Heritage of the area as we dropped down through Park Wood which was once part of the area known as Mapledurham Gurney when Mapledurham consisted of two manors. The wood was linked to a Medieval deer park where, in 1233, Hugh de Gurney was granted 2 bucks and 10 doe from Windsor Forest by Henry 111 ! We saw no sign of their descendants but we did find Old Palm, a statue overlooking Mapledurham House down in the valley. He was probably installed in the 1700's when the grounds were landscaped with the help of Alexander Pope.



Arriving in Mapledurham Village we enjoyed the swathes of snowdrops as we soaked up more Heritage with cottage names telling the story of life in the village in the past, for example, The Forge, dated 1691, and The Almshouses, dated 1613. Taking our break in the village allowed us time to explore. Inside the Church a poster commemorates the village's part in scenes from The Eagle Has Landed, one of several films which have used the village as a film set. The Watermill looked lovely in its Thameside setting - a different picture from a year ago when we visited the area in flood!

Mapledurham House, built in 1588, could be more clearly seen as we left the village. Fans of The Allotment Challenge recognised the greenhouses set beside their plots which feature in the programme. We passed Park Farm with its snowdrop drifts. Confined to winter quarters, their herd of cows gazed longingly over the yard gate towards the pastureland beside us, no doubt jealous of the flock of geese and swans which had taken up squatters rights in their absence! Across the pastures and the hidden River Thames we had a good view of Purley Magna and the Roebuck amongst other familiar landmarks on 'our' side of the river. Leaving the track to continue on towards Caversham, we climbed between trees of Chazey Wood, part of the second manor, Mapledurham Chazey. Eventually we were back beside the golf course and heading for the Pack Saddle where a glowing fire and cheerful staff warmly welcomed us in for lunch.

**Swyncombe (February):-** February heralds our snowdrop walks and we weren't disappointed as we began by walking through the churchyard of the Norman St Botolph Church which lay buried in snowdrops and aconites - a wonderful sight which brings people flooding to Swyncombe each February eager to see the spectacle and enjoy a Snowdrop Tea! Swyncombe, valley of the wild boar, now consists of the Church, Manor House and Rectory and as we climbed up through sheep-grazed pasture we turned to look back down for a clear view of the attractive Jacobean Manor House and neo-classical Rectory. We followed the Chiltern Way through woodland to reach the hamlet of Cookley Green. This ancient hamlet consists of a handful of attractive houses and cottages set around the village green on which stands a proud war memorial. We noted the GR postbox as we walked past snowdrops swathes in front of cottages to enter an area of beech woodland which soon gave way to arable fields. Back into woodland we followed a sunken path, the result of constant use for many centuries. We passed Dame Alice Farm which refers to Alice Chaucer, grand daughter of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who inherited the Swyncombe and the nearby Ewelme estates. We took our break with an excellent view of Watlington Hill and looked forward to walking there later in the year. Next we joined the Ridgeway, our route for the remainder of the walk. It rose and fell with the contours of The Chilterns, alternating between beech woodland and open countryside. The final climb proved quite steep but it gave us the chance to look over the wonderful green landscape patrolled by red kites. The wind increased and the odd spot of rain fell but with a downhill stretch we sailed down the hillside with views across to Wittenham Clumps and Didcot to arrive back beside St Botolph's in the dry. Before heading home we took the opportunity to soak up more Heritage inside this lovely church with its wall paintings created by Medieval Knights before setting off on their Crusades.

**Woodcote (February):-** Soon after leaving the buildings of Woodcote we found ourselves in delightful countryside where verges lay smothered in snowdrops. The clear day afforded us good views towards the distant Wittenham Clumps and the remaining towers of Didcot. We passed the 17th century Beech Farm, a typical isolated Chiltern farm. We crossed its fields to arrive at the top of pastureland. We paused to gaze down and across to Elvendon Priory, former retreat for Goring Priory. Elvendon means 'fairy hill' and, although perhaps not resembling fairies, we flew down the hillside to stand beside the mainly 20th century buildings which incorporate a Medieval House. Next we were in for a climb as we made our way up the other side of the valley. A raised path led us on into the Great Chalk Wood with its rather muddy paths. Leaving the wood we walked beside a pretty cottage set between high banks which appeared to wrap themselves protectively around it having been transformed into a white blanket by the profusion of snowdrops! Arriving at Crays Pond we entered more woodland in which we discovered a fabulous dell full of snowdrops. We finished our walk on further muddy woodland tracks which proved a good work-out for our legs, so when we came upon a lovely thatched cottage at the edge of the wood bearing the name, 'Three Bears', we reflected on how pleased we were that we had eaten our porridge that morning!



**Ecchinswell (March):-** March may well have 'come in like a lion', but for our first walk in March the day, after an early frost, turned sunny and bright with a glorious blue sky. We enjoyed the snowdrops which flower throughout the conservation village of Ecchinswell which contains many listed properties. We passed several attractive thatched properties and the listed school, school house and mill to leave the village on a climbing path which gave us increasingly good views towards Watership Down. Skylarks patrolled the fields and a flock of chaffinches gathered in the hedgerow. Welcome signs of spring! We passed Nuthanger Farm, referred to in Richard Adams tale. Banks edging our path supported pretty displays of snowdrops, primroses and crocuses, and when we dropped down beside the garden of a fine house we revelled in the sight of drifts of snowdrops covering the whole area so that the sloping lawns resembled a ski slope!. Amazing! Entering the estate of Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber we were greeted by much bird song which must surely inspire Lord Andrew in his compositions! Birds of all sizes flitted from tree to tree, adding to our delight. A grassy bank gave us a seat with a view as we took our break before continuing on to walk beside a field of horses which galloped majestically over to greet us. Our route continued to thrill us with its snowdrops and eventually we walked down an avenue where snowdrops completely line either side of the path. A wonderful sight! We walked through a copse and across a field near the village Church to make our way back into the village where a pleasant stroll past more of its lovely properties led us to the Royal Oak where we were welcomed for lunch by the new owners of the recently refurbished pub.

