

## HAPPY TENTH BIRTHDAY PURLEY PATHFINDERS!

Who would have thought that a simple advert in the Parish mag wondering if any ladies would like to join me on the odd walk for company and safety, would result in a popular walking group barely a month later! I certainly didn't have an idea just how many other ladies felt like me – wanting to get out into the countryside to enjoy the delights of each season, yet feeling vulnerable on my own. So – Purley Pathfinders was born on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1999, and during the following ten years the group has explored the length and breadth of the marvellous countryside which we are privileged to live within. 'Specials' have taken us by coach to other lovely areas of the country so that we have been able to enjoy the delights each has to offer – and also the chance to survey the tastiness of their cream teas!



For our tenth birthday our birthday celebration had to be something really special. After over a year of planning we headed for largest area of outstanding natural beauty, The Cotswolds. From Friday to Sunday, thirty-eight of us took over an entire Manor House, quietly situated in Bourton on the Water, yet within a 200 yard walk into the centre of this showcase Cotswold village, beautifully positioned around greens either side of the pretty River Windrush.

There was time to enjoy the peaceful walled garden of the Manor before assembling for afternoon tea and cake. We had been allocated three guides and, after outlining the plans for our long weekend, they led us on an enlightening walk around Bourton, taking in some of the back streets rarely seen by visitors, yet delightful with their wisteria and clematis covered cottages. We also had the opportunity to visit the splendid church. Back at the Manor we relaxed with a pre-dinner drink before being called into the dining room, set with friendly circular tables. After our tasty three-course dinner we retired, with coffee, to the large function room in anticipation of the evening's entertainment. The first evening was to be Country Dancing (I use the term loosely!). With great hilarity we counted our steps through a variety of dances before slumping back into our chairs, weary from both the activity and the laughter!

Saturday dawned with the sun shining in a blue sky. After a filling breakfast, we gathered in two groups to begin our walk for the day, which would take us to the Slaughters. Often described as the most beautiful of all the Cotswold villages, we arrived at Lower Slaughter via a pretty route along the River Windrush, passing an old mill, (how I wished I could paint!), and through lush green meadows affording us views over glorious Cotswold countryside. After visiting the Church we wandered along the gentle River Eye overlooked by some of the village's gorgeous cottages. We took a break at the Old Mill, a picturesque spot where we could either relax in the



Mill's café garden with a coffee, or gorge ourselves on giant Cotswold ice-creams! Tearing ourselves away, we continued across oh-so-green meadows to reach Upper Slaughter, one of only a very few 'Thankful Villages' - thankful that in both World Wars the village suffered no fatalities. After visiting the Church we continued our walk. 'Upper' refers to the village's position 'upstream' along the River Eye, not 'up' as in height, but now we began to climb through fields of clover beside one of the dry-stone walls for which the Cotswolds is famous. A welcome breeze cooled us once we had gained some height, and we continued through arable fields between swaying crops with skylarks singing from above. Our view was one of the green landscape of the Windrush Valley, neatly divided by

dry-stone walls and hedges, and dotted with the occasional mellow stone village. Eventually we looked down into the valley below to an undulating area pin-pointing the site of a Medieval Village at Lower Harford. We headed down the hillside, coming alongside a field of spectacular English Longhorn cows. As befitting the name of the village, we crossed a ford and entered the undulating meadow seen from above, settling beside the meandering River Windrush to eat our picnics - these having been selected earlier from a mouth-watering array of choices, (we certainly wouldn't starve this weekend!) It was difficult to leave the tranquil, idyllic surroundings, but once back on route we were soon marvelling at fields full of cowslips and orchids. Woodland came as a contrast and we enjoyed the shade it offered as it led us on the final part of our walk. We emerged alongside Aston Mill where the gardens sported a fine floral arbour, and burgeoned with lilac and tulips. Beside paddling ducklings, and banks edged with colourful irises, we followed the Windrush back to the Manor.

During a stretch of free-time the delights of Bourton on the Water were investigated, with purchases made at many of the interesting shops, and many a cream tea devoured in sunny riverside café gardens! After another lovely evening meal we gathered for a games evening. The room soon became full of laughter at the jollity of it all – a great end to another great day!

A clear blue sky and sunshine greeted us early on Sunday morning. (By 7am some of us were already sunning ourselves in the garden before breakfast!) Today our walk was one of exploration of the glorious Windrush Valley. Buttercup meadows took us out of Bourton on a climbing path, part of the Monarch's Way, from where we gained extensive views. Our open route saw us cutting through one lovely meadow after another until, eventually, we reached the welcome shade alongside a copse full of birdsong. Our morning break was taken on a hillside beside a hedgerow of May blossom, with a panoramic view out across the Windrush Valley and back to Bourton. This area belongs to Clapton Hill Farm which is in partnership with the Countryside Stewardship. The care of the countryside was evident by the array of pretty wild flowers surrounding us – magic! Piled nearby we discovered a



hay-stack looking splendid in its natural state, and not wrapped in black plastic! It was fitting that we should climb to the first Cotswold village to be visited, for it is called Clapton on the Hill. Established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it has less than 90 inhabitants, but we enjoyed their cottages, and walked through a gate made by a local craftsman entirely out of horseshoes to find its Church. Evidently it is a lucky tradition for the groom to lift his bride over the horseshoe gate! We took it in turns to look inside the Church, for it is only 6 paces across and 8 paces from the door to the altar, making it the smallest in Gloucestershire! However, a lot of beauty is packed into this small space – we particularly liked the tiny lancet windows above the altar.

Our walk continued by dropping down beside a Nature Reserve. Further on a flock of mixed sheep greeted us loudly as they clamoured around the fence, baa-ing excitedly like a bunch of woolly hooligans! A country lane with verges full of wild flowers took us to a rough meadow overseen by a buzzard, and skirting a bluebell copse. Eventually we crossed the River Windrush, and through a froth of cow-parsley, we arrived at the lakes of a Nature Reserve. We settled ourselves amongst the cowslips alongside one of the lakes to eat our picnics, watched jealously by a black swan. Again the idyllic setting was difficult to leave, but we rejoined the walk by walking beside, and then crossing, the pretty River Dickler as it made its way to join the Windrush. We climbed a fairly steep hill – a glider teasing us as it floated effortlessly above in the blue sky. From the top we had a great view over the route we had walked, with the lakes shimmering in the valley below.



We arrived at Little Rissington, now remote from its Church after the village was moved, probably after the Black Death. We followed the sign to its 12<sup>th</sup> Century Church and, upon entering, we were immediately reminded of Little Rissington's association with the Red Arrows at their former base nearby. A Red Arrow vividly stood out on a Memorial stain-glass window, and kneelers have been lovingly embroidered with the distinctive red aeroplanes. However, the most poignant memorial was to be found in the churchyard where stand row upon row of white gravestones embellished with the Red Arrow logo. We walked along the rows of graves, all beautifully tended, and quietly reflected on the loss of so many young lives.



Thoughtfully we plunged ourselves back into the peaceful countryside with a 240 degree expansive view. We crossed two bridges over the River Dickler, one stream leading to Rissington Mill. We passed more lakes belonging to the Nature Reserve visited earlier – these ones edged with fine bullrushes. With the gentle song of the birds we made our way along the quiet backways into Bourton on the Water. Upon reaching the village we appreciated its drawl on such a fine day as this, for, upon the greens, families spread out on picnic rugs eating ice-creams, watching the youngsters paddling in the cool waters of the Windrush, or sitting on the low 18<sup>th</sup> century bridges, dangling their feet. We arrived back at the Manor in 'Holiday Mood', but sadly our holiday was over – However – there was time to sample just one more cream tea before making our way back to Purley!

Thankyou ladies for your company and friendship over the past ten years – Here's to the next ten!!