

**Summertime Special to Beaulieu (July 14):-** As soon as our coach rumbled across a cattle grid, and several ponies ran across the road, we knew we had arrived in The New Forest! Coffee was enjoyed in the Montagu Arms in the centre of Beaulieu Village before setting off on our walk. We began by exploring some of the delights of Beaulieu, its name meaning 'Beautiful Place' and, indeed, one of the loveliest villages in the New Forest. The Beaulieu River sparkled in the sunshine and, at its head, boats drifted along and swans and ducks gathered expectantly. Two New Forest ponies grazed the expanse of grass beside the river, and across the road we caught sight of Beaulieu Parish Church and the Outer Gatehouse of Beaulieu Abbey



and looked forward to our visit later in the day. For now, we continued along both sides of the High Street lined with picturesque cottages. On some we noted the three red diamonds logo, indicating ownership remains with the Montagu family. Gazing across the Mill Pond we could just see their home, Beaulieu Palace House, amongst the trees. Another delight to come, but on we went, leaving the village and its ponies wandering freely along the streets, to join the Solent Way. Our view stretched across the Beaulieu River which would be our companion for the rest of the walk. The whole of the Beaulieu River is a National Nature Reserve and a SSSI so it was no surprise to come across notice boards outlining the wealth of flora and fauna to be found both in the river and along its banks. Meadow grasses dotted with wild flowers came alive with numerous butterflies, and an area of woodland resounded with birdsong. As the river came alongside us we watched gulls, soon to be joined by other wading birds, as the tidal river revealed more of its mudflats. With the river

still full at the moment we enjoyed watching boats leisurely sailing past, and eventually we reached the Aganemnon Boatyard with a mass of ships masts rising up from expensive craft. We passed the Duke's Bath House, built in 1760 to provide a place for the 2nd Duke of Montagu's son to swim in salt water, hopefully to ease his arthritis!

Manoeuvring around a barrier we arrived at Buckler's Hard, virtually unchanged by time with its picturesque 18th century street leading down to the river. Here a spell of free time allowed us to enjoy looking inside the Shipwrights Cottage, St Mary's Chapel and Maritime Museum. Along a woodland trail we could discover how timber was sourced here to construct ships for the British Navy, including several for Nelson's fleet. Drinks were enjoyed in the garden of the Master Builder's House and, in the warmth of the day, ice creams went down well as we waited by the quay for our cruise boat. Soon we were seated ready for a cruise along the Beaulieu River. Our amusing and informative guide pointed out interesting things along the way divulging the history of the river and its abundant wildlife. We spotted Little Egrets and Oystercatchers and were thrilled to pass close to a seal basking in the sunshine. What a treat!



Rejoining our coach we took a short drive to the award-winning attraction of Beaulieu. Here free time was spent exploring the many attractions on offer. In the grounds we visited the Victorian Flower Garden and Rose Garden both awash with colour and scent and the Victorian Kitchen Garden full of vegetables. The site of the 13th century Cistercian Abbey holds stone markers showing the Abbey to be one of the largest Abbey churches in England before its dissolution in 1530. The Domus is one of few Abbey buildings to have survived and here a wonderful exhibition along with a video tells of life as a monk here. Upstairs embroideries depict the history of the Abbey. Outside, the former Cloisters are planted



with herbs favoured by the monks. In the Palace House, as one of the Treasure Houses of England, its 'treasures' are set off by rich furnishings and decorations. We were fortunate that our visit coincided with a special Royal Pageant Exhibition

showing the Montagu's connection to the Royal family with items such as invitations to Royal events and clothing worn to the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. A walk across sweeping lawns took us to the Mill Pond for a view across to where we had stood in the morning. The Mill Pond Walk allowed a pleasant stroll beside the water. In between exploring we rested our legs during a mile-long ride on the Monorail for an aerial view across the whole complex. The Vintage Open-Top Bus also proved a great hit! With so much to see there was meagre time to look inside the World of Top Gear, the display of On-Screen Cars, and the famous Motor Museum. However, in the latter we took no time at all when encouraged by a guide to dress up in vintage coats and hats and sit in a vintage car for a photo! The Pathfinder tradition of a Cream Tea ended our fabulous summertime special in Beaulieu.



**Hailey (September 14):-** Our conversations may have centred on tales from our summer holidays when we met for our first walk of the September/October programme but we couldn't help noticing the signs already of the approaching autumn. Some trees held a definite autumn tinge while our distant view was veiled in morning mist. However, our surroundings were anything but 'mellow' with hedgerows full of the bright berries, spindle, rosehips, elderberry, blackberry and more all positively glowed in the ever increasing sunshine as we made our way from the hamlet of Hailey out into the gorgeous Chiltern

countryside. Further autumnal signs appeared with fields on one side having had their autumn plough while, on the other, golden stubble betrayed a good harvest. In other fields tall stacks of hay awaited removal to be stored in barns. Similarly squirrels were active stocking up their 'larders'. Native birds busied themselves in hedgerows, laying down fat stores for winter, while swallows were spotted preparing for their migration to spend winter in the sun. For now we were content with the clean freshness of the morning as we were led along a track by a procession of young pheasants.

We entered woodland in which sunshine glinted through the trees. We joined the ancient Ridgeway which soon delved into a belt of trees complete with fungi. Our route followed the line of Grimms Ditch but eventually we left the trail to follow a 'green lane' back to the King William IV where we had lunch enjoying the wonderful view out of its windows.

**Upper Woolhampton ( September 14):-** From Upper Woolhampton we followed a pleasant route through woodland to emerge into fields across which we gained our first view of Douai Abbey rising into the morning mist. Soon we were walking with the Abbey nearby as we made our way to the village of Beenham. Here we gained lovely views over the Kennet Valley below as we walked a narrow path to reach St Mary's Church. Its lofty position meant our lovely views continued, but not for long as we began a rollercoaster of a route by first dropping down through woodland to soon climb back up on the other side of the valley. Fields and woodland led us on to eventually arrive at playing fields alongside Doai Abbey to return to our cars to end this lovely West Berkshire walk.

**Middle Assendon (September 14):-** On this walk we were promised views and we sure weren't disappointed!! However, to get the best of them we had to start with a climb. It was worth it as, not for the last time during this walk, we felt like we were on top of the world! The wonderful Chiltern countryside lay as a patchwork of fields and woodland showing early autumn hues. After a couple of stiles we were glad to pass through a series of gates, ending in a very special gate to us - the Purley Pathfinder Gate proudly displaying its plaque announcing our sponsorship. After pausing by paddocks to look at some of McAlpine's menagerie of animals we continued across fields where notice boards pointed out their importance for the abundance of wildflowers to be found in them. At this time of year we could only imagine its summer beauty as now we were left with just the very important seed heads.

We reached Fawley Bottom from where a long steady climb rewarded us with more incredible views. We joined a track which hugged the side of the hill. To our left a farmer busied himself on his tractor, followed by various interested birds including Red Kites, but our eyes were drawn to our right where from our hilltop path we had the whole of the valley stretched out below us in all its early autumn glory. Eventually a wooded path took us back down to Middle Assendon where we enjoyed lunch in The Rainbow - aptly named for we felt full of golden memories! An amazing walk!



**Autumntime Special - Bourton-on-the-Water (September 14):-** During our *Celebration of the Countryside* year our



autumn trip took us to the Area of Outstanding Beauty that is The Cotswolds. Frequently voted one of the prettiest villages in the Cotswolds, Bourton-on-the-Water with its honey-coloured architecture, wide sweeping greens, and the River Windrush crossed by pretty, low arched bridges is a magnet for tourists. However, we arrived early to an empty coach park so our walk through this 'Venice of the Cotswolds' took place in peaceful, unrushed fashion. The morning sunshine glistened on the River Windrush as it led us away from the centre and, before long, we joined The Wardens Way, cutting between fields grazed by sheep and horses. Soon

we arrived at the quintessential Cotswold village of Lower Slaughter to walk beside the River Eye. We entered the 13th century church to enjoy the wonderful floral displays which compliment the lovely interior and stained glass windows. Back outside we wandered beside the River Eye as it dreamily flowed between gorgeous honey-coloured, flower-smothered cottages. Round a bend we suddenly viewed our next stopping point - the stunning water mill with its huge restored water wheel and strikingly tall chimney. A break here allowed time to browse in the award-winning shop and also to just sit to soak up the atmosphere in the warm sunshine.

Our walk now took us over one of the little stone bridges to cross the river while we watched a rider skilfully manoeuvre her horse through the ford beside us. We left the village to snooze in the sunshine as we climbed to join the Macmillan Way. From its route we gained panoramic views over the stunning Cotswold landscape as it took us beside autumnal hedgerows and through arable fields patrolled by songful skylarks. A pretty copse took us down into the Windrush Valley and soon the River Windrush flowed in to join us as we made our way back into Bourton-on-the-Water via a path beside the Mill.

Rejoining our coach we picnicked on the short journey to the Cotswold Farm Park set in the depths of beautiful Cotswold countryside. Here we were greeted with cups of tea to enjoy in the marquee whilst listening to an enlightening and interesting introductory talk. In 1970 Joe Henson noticed how many of our breeds of farm animals were dying out, replaced by more commercially viable breeds. He decided to do something about it and gathered together a pig (Gloucester Old Spot), a cow (The Gloucester), and a sheep (The Cotswold). They needed funding for food etc so, despite much negativity from others, in 1971 he opened to the public, the first Farm Park in the world. In the first year he opened for just five months but in that time over 20,000 people came to see Joe's 'Trinity' of endangered breeds of farm animal. The farm now holds over fifty flocks and herds of rare breed farm animals! Since Joe's retirement the farm continues to thrive under the care of his son Adam. Adam has become quite a celebrity since beating three and a half thousand other applicants for the position of presenter on BBC's



Countryfile programme. Viewers are eager to hear the week's news of life on the farm and have followed Adam and his family through happy and sad times with the arrival of various young animals keeping the breeds going, to the devastation of hearing one of their cows has tested positive for TB. With its popularity the farm has affectionately become known as Adam's Farm. We were free to spend the afternoon exploring. Adam left just as we arrived, evidently to see what can be done to help turkeys cope with the stress of firework night!. However, in the first paddock on the Rare Breeds Through History Trail we were delighted to find Archie, the 'Royal' Highland bull who has become as much a celebrity as Adam! The Highland Cows belong to the early days of our history, originating from 4,000BC when man began to hunt and breed animals to substitute a diet of mainly seeds and nuts. Along the trail we were transported back in time with notice boards stating when each breed was introduced to Britain and its uses. Next came the Bronze Age from 3,200BC with its Ronaldsay Sheep. The Iron Age from 55BC introduced the Iron Age Pig and the one on the farm lay contentedly feeding a litter of piglets. In 43BC the Romans arrived along with Cotswold Sheep and White



Park Cattle. The Vikings from 597 AD had Exmoor Ponies and Hebridean Sheep. 1066, the time of the Normans and Tamworth pigs and Gloucester Cattle. The Agricultural Revolution from 1600AD saw the arrival of donkeys and Galloway Cattle. War Time from 1900AD saw Jacob Sheep and Shetland Ponies, and so on we went to reach the Modern Day paddocks from the 1960's with breeds such as British Blue Cattle. Such an informative trail, and it was great to see many of these breeds with youngsters in tow showing the success of the Rare Breed Trust.

Conservation is close to the Henson family's heart and in a special Conservation Area we were treated to information regarding conservation work as we wandered past the pond containing newts, the wormery, bug houses, bird feeding stations, wild flower beds and a viewing area where we could watch bees at work in their bee hive said to contain 50,000 bees!

The Cotswold Maze got our brain cells working as we attempted to answer the animal-related questions to help us choose the correct path to discover the Cotswold Lion! In the Touch Barn we met some of the farm's smallest residents with the invitation to hold a newly hatched chick or cuddle a baby rabbit. Lambs eagerly sucked from the bottles of milk we were handed to feed them. In the Demonstration Barn we perched on hay bales for the Sheep Show - a Pageant of History on Four Legs. We were told the history of nine breeds of sheep as each one happily climbed the steps to its own special platform, lured by the promise of a manger of food! Eight of the breeds are still at risk, including the Cotswold which brought such wealth to the area, but happily the Jacob Sheep is no longer on the risk register - a legacy to the dedication of places like the Cotswold Farm Park. Whilst seated on a large trailer, pulled by a tractor slowly around the edge of the farm, we listened to the interesting commentary and enjoyed the far-reaching views.

Meeting back up in the marquee we savoured our traditional cream tea then there was just time to browse in the shop. Soon bags were filled with the farm's own honey, and rape seed oil. Books signed by Adam, organic wool and Adam Henson's Beer were other tempting buys! We had been told that the best way to preserve Rare Breeds was, infact, to eat them so with this in mind cool boxes now empty of lunch filled up with succulent rare breed meats.

All in all a fabulous day had been spent in the sunshine, Celebrating the wonderful Cotswold Countryside !

**Lambridge Woods ((October14):-** Rain attempted to dampen our spirits, but the knowledge that we would be walking through 'Fairy's Bottom', 'Happy Valley' and along 'Paradise Road' we set off cheerfully from Henley. A walk beside the Thames took us to the Grade 1 listed Henley Bridge. The recent re-opening of Whitchurch Bridge after months of closure was put into perspective when hearing that in the 1700's the bridge was swept away by floods and not rebuilt for ten years!!

We paused at the graveside of Dusty Springfield then, after enjoying the buildings hidden in backstreets of the town, we reached Friars Park, the former home of Beatle, George Harrison. Soon we were walking through the golf course and on into Lambridge Woodss where, despite the beech trees just showing signs of colour change, the woodland floor was carpetted with orange leaves from the previous leaf fall. Sheltered somewhat from the rain we enjoyed the woodland walk, finally emerging into the grounds of Greys Court. We took advantage of one of its majestic trees lining the driveway, to shelter for our break, enjoying the view over green fields edged with tinged autumnal trees - our return route to Henley.

Reaching the start of a series of fields we were glad that the rain had stopped. Red Kites joined us while cows with calves grazed in nearby fields. We passed a newly planted copse of trees as memorials to people from the nearby Sue Ryder Home and eventually we reached the edge of Henley to walk back to the River Rowing Museum where we were efficiently served with a delicious lunch.