

**Silchester (Sept 15):-** As The Queen celebrated her long reign, the ladies of Purley Pathfinders celebrated the start of a new term. We began in Silchester where with much chatter we caught up on holiday stories as we walked through lush meadows, strips of woodland where trees stood hugged by circles of impressive fungi, and further meadows grazed by disinterested cows with calves. Sloes and blackberries ripening along a lane gave an autumnal feel to the bright late summer's day and as we walked across an arable field the high haystacks of safely gathered crops continued the autumn theme.

Pheasants noisily protested at being disturbed along a farm drive, and their protest continued as they became our noisy companions as they led us along the next field edge! Across the field the cheery yellow faces of a large group of sunflowers smiled at us and soon we were walking beside them. Numerous bees could be seen enjoying this valuable, late nectar source, and no doubt the pheasants and other birds would soon be enjoying the seeds from the giant heads.

We shared a field with a flock of sheep to have our break before heading off to soon arrive beside the walls surrounding the site of the Roman town of Calleva. The English Heritage site has traces of occupation from the Iron Age but the development of the large, important Roman town took place from AD43. We stood in awe in the centre of the 1st century Amphitheatre, imagining up to 9,000 spectators sitting around the arena watching various events such as gladiatorial combat and wild beast shows. Public execution also made for a nice day out! We entered the ancient church with its stunning 13th century wall paintings, 14th century effigy and beautifully embroidered kneelers.

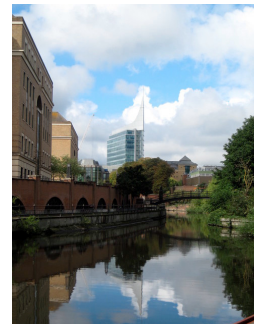
We arrived at the path which leads through the centre of the 1st century town but decided to end our walk with a walk beside the fabulous walls, built around the town in the 3rd century, and believed to be the best preserved Roman walls in Britain. How privileged we felt to be soaking up the Heritage of this most complete plan of any Roman town in the country!

**Reading Heritage Walk (Sept 15):-** Leaving the clamour of swans we began by walking along the south bank of the Thames beneath Caversham Bridge, looking forward to walking beside the new footbridge/cycle bridge. It certainly didn't disappoint with its elegant white arching sides and 37 metre mast. With last minute details being finalised in readiness for the official opening by the Mayor in a few days time we were forced to detour around the workmen, rejoining the Thames by Reading Bridge. In contrast to the new bridge, the Reading Bridge is nearly 100 years old.

We continued beside the Thames past the flower-decked Caversham Lock and on into Kings Meadow, Reading's largest park looking green and inviting on this lovely morning. Eventually we reached Kennet Mouth where the River Kennet converges with the Thames. We used the listed Horseshoe Bridge to cross the Kennet which we followed to Blake's Lock, the last/first lock on the Kennet & Avon Canal. A heron sat patiently above the weir while we stood patiently watching a narrow boat make its slow progress through the lock, reminiscing on our Bath trip when we stood at the other end of the canal. Along the towpath we passed the Fisherman Inn being colourfully decorated with bunting in readiness for the rugby! With so many local pubs closing it was good to see this one still serving the community after 200 years!

With Heritage in mind we left the canal to cross towards the former Huntley & Palmer biscuit factory which provided the 'B' for biscuits in the Reading trio. It provided a link to another trip when we visited the Oates Museum in Gilbert White's House, for Huntley & Palmer provided the energy biscuits for Scott's expedition to the Antarctic!

Continuing our walk beside the peaceful Kennet we imagined it in days gone by when it was an important transport link, busy with barges. A bronze fisherman stood poised on the peaceful Chocolate Island but in the past it would have been a hive of activity with cocoa being unloaded from barges onto the island to be taken across a bridge to the factory for their chocolate biscuits! Further on, the towpath was renamed in 2000 as the Oscar Wilde Memorial Walk. He was a prisoner in Reading prison, seen peeping over the wall, and upon his release uttered 'Oh Beautiful World'. These words have been immortalised on the railings beside the river and in this lovely spot we agreed with his sentiment! Through a closed gate we paused to peer through at the remains of Reading Abbey, founded in 1121 by Henry 1 and one of the wealthiest Abbeys in the country at the time. Henry died in Normandy and his body brought back to Reading via the Kennet to be buried in the Abbey as he had requested. It is hoped that soon the unstable Abbey site will be made safe enough for the public to once again walk through this important part of Reading's Heritage. We paused beneath one of Reading's newest iconic buildings, The Blade, before walking beneath the Abbey Gateway towards Forbury Gardens, once the forecourt of the Abbey. Now they make an attractive oasis with gardens laid out almost as they were in Victorian times. We took our break at the bandstand beside the imposing Mainwand Lion, the largest standing lion in the world, before finishing with a walk on the north bank of the Thames through Christchurch Meadows. We ended with lunch on Pipers Island with its views up and down the river.



**Stoke Row (Sept 15):-** Early drizzle had left a freshness to the air and we walked through woodland at Stoke Row tinged with yellow and smelling of autumn. Lovely! Our route took us past some pretty old farmhouses and along paths between hedgerows heavy with autumn bounty. Through the next wood the lofty trees provided a pleasant early autumn canopy while ferns turning rusty in colour provided a pleasant edge to our path. When we emerged from the wood we were greeted with a magnificent view stretching away over undulating fields bounded by trees in their early autumn dress towards Wittenham Clumps in the distance. Dropping down the hillside we turned our gaze to the left where sheep grazed beneath a tree, rather than looking to the right where an unlovely newbuild intruded on the lovely landscape - soon to be inhabited by Rowan Atkinson! After our descent we faced a climb but blackberries provided refreshment on the way. Eventually we returned to Stoke Row to walk through the cherry orchard planted to provide an income for the upkeep of the Stoke Row well. Known as the Maharajas Well after its benefactor, the Maharaja of Benares, we took a closer look at this ornate construction with its gilded dome and decorative elephant, marvelling at the fact that the 368 feet deep well was dug entirely by hand!



**Autumntime Special (Sept 15):-** On a most beautiful sunny morning we arrived in the thriving market town of Marlborough to



begin our day with coffee in the 15th century 'not-so-redundant-church' of St Peter's. There was time to look around the fascinating and beautiful interior as well as browsing the stalls of locally made crafts. A short hop by coach found us at the starting point for our walk, Fyfield Downs high above Marlborough. The views were clear and amazing as we set off across the Downs. We dropped down into a valley and walking along it we found ourselves surrounded by in an estimated 25,000 Sarcen Stones scattered across the ground creating a 'River of Stones'. This dramatic sight appeared as if some giant had tossed stone marbles in the air and they lay where they fell. A less fairytale explanation is that 50 million years ago this area had a tropical climate. When the earth cooled to Arctic conditions in the Ice Age the earth's crust broke into pieces and glaciers, rather than a giant, ripped through the valley depositing the rocks which we saw today. What a privilege to walk within this unique sight!

Eventually we climbed through further abandoned stones, partially hidden by gorse bushes, to pause for our break with a fabulous view down over the stones. Continuing on across meadows of the Fyfield Nature Reserve, an SSSI, fabulous views over rolling downland stretched on every side in a huge expanse of natural beauty. Passing through a gate the rough meadows were suddenly replaced with the smooth green of gallops. What a thrill it must be to ride horses along here in this stunning landscape! Crossing the gallops we joined a gravel track, part of The White Horse Trail, which eventually led us back to our coach.

Munching on picnics we made the short journey to the World Heritage Site of Avebury. On this lovely sunny, blue-sky day coats were left behind as, with site maps in hand, we were free to explore this impressive site which is 14 times larger than Stonehenge and 500 years older! We wandered amongst the huge Sarcen Stones which, unlike the naturally placed ones we had witnessed on the Downs, were placed in intriguing circles and avenues. The play of the sunshine formed lengthy, atmospheric shadows across the ground. In the Middle Ages people had begun to pull the stones over and bury them until a tragic accident, when a barber cum surgeon was crushed by a falling stone, brought forth stories of superstition and so the burying ceased. Much later a way was discovered to break up the very hard sandstone and farmers profited from selling the stone for buildings. When William Stukeley arrived in Avebury in the 18th century he realised the importance of the site but was unable to force the destruction to cease. Thankfully he made note of the positions of the stones for in the 1930's the archaeologist, Alexander Keiller bought the Manor House and surrounding land with plans to return Avebury to its former glory. By this time only 15 stones remained upright so we appreciated the enormous task he undertook as now a further 50 stones are in their correct place. With concrete markers showing the position of any missing stones we were really able to see the wonder of this special place.

In the Old Avebury Farmyard we could wander through two museums, one with interactive displays telling the history of Avebury, and the other full of interesting artefacts discovered in the area by Keiller including the scissors found beside the remains of the ill-fated barber cum surgeon, the skeleton of a dog and 500 year old fossilised dog poo!!



The lovely Manor House was the subject of a 2011 project by the National Trust in conjunction



with the BBC. In the resulting programme, The Manor Reborn, rooms were restored to reflect a significant period in the history of the Manor from the age of Elizabeth 1 to the eve of World War Two. We enjoyed the Manor's friendly informality as we sat on settees in the parlour, listening to a radio programme from the 1930's; played billiards in the Billiard Room; sat at the grand dining table and read old newspapers in the 18th-century-theme Dining Room; lay on sumptuous beds in the Tudor Bedchamber and Queen Anne's Bedroom, and even did some mixing in the 1912 Kitchen!

Outside, the Walled Garden was a delight to the eye with colourful beds bursting with seasonal dahlias while the Topiary Garden provides structural beauty all year round. Fruit trees in the Orchard hung laden with fruit which, with produce from the productive Vegetable Garden, provide fresh produce for the cafe. Luckily there were spare runner beans and squashes for us to purchase!

With so much to see we had a very full afternoon so, after a browse in the well-stocked shop, we were ready for our Cream Tea which we just knew would be delicious, the Tea Room having been voted the best National Trust Tea Room!

**Swallowfield (October 15):-** Feeling fortunate to have a lovely morning after two days of rain we began along a quiet lane with views across the Blackwater Valley. We noticed how much more autumn colour there was to see in the countryside and enjoyed its beauty. Hedgerows burgeoned with the deep purple of nature's bounty - blackberries, sloes and elderberries. We joined the banks of the swollen River Blackwater, its edge prettily decorated with purple mallow and teasel spikes. Four herons suddenly lifted in ungainly flight while on our other side a red kite dipped to the earth's surface before rising in effortlessly grace.

We paused beside Thatcher's Ford, impassable after the recent heavy rainfall. Then, leaving the riverbank, we cut across a field of maize and on along a tree-lined path where ferns provided a russet carpet. We climbed the edge of a field and at the top gained a good view across to the distant Madejski Stadium. Back on a path beneath trees we paused to watch a large number of game birds running here and there beside a strip of maize.

Eventually we entered the parkland grounds of Swallowfield Park. In the 14th century the park was used for the breeding of King Edward 111's horses but today the grass was beautifully manicured by a flock of sheep. Our view of 17th century Swallowfield House was partially obscured by magnificent trees. In 1820 it passed to the Russell family who formed an event which survives to this day - the Swallowfield Show. We left the parkland to walk across the grass to The George and Dragon for a lovely lunch.