

Purley Pathfinders Walk Reports – Flora & Fauna

Distributed with April/May 2013 programme

New Year Celebration Walk:- As usual our first walk of the year was our New Year Celebration Walk where the *Fauna* was supplied by three red kites which followed us overhead throughout, apparently oblivious to the lack of warm thermals. Down on the frosty ground we were warm walking in a different kind of thermals! As we entered the first of two Tilehurst parks to be explored, Arthur Newbery Park, we admired the *Flora* provided by the magnificent skeletal shapes of its many fine trees. On reaching a viewpoint we paused to look out over the rather misty, frosty scene before us. We continued on passing odd clumps of snow – probably the remains of snowmen built from the snow of the previous days. The playground stood empty on this cold day, but we couldn't help appreciate the value of this wonderful green oasis to local residents. Arthur Newbery is the person to thank, for he saved the area from development. We walked on to enter the second green space, McKilroy Park, named after its benefactor, Mr McKilroy of the famous Reading Department Store. From his office in Reading he could see the green plateau and fought to save it. To reach the green plateau we first had to walk through trees which, unlike the previous park, were clumped together to form a spinney. Emerging onto the open area we had a good view across the flooded valley of the Thames. On reaching the Tylers Rest we enjoyed a New Year Celebration lunch together.

Moulsford Cancelled due to snow!

Silchester (January 13):- With snow of the previous week having melted, the sun-filled blue sky of a lovely morning reflected in the flooded fields turning them into deep blue lagoons. We had been warned there may be mud, and mud there was! However it didn't distract us from the lovely walk around the Roman Town of Calleva. Often throughout the walk we could see surviving parts of the old town's walls– amazing considering their great age. We squelched our way through fields and along muddy tracks. Two red kites flew overhead –were they whistling at us, or laughing! We all had a laugh at the expense of poor Corinne whose boot got sucked off in a particularly muddy stretch! We managed to rescue it from out of the mud but were unfortunately unable to save her sock!! Determinedly we carried on, enjoying the fresh air of the lovely morning, stopping off at St Mary's Church. Inside this pretty 12th century church there were many treasures to discover, our search aided by informative literature. We were particularly struck by the amazing medieval wall paintings. Back outside we admired the early snowdrops and primroses, and the sweet alpacae grazing contentedly in the paddock next door. Our walk back in time continued as we entered the 1st century Amphitheatre. Here we stood in awe – what scenes it must have witnessed! We finished our walk by virtually walking on top of a well-preserved length of the Roman walls. Amazing!

Nuffield (February 13):- Red Kites decided to join us on our walk and soon after crossing a golf course we paused to watch their aerobatic display. We enjoyed far-reaching views across Oxfordshire countryside with two clumps of trees nearby creating a frame around our view of Wittenham Clumps. We walked beside Nuffield's peaceful Church where snowdrops spread like little glowing lanterns amongst the gravestones and along the base of hedgerows. As we joined the Ridgeway further views opened up until we delved into pleasant woodland where, even on this early February day, bluebell shoots were already poking through the earth. We emerged from woodland on a path cutting through arable fields where red kites gave another impressive flying display above the stubble. A gaggle of geese announced our arrival at Homer Farm where primroses added a delicate glow of yellow amongst the snowdrops. Walking along a lane, further snowdrops scrambling along the bank beside us, while catkins danced merrily in the breeze. We took our break in a sunny glade where bluebell shoots were well advanced. Then, walking along the drive of a stunning Chiltern house, we spotted our first daffodil in bloom amongst the spiky leaves of its less advanced companions. Further cheery yellow was provided by a swathe of winter aconites. Flocks of birds rose and fell over fields, their wings flashing white in the sunshine as we approached the wonderful English Farm. Climbing through its pastures gave us the excuse to pause to look back over the grand farmhouse set within its green and pleasant land. We reflected how apt its name!

Nettlebed (February 13):- Having left Purley in above freezing temperatures, how surprised we were to arrive in Nettlebed to find it covered in a few inches of snow! How beautiful it looked! Warm and cosy in our hats, gloves and scarves we couldn't fail to miss the old Kiln, a prominent reminder of Nettlebed's brick making past. Two large Pudding Stones, thought to be over 50 million years old, have been relocated onto the Green from a property in the High Street. It is thought they were formed when the area was a semi-arid region. Also on the Green the bus shelter sports a fine mosaic plaque which celebrates not only the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, but also the 60th anniversary of the Art Society's art shows. It features a tree and a red kite, both prominent features of the area.

In our definitely non semi-arid surroundings we left the centre of the village to search for these features and soon found ourselves beneath both trees and red kites as we walked through the wooded Nettlebed Common. With branches heavy with snow we felt we were entering the world of Narnia! Wonderful! Eventually emerging from trees we were faced with the glorious scene of a Chiltern valley set between folds of Chiltern hills, all clothed in white. Wow! Our feet made a satisfying muffled crunch in the snow while we looked for footprints betraying the earlier presence of any wildlife. Back in woodland, this time part of the wonderful Warburg Nature Reserve, we made our way to the Visitor Centre. A hide provided the perfect place for our break as we were thoroughly entertained by the numerous birds visiting the welcome bird feeders. Dragging ourselves away we entered the glorious Bix Bottom. What fun we could have had if we had brought a sledge! Making our way back to Nettlebed we passed through Crockers End where snowdrops were just visible above the snow surrounding pretty cottages, many featured in Midsomer Murders. TV dramas were on our minds during lunch in the very pleasant new café in Nettlebed, for seated at a table beside us the debonair actor Simon Williams was also enjoying lunch!



Donnington (February 13):- (thankyou Laura for this report). We arrived in the pretty village of Bagnor on a rather cold, cloudy morning. We admired the masses of snowdrops and the yet-to-flower daffodils set beside the very fast flowing and full River Lambourne. From the Watermill Theatre we began our fairly easy, although muddy in places, walk. Bridlepaths took us through woodland of oak, beech and holly. We passed beside Snelmore Common Country Park, a designated SSSI, Donnington Golf Course and over the noisy A34 before arriving at a disused barn which has been the subject of a wonderful restoration project and which will soon be a family home. Then we saw the Castle which looked stunning even on this grey day and luckily we still had reasonable views from our vantage point. We took our break beside the Castle and learnt of Donnington Castle's part in the Civil War. It had played an eventful part of the war in the 1600's but today, thankfully, all was peaceful. We continued by wending our way back to Bagnor via woodland and bridleways. Sadly The Blackbird which we have used several times in the past is now closed, but The Watermill Theatre warmly welcomed us in for lunch.

Sonning Common & Clayfield Copse (March 13):- Beginning by walking across Sonning Common's Millennium Green we were pleased to see signs of spring in the primroses and crocuses dotted in the grass below pretty dangling catkins. After crossing an enormous field, the first of several to be encountered on our walk, our arrival at Chalkhouse Green was heralded by a gaggle of geese. A pair of sweet donkeys ambled over to greet us over the fence. We admired the farm's fine herd of Pedigree British White Cattle with their black noses, ears and socks! Continuing along a bridleway we were surprised and pleased to find it fairly dry – a nice change after the muddy walks of January and February! Birdsong filled the air – a sure sign that spring is just around the corner, and bluebell shoots added to our optimism. A rabbit appeared – as if by magic! – and just as quickly disappeared down one of the numerous holes dug into the bank beside us. We left this countryside scene to take a short walk along an estate road, but this was equally as pleasant with front gardens richly bejewelled with crocuses of all shades. Our search for Flora & Fauna took us into Reading's first Nature Reserve, Clayfield Copse, an area of ancient woodland which means it has been wooded for at least 400 years. The Reserve plays host to numerous birds, insects, three varieties of bats and 25 species of butterfly. Clayfield Copse was once part of Caversham Park and its stately mansion. In 1990 one of its mature cedar trees succumbed to gale force winds but the wood was given to the Berkshire Wood Carvers who produced a series of wonderfully carved posts which now form a sculpture trail through the copse. We followed part of the trail, each post depicting some of the flora and fauna of the area. Leaving the wood we walked across an area of grassland to where we once more were grateful for the forethought of those in charge of the area. An ancient oak tree split in 2006 and to save it the tree underwent severe pruning. The oak was saved and it also provided the wood for a sculpture of a huge dragon which was painted by local children and unveiled in April 2007. We wished the dragon a happy 6th birthday for next month and walked on along a pretty wooded strip alive with



birdsong. We followed deer tracks across a large field and were delighted to see some lapwings fly up with their distinctive 'pee wit' cry. In the final large field a line of game birds performed a victory march now that the shooting season is over! We had seen plenty of flora and fauna on our walk so it was apt that we had lunch in the Bird in Hand where we chatted to the pub's resident parrot!

Inkpen Crocuses (March 13):- On this walk we visited two Nature Reserves, continuing our quest for Flora and Fauna! We walked across Inkpen Common Nature Reserve which is an important heathland site. It looked cheerful with its yellow gorse bushes in flower. We listened out for the numerous species of birds which make this, now rare, site their home, and looked out for the three varieties of heather which enjoy the acid conditions. Inkpen Beacon could be seen which at 974 feet is the highest point in SE England. We continued between trees beneath which snowdrops scrambled, and on along a lane where we were amused by a sculpture of an enormous boot. Along a bridleway we were struck by Nature's own sculptures for here the exposed roots of trees made intricate sculptures along the bank. A green woodpecker flew across our path as, watched by horses, we walked beside more swathes of snowdrops. Inkpen is a fairly wooded area and the next woodland we walked through is known as The Folly which on this March day was highly decorated with catkins. In contrast our next path took us through open fields from where we gained a good view of The Gibbet on top of Inkpen Beacon. As we neared the end of our walk we entered the second Nature Reserve to be visited, Inkpen Crocus Field, an SSSI. This 8-acre site is one of only two in the country to support Mediterranean Crocuses. Thought to have been brought here by the crusading Knights Templar in the 12th century, these little beauties transform the field with a purple haze in March. Unfortunately the lack of sunshine meant most blooms stayed closed but as we walked amongst the 400,000 purple spikes we could see the potential! We finished with lunch in the Crown & Garter.

Pyrton Wild Daffodils (March 13):- Six Red Kites circled above us as we left Watlington to join a pleasant path edged with bird-filled trees. We stayed on this path for some distance until branching off to find the village of Lewknor with its attractive brick and flint cottages. We crossed the playground of the attractive thatched school to reach the church which was familiar to fans of The Vicar of Dibley as it features in the opening title sequence along with the gorge cut by the M40 nearby. Inside this interesting church there was much to see including an impressive font and two William Morris designed stained glass windows. Continuing on through the village we walked beside the pretty stream with its watercress crop. The banks looked colourful with daffodils nodding beneath catkins – a lovely spring scene! Our route took us out of the village along the edge of arable fields until we arrived near Model Farm which was an innovative farm trialing all the latest equipment. Eventually we arrived at the pretty village of Pyrton. Walking through the village we admired its lovely cottages and were impressed by the dove cote sited on the roof of one of them. At the end of the village we found its church and upon passing through the lych gate we were greeted by the cheery yellow scene of the churchyard full of wild daffodils. Although many were yet to open fully, the area looked splendid decorated by these little blooms. From here it was a short walk back to Watlington to end our lovely long walk.

