

## PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with June/July 2014 programme

**Dinton Pastures (March 14):-** We hoped that once into March footpaths may be returning to normal but little did we know that the recent flooding would continue to disrupt our walks! Cheerfully we made our way into Dinton Pastures Country Park, enjoying the drifts of snowdrops on the way, and completely oblivious to problems ahead! For now we enjoyed the lovely Spring morning and the wildfowl activity on first Black Swan Lake, and then Sandford Lake. Gaily dangling catkins, leaf- buds beginning to open, and the territorial songs of numerous birds all gave us assurance that Spring is really coming. Then, alas, we came to a flooded stretch of path! Not to be thwarted we took a detour which involved much ducking under branches to reach Lavell's Lake to walk beside this one instead. A bridge took us over the fast flowing River Loddon. This power may have been welcomed in the past by the Mill standing alongside the river where one has stood since the Domesday Book. Pink blossom looked pretty against the white weather-boarding of the present mill building which became a private residence in the 1950's.



Along a lane, aeroplanes displayed at The Museum of Berkshire Aviation stood surrounded by a wonderful froth of white blossom. With the River Loddon still in flood we soon had to retrace our steps to finish with a pleasant walk beside Dintons' largest lake, Black Swan Lake. Newly emerging leaves on the willows beside it looked fresh and green in the sunshine. Pairs of geese and swans flew by and soon we found their destination - the feeding station where visitors threw bread into the water. A large gaggle of geese, ducks and swans competed for the largest morsels. We looked at an information board trying to identify the many varieties. An Egyptian goose flew in to land rather clumsily amongst the throng. All this feeding made us feel hungry too so, startling two deer, we made our way back to the Jolly Farmer to enjoy our lunch.

**Upper & Lower Basildon (March 14):-** Thankfully the flooding had subsided enough for us to complete our next walk which would link the part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Natural Beauty which lies between Upper & Lower Basildon. Early morning mist cleared to allow the sun to shine on us as we made our way through Upper Basildon where daffodils and blossom celebrated the arrival of Spring. After crossing a field we entered woodland to follow a downward path. A shiver went down our spines - was it the coolness of the air in the wood or the surreal look of cobwebs glistening amongst the branches? Fallen tree trunks left undisturbed for years lay coated in moss adding to the atmosphere while pussy willows attempted to light up the scene with their bright, almost furry catkins. The sound of a train trundling by brought us back to reality and we passed beneath the railway bridge to cross to the banks of the Thames. We looked along the river towards Pangbourne to see that the earlier mist lingered atmospherically above the river down here in the valley. We turned to walk with the river flowing calmly beside us, seemingly unaware of the trouble it has caused over recent weeks! Now the riverside looked glorious with bullrushes framing the scene to our side, and fresh green leaves of willows reaching over our heads towards the water. Trees and the occasional boathouse on the opposite bank were reflected on the still surface and all was peaceful and quiet. Then - the cry went up! "Kingfisher!" A flash of blue and he was gone but what joy he gave for those couple of seconds! More birds came in to view - a heron took off from our path to skim across the water, settling on the opposite bank to watch us pass. Ducks floated by in pairs while several cormorants sat with wings outstretched to greet the sun which had now burnt off the mist. Deer in the paddocks of Beale Park could be seen nearby and as we approached the river entrance to the Park which holds the foremost collection of birds in Europe, more unusual and colourful waterfowl appeared on the river.



Eventually we left the river to walk beside some of the Park's lakes beside which fishermen patiently sat. We crossed a field of sheep with their sweet lambs and took our break on some conveniently placed logs. Afterwards we followed a Nature Trail through fairly young trees, all planted with wildlife in mind with catkins of hazelnuts and blossom of fruit trees and even berries left over from the winter. Pheasants and rabbits scurried away at the sound of our footsteps, but a multitude of birds continued to sing their spring songs with gusto. The final part of our walk took us alongside the grounds of Basildon Park. We remembered its appearance as Netherfield Park in *Pride and Prejudice* in 2005, and more recently, Grantham House in the 2013 Christmas Day special of *Downton Abbey*. Back in Upper Basildon our walk ended at the Red Lion where we enjoyed lunch.

**The Holies and Lardon's Chase (March 14):-** As we walked between the houses of The Coombe in Streatley we enjoyed the spring gardens in which daffodils and primroses vied for attention amongst blossom trees clothed in pink, white and yellow. Even the flowers on a magnificent magnolia had begun to open. Spring it seemed had sprung! We made our way up through the Holies where leaves had begun to unfurl and where the wooded banks were smothered in primroses, violets, and the green shoots of bluebells. Oh-so-green fields tumbled down beside us towards Stichen Green and, just like the birds around us, it made us feel like bursting into song!

During our break we amused ourselves as we found our way to the centres of three stone mazes set into a grassy area. Then the second half of our walk took us out onto Lardon's Chase high above Streatley. Several red kites flew low over the grass further down the hillside which gave us a good view of the rich colour of their wings and bodies. From our high vantage point we gained stunning clear views along the Thames down in the valley and up to the Chiltern Hills. We delved into Lough Down to extend our view to over the Berkshire Downs and across the Oxfordshire Plains. The towers of Didcot and the humps of Wittenham Clumps

were familiar landmarks within the green expanse. Behtaking! Two church towers land-marked their villages of North and South Stoke while, back on Lardon's Chase, the sound of the clock chiming on the church tower in Streatley signalled time for lunch so we swooped down the hillside to find the Bull at Streatley to eat, as did the Three Men in a Boat with Montmorency their dog during their epic journey along the Thames. The Bull is still mentioned as Dog Friendly in the Good Pub Guide!

**Ecchinswell (March 14):-** We began beside the attractive School House, School and Mill House, just some of the 26 Grade 11 listed properties in Ecchinswell. Lambs bleated as we climbed along their field edge, then on beside woodland with a pretty show of primroses, and bluebell shoots with a promise of future beauty. All the while our view opened up towards Watership Down and once at the top of our climb we found ourselves almost level with its plateau. Big Wig's beech hangar stood out clearly. From here he had proclaimed to 'See the Whole World!' - and we saw the whole world back! Wonderful! Forsythia and daffodils brought a sunny glow to the garden of Nuthanger Farm whilst primroses and violets scrambled along banks beside us. Through a tunnel of newly emerged leaves we made our way down the hillside. The sun shone and birds sang as we enjoying the peaceful green view dotted with sheep and lambs. Surely the English countryside at its best!

We entered the estate of Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber, spied by some of Lady Lloyd Webber's polo ponies and, further on, by a heron perched watchfully by a pond. Daffodils and hyacinths mark the final resting place of Dusty, 'a well loved horse'. Being careful not to squash the numerous cowslips, we perched on a bank to have our break, Watership Down still wonderfully dominated our view. We continued beside woodland patrolled by buzzards and by a large field sporting the occasional yellow flower on its crop of oil seed rape. From a beautifully renovated thatched cottage we wandered down an avenue lined with the leaves of spent snowdrops, their blooms now beautifully replaced by primroses. Our walk ended as we passed the churchyard smothered in tiny daffodils and another thatched cottage with a garden resplendent with cherry blossom. Aah! Spring! Endorphins on a high, we headed for lunch!

**Whitchurch (April 14):-** Fame at last! You may have seen some of the ladies of Purley Pathfinders on Meridian news being interviewed on the day the Thames re-opened to river traffic beneath Whitchurch toll bridge! We made good use of the temporary footbridge to take us over the river to Whitchurch for a pleasant walk through the village and up to the viewpoint for a spectacular view over Purley. Then it was back home to set our TV recorders for the 6pm news!!

**Birthday Specials to Highgrove (April 14):-** To mark the occasion of Pathfinder's 15th birthday we went to Highgrove for three tours on two separate days. After the formality of security checks we were shown into the Orchard Room where, surrounded by paintings by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, we were introduced to our guides. On a TV screen Prince Charles welcomed us and told of his desire to create a garden which would '**Warm the heart, Feed the Soul and Delight the Eye**' Enthusiastically



we followed our guides as through the first of many strikingly designed and colourful gates our tour began! In the Cottage Garden the sunny yellow-theme of the planting mirrored our happy faces and our senses were immediately awakened by the lovely sight and smell of this area. Tactile, fat, Cotswold Stone columns supporting an impressive pergola guided us through to stand beside Highgrove House. Here rhododendrons were beginning to give a good show in their acid bed and a new pavilion has been constructed beneath what is left of a Cedar of Lebanon - a favourite tree of the Prince which has succumbed to old age and disease. One long branch survives to support numerous intricate bird feeders attracting many birds which in turn keep the hostas beneath slug-free. A good example of the organic principles of the garden. Birdsong filled the air throughout the garden and sometimes we even had to lean forward to hear our informative guides above their singing!

A Terrace in front of the West side of the house has at its centre a gurgling millstone, the water feature designed low so as not to obstruct the splendid vista from the house. On the south side of the house we entered the Sundial Garden where the sundial sits between six box-edged borders each centred with a Stellata Royal Star Magnolia. The white blossom lit up the area, soon to be joined by flowers in soft shades of pink and purple with blue to be provided by delphiniums, a favourite of the Prince. The gardens are designed to give glorious vistas and constant glimpses of the surrounding Gloucestershire countryside. At the front door we admired the view across parkland along the protected, uninterrupted view to the distant spire on the church in Tetbury, whereas a diagonal vista stretched to a tall column on top of which sits a gilded bird on its nest. Next a path through the middle of four acres of wildflower meadow took us between swathes of daffodils, tulips, snakes head fritillary, primroses and cowslips. This spring display will eventually give way to summer wildflowers including hundreds of orchids.

Prince Charles picks up ideas for the garden during his travels and we passed beneath a Moorish Arch inspired by a visit to the Taj Mahal to find ourselves in the Azalea Walk. Along a narrowing path designed to disguise its length our eye was drawn to the Goddess Diana set on a plinth in front of a yew tree cleverly shaped to echo the Moorish Arch. The azaleas are backed by a wall upon which sit busts of people admired by the Prince while set into the wall lies a stone carving of Tigga, a favourite, but now departed pet dog. Another intriguing gate, this one painted pale pink, tempted us into the Walled Kitchen Garden. Vegetable planted was still in its early stages but this allowed us to see the backbones of the design. Low hedging, curves of crab apple trees, arches supporting fruit trees and willow dome supports all cleverly make up the pattern of St George's and St Andrew's crosses. We were free to wander in this wonderful space centred with a carp-filled pool with a moss-covered Italian fountain set at its middle. From the Walled Garden yet another tempting view drew us into the Arboretum where years of falling pine needles allow The Prince to indulge in growing spectacular acid-loving rhododendrons, azaleas, maples and acers. They provided a colourful treat supported by daffodils, cherry blossom and magnolias. In a clearing we came across a sculpture of four beautiful girls, The

Four Daughters of Odessa. We marvelled at the exquisite detail in their flowing dresses, windswept hair and slender hands and feet. In another clearing we found The Sanctuary in which The Prince can escape in private thought and contemplation. We decided everyone should have one of these, but must be a particular welcome blessing for someone so much in the public eye! We left the Arboretum watched by a larger-than-life topiary bullfrog and snail to find the Hemisphere Garden. Here the back of the high wall of the Kitchen garden provides the shelter needed by 60 tree ferns given to Prince Charles as a 60th birthday present. Other gifts have found a home here including a totem-pole-like column made up of numerous African figures all intricately carved from a single piece of wood.

We gained a different vista across the Wildflower Meadow as we made our way to The Stumpery. This area has a unique feel with large stumps of mainly sweet chestnut stacked to form arches and interesting shapes, their roots sticking up like gnarled bones. Natural pockets within the stumps provide convenient places for ferns to grow and the area is also planted with an extensive collection of hostas. A pair of green-oak temples sit within the Stumpery, their pediments filled with driftwood collected by Prince Charles and cleverly mirroring the ruggedness of the stumps. Guarding the whole area sits the Goddess of the Woods, a marble sculpture exuding a spirit of calmness. Set within the boughs of a holly tree sits Hollyrod House, a tree-house originally made for the young Princes William and Harry. Perhaps Prince George will soon be exploring inside through the holly-shaped door!



His Royal Highness is given many gifts and nothing is wasted. The problem of what to do with numerous samples of masonry given to him by students was solved by cleverly incorporating them into a Wall of Gifts. The Queen Mother held a special place in the heart of Prince Charles and a plaque showing her sporting a favourite gardening hat has pride of



place on the Temple of Worthy. The sound of water brought us to a large stone fountain topped with a gunnera which will reach 6 foot by the summer. Four clamshells from the garden of Edward VII sit on each side and water bubbles over from each one to splash satisfactorily into the pond below. Soon another vista towards the house opened up with a view over a reflective lily-shaped water feature and along the Thyme Walk edged by golden yews sculpted into eccentric shapes by the gardeners. Soon the thyme will transform this view with their flowers, but for now the primroses scrambled a yellow path to the house. Behind us, beyond the statue of a Gladiator, daffodils provided the yellow for a pathway leading to a distant dovecote.

With our two-hour tour sadly at an end we were taken into the Orchard Restaurant where we indulged in a Pathfinder tradition, but this time a rather special, Highgrove Clotted Cream Tea! Then there was just time for a visit to the Highgrove shop for those special mementoes of our special trip. Back on the coach we contemplated on our wonderful tour during which, true to his word, the garden at Highgrove had **Warmed our Hearts, Fed our Souls, and our eyes had been truly Delighted!**

**Sulhamstead (April 14):-** On St George's Day, complete with the flag of the St George Cross, we set out to celebrate more of the wonderful English countryside. In Sheffield Bottom we began between large lakes which are part of the Lower Kennet Water Park and, like many others in the area, originated from gravel extraction. Now excellent leisure facilities, we noted one side was being used for sailing while the other side, fishing. Although not quite May, the May blossom on the hawthorns was coming out, promising winter berries for the numerous small birds flitting from hedge to hedge. On reaching the Kennet & Avon Canal we walked beside its banks, enjoying the reflections in its still surface, the lush growth of waterside plants, and the cheerfulness of the colourful canal boats moored along its side. Soon a view opened up to our left to a large lake where several fishermen sat, rods poised. As we approached one he was just landing his catch and proudly held up an eleven pound carp to show us!

We passed one of the traditional black and white locks and continued on with a flurry of blossoming cow parsley beside us. Eventually we reached the Sulhamstead swing bridge and here we left the canal to cross a meadow grazed by numerous noisy geese. Our route proved adventurous for, after crossing a wooden platform over a stream, two fallen trees had to be negotiated! Managing without incident we reached a lane to walk along it with the lovely English scene of bluebells cascading down a wooded bank on one side and the stream flowing by on the other. We turned to climb up steps cut into a bank beside the wood from where bluebells had spread to line our path wonderfully with their sweet smelling blooms. A lush meadow led us into a field of horses which, although inquisitive, kept their distance from our long crocodile of ladies. The song of skylarks filled the air, all adding to the enjoyment of our varied English countryside walk. Soon we gained a good view across the Kennet Valley with the distinctive building of Englefield House clearly visible in the distance. We took our break to savour this splendid view a little longer. Suddenly a pair of hares appeared in the field, chasing each other this way and that. An English spring scene if ever there was one! The last part of our walk took us through a flower-filled churchyard and out within more pastoral and arable fields, spotting the white Police Training College located in Sulhamstead House nearby, while far-reaching views stretched over *England's Green and Pleasant Land!* Our meandering route eventually led us back down into the 'Bottom' where we joined the banks of Hosehill Lake. It is possible to walk the one mile path around the lake, but today we planned to walk only part of it. We enjoyed plenty of wild bird activity, especially the many sand martins flying in and out of their nesting holes in their purpose built sand bank - just one of the ways BBOWT is supporting wildlife in this fabulous English Nature Reserve. We were pleased to think that the Pathfinder's Christmas donation will go to projects such as this.

Leaving the cacophony out on the lake, we headed to the 16th century English pub, The Fox and Hounds, for lunch.