

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with Feb/March 2015 programme

In Celebration of the Countryside

Hampstead Norreys (Oct 14):- Unfortunately the rain stayed with us for most of our walk from Hampstead Norreys but as this is such a rare occurrence for a Pathfinder walk we still managed to enjoy what the area has to offer as we explored classic features of the countryside with its varied landscape and good views. We began with a climb which took us onto Folly Hill where we looked across the green expanse, now peaceful, but during the 2nd World War the site of an airfield with Wellington Bombers based here. Today the only thing we saw taking off was a flock of gulls! We passed hangars complete with light aircraft, happily with pleasure in mind rather than war. Arable fields in various autumn stages of ploughing or planting were crossed until eventually we reached the River Pang. The Pang was quite full after the recent rainy weather and spilled out of its meandering line. Luckily a small bridge allowed us passage over and on we went to enter a lovely stretch of woodland. We reached an information board telling the history of Hampstead Norreys and its Motte then a walk through the churchyard led us to the White Hart pub for lunch and a trip down memory lane for one of our walkers, the pub being her childhood home!

Greenham Common (Oct 14):- After what seemed like days of rain, at last a lovely sunny morning as we met on Greenham Common where all was peaceful and quiet. Different from 30 years ago when it was alive with jet-powered US warplanes and the chanting of protests from the Women's Peace Camp! Since the Cruise Missiles were removed in 1993, the Common, under the management of BBOWT, has gradually been reclaimed by Nature. Now the only chanting we could hear was that coming from the birds! Our walk took us across the Common following the line of the old military runway. Waterholes had filled with rain water and, after several wet days, we savoured the reflection of the blue sky on their surfaces! Cows with calves and ponies happily grazed on the Common, important for the survival of the numerous wildflowers which now smother this area in Spring and Summer. On this autumn day we were content to spot various fungi including colourful fly agarics. Eventually we left the Common to drop down to a bridge over the River Kennet. We looked up and down the river, remarking on its beauty as it sparkled in the sunshine and reflected the surrounding trees. Next we crossed the Kennet & Avon Canal looking equally as stunning. After a pleasant walk along its towpath for some distance we left the Canal to walk beside the large lake of the Thatcham Discovery Centre. Grebes and moorhens busied themselves on the water while cormorants sat like statues on an island in the lake, drying their wings in the sunshine. As we approached the Visitor Centre we were greeted by the cacophony of ducks, geese and gulls. We enjoyed a coffee break, seated on benches overlooking the lake. Refreshed, we followed a path through the Thatcham Reed Beds, the largest inland reed beds in Southern England. Soon we were crossing the Kennet & Avon Canal again to take an uphill path into Bowdown Woods, the largest BBOWT area of woodland and rich in flora and fauna. Renowned for its wealth of fungi we spotted several along our route. Back on Greenham Common we made our way towards the Grade 11 listed Control Tower which is being refurbished and will soon offer a visitor centre, exhibition area and cafe to visitors of this wonderful part of the Berkshire countryside.

Crowsley Park (Nov 14):- It was a misty autumn morning for our first November walk as we gathered at the Herb Farm in Sonning Common. As we walked across the Millennium Green the mist began to lift revealing the wonderful open space saved from development by local former resident Sibella Bonham-Carter. Now it is enjoyed by local residents, walkers like ourselves, and the local birds and wildlife. From the Green we walked in sunshine through wonderful undulating fields. Passing the attractive timber-framed and thatched Frieze Cottage we soon came to the gateway of Crowsley Park. The gateposts topped with fierce-looking hounds serve as a reminder of the property's links with Arthur Conan-Doyle, author of *The Hounds of the Baskervilles!* With bonfire night the next day the hedgerow along the drive provided its own *firework display* in yellows and golds interspersed with fiery red berries, while mistletoe exploded amongst the branches of tall trees. We passed Crowsley Park House, with the coat of arms of former owners, the Baskerville family, above the door. Now in the ownership of the BBC we walked across some of the 160 acres in which the mansion sits, noting three satellite dishes. These huge dishes could easily have landed from outer space but the only connection with space came in 1980 when scenes from *Dr Who* were filmed here! The park holds many fine trees, some the remains of seven avenues which radiate from the house. We chose to take our break by a cluster of sweet chestnut trees which gave the opportunity to search for its fruit amongst the grass! The second part of the walk took us from the parkland into huge arable fields, dipping down before rising up to meet the blue sky as the fields dramatically followed the contours of the Chilterns. Small areas of woodland were passed through in which the ground lay littered with fungi before we reached the Herb Farm where we were served a lovely lunch before taking the opportunity to browse amongst their 'feel-good' gifts in the shop.

Stonor (Nov 14):- The Crown at Pishill may once have been a 'Hotspot' for music and dancing in the 60's but on this



November day it exuded peace and tranquillity set in its valley in The Chilterns. The drive to the pub had us 'ooh-ing and aah-ing' as we passed beneath glorious autumnal Chiltern beech trees and we set off on our walk, eager to find more. As is often the case in The Chilterns we began with a climb but this rewarded us with views down over the wonderful arable and pastoral countryside through which we had climbed. As we continued on, more splendid views opened up in front of us as our path dropped down the other side of the hill. Soon we entered a gate into Stonor Park and we climbed once more to gain a great view of the lovely Stonor House down in the valley. A magnificent Cedar of Lebanon stands protectively in front of the house, but the beech trees flaunting their deep golden leaves took most of our attention, especially as we could look down onto their canopies from our high vantage point. Further along the top of the hillside we had a good view of the Saracen and Pudding stones which lie in a mysterious circle in the ground. As we continued on we passed the remains of fallen trees, their stumps now supporting whole 'gardens' of fungi. Lovely.

A gate took us out of the deer park and into a beech woodland. Here we were torn whether to set our gaze up into the canopy of gold, or down to where a wide variety of fungi lined our path! Further on in the woodland we passed through a plantation of larch, their fronds joining the *autumn festival* by adding a mellow yellow to the vibrant scene. We took our break in the hamlet of Southend before continuing beside red-berried hawthorn hedgerows enclosing rolling fields forming picturesque folds in the landscape. We spotted the Turville windmill set on its hill, and a gorgeous isolated house enjoying an amazing view. Another stretch of beech woodland in all its autumnal glory led us out to find a path leading down the hillside grazed by deer. A fire greeted us warmly at the pub and in the cosy surroundings we enjoyed lunch to end yet another 'feel good' walk *Celebrating the Countryside!*

Warburg (Nov 14):- Searching for more wonderful autumn colours in The Chilterns we headed for the Warburg Nature Reserve, managed by BBOWT. A climbing path allowed us to look down over the orange, yellow and russet of the tree canopies which on this dry but otherwise dull day, beautifully illuminated the woodland. We made our way down the Oxfordshire Way, passing the Doormouse Village - small nest boxes set onto tree trunks a few feet off the ground in which doormice make their summer nests and raise their young. The network of boxes allows them to move around through the trees without going onto the ground. We reached a chalky path to walk down it overlooking the glories of Bix Bottom. Wow!

Along the valley floor we paused to chat to workmen at the remains of St James Church. Funded by English Heritage they were completing essential repairs to make the ruins safe in the hope that the public will once more be able to wander around the atmospheric site in the future. We climbed out of the valley as two pairs of red kites floated with ease across the 'Bottom' adding to the delightful scene. We entered more golden beech woodland in which a pair of fallow deer paused on our path to look suspiciously at us before prancing off into the cover of trees. In contrast to their graceful movement, a muntjac crashed clumsily across our path! Emerging into a field a kestrel was the next creature to amuse us flapping its wings madly as it set its sights on its prey below.

We reached Crockers End, a peaceful hamlet sitting comfortably beside its green and warmly enclosed by beech trees. Amongst its picturesque cottages we spotted one used in *Midsomer Murders*. A field path afforded us a good view of Soundess House set in its lovely garden. The view across from the house is now interrupted by trees, but in the 1670's this view stretched to Windsor Castle where it is said Charles 11 sent smoke signals to his mistress, Nell Gwyn who lived in Soundess House! We left a large flock of rooks circling over a spinney of trees as we made our way back into Warburg Nature Reserve to find its Visitor Centre.

We took our picnics into the hide overlooking a pond surrounded by trees hung with bird feeders. While we ate we watched tits, jays and even a woodpecker visiting to eat their lunch too! Afterwards we were met by Park Ranger, Giles who led us on



a Nature Walk through special areas of the Reserve. He pointed out several of the 900 species of fungi which are known to grow at the Reserve, amusing us with their unusual names such as Sulphur Tusk, Candle Snuff, Jelly Ear, Ivory Woodwax, The Deceiver and Funnel Cap! He showed us areas of coppiced hazel, a practice carried out since Neolithic Times. We were told that areas of buckthorn provide important food for the caterpillars of the yellow brimstone butterflies which can be enjoyed here in the summer. Grassland seemed quite plain to the untrained eye, but was transformed as our gaze was guided to discover the huge mixture of other plants amongst it, especially herbs. We were encouraged to return in the summer when these areas of grassland become transformed by a mass of wildflowers. Having enjoyed *Celebrating the Countryside* in this wonderful Reserve we knew we would be back!

Sulham (Nov 14):- After a couple of walks in the Chilterns it was lovely to explore the beech woodland right on our doorstep in Purley. It also gave us the chance to show off what we had learnt on our tour with Giles as we attempted to remember the names of several of the fungi we passed! Eventually we left the woodland to walk across fields which, although home to numerous skylarks and full of poppies in summertime, is under threat by builders who are seeking planning permission to build here. We were determined to enjoy it while we could!!

Turkey & Tinsel Walk (Dec 14):- It was a lovely, bright winters day as we enjoyed making our way around fields, amongst trees and through hamlets in the vicinity of Arborfield. Afterwards we tucked in to a Festive Lunch in Henry's Street Garden Centre before enveloping ourselves in the wonderful Christmas displays in their shop. Of course no visit would be complete at this time of year without wandering through the grotto and talking to the real reindeer! We left feeling extremely festive!

Christmas Party (Dec):- As usual our party day began with a local walk, this year enjoying the Winter Wonderland along the Thames Path at Purley. Back at St Mary's the aroma from vats of mulled wine set the ambience for a jolly shared lunch displayed on tables groaning under the weight of so much varied and delicious food. With a slice of Christmas cake and a cup of tea we settled down afterwards to hear a review of our wonderful year of walks *Celebrating the Countryside*. Marjy then amused us with a selection of her poems before the Pathfinder Choir treated us to some Christmas songs. We ended with a rousing rendition of 'We Wish you a Merry Christmas!'

