

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with Feb/March '14 walk programme

Hailey (Sept 13):- *Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness!* We have been lucky enough to be out in the countryside to follow Nature's progression as summer slides into autumn. The quote from *To Autumn* by John Keats came to mind as we set out from Hailey with distant views veiled in mist and hedgerows burgeoning with fruitfulness - jewel elderberries, ripening blackberries, plump rosehips, and hawthorn berries amongst others. A gap in the hedgerow revealed a view across a pheasant-filled field, another sight associated with this time of year, while the redundant towers of Didcot rose eerily into the distant misty sky like a ghostly reminder of some forgotten industry.

Striding out across a field of golden stubble, we headed towards woodland where trees showed early autumn tints. Soon we were walking within this pleasant airy woodland, but once back into the open we shared the countryside with still more pheasants - they were everywhere! Red Kites circled over the harvested fields and the autumn bounty continued to fill the hedgerows, now with numerous hazelnuts joining the feast.

We joined the Ridgeway, initially on a narrow path lined with ferns and fungi. It took us on into woodland, following the impressive line of the Grimms Ditch. Within the wood we spotted many interesting fungi amongst the tree roots, now exposed after years of footfall on this ancient path. Beyond the trees a flock of sheep grazed, and our thoughts turned to Celtic times when our route must have been an important one along which animals would have been herded.

Leaving the Ridgeway we witnessed a truly autumnal scene - a tractor making its way across a large ploughed field with a flock of glistening white birds never far behind! We entered a field in which, at first, we thought was full of more pheasants. However, as huge wings took off into the air we realised it was a large flock of Red Kites. A wonderful sight! Our way back was along a Green Road, a track which wound its way under trees, and with the early mist having cleared, with splendid views on either side. We were warmly welcomed into the King William 1V by the new owners who served us a delicious lunch.

Moulsford (October'13):- Continuing our search for signs of autumn we set out from Moulsford on a path strewn with conkers. Even at our age we witnessed that heart-leap of triumph as we plucked shiny new conkers from their spiky shells! Then, safely stored in our pockets, they lay as a natural stress ball for each time we thrust our hands into our pockets! As well as this comforting treasure, the surrounding countryside also made any stresses of life quickly disappear as we made our way up a track between hedgerows glowing with rosehips. Over the hedges our view stretched over miles of the wonderful Berkshire landscape with the green only interrupted by the occasional changing tree. On this glorious autumn morning all seemed well with the world! We entered the Well Barn estate, led by an amusing procession of young pheasants. Red Kites patrolled the blue sky while small birds sang from the hedgerows and mature pheasants scattered noisily into the surrounding fields. Beech nuts provided a crunchy carpet to our path as we passed between beech trees. Suddenly six Red Kites flew low across our path to swoop down into the dip beside us, allowing us to see their rich colouring. Walnuts now added to the bounty on offer as we gradually began the descent back to Moulsford with wonderful views ahead - a lovely end to our walk.

Autumn Special - Exbury (Oct 13):- In temperatures more suited to summer, we gathered for our Autumn Special beside the Solent at Lepe Country Park. We gazed across the shimmering water to the Isle of Wight, taking pleasure from the warm breeze. A flock of turn-stones wandered along the shingle, and we watched as these sea birds turned stones, searching for food. Our walk took in a variety of habitats for flora and fauna as befitted our theme beginning with meadows and arable fields. A jay drank from a puddle while a variety of birds flew or sang nearby. We walked in woodland, part of the New Forest National Park, where berries, acorns and nuts were in abundance. The final stretch took us along the beach with the bird sanctuary, Gull Island nearby, home to black-headed gulls and other rare sea-birds. Sailing boats made their way towards the mouth of the Beaulieu River on water which reflected the blue sky on this lovely hot day. The gardens of Inchmery House run down to the beach and we took special interest in this property as it was the home of Lionel de Rothschild before he moved to Exbury House to create his famous woodland garden. We passed the Millennium Beacon, a lighthouse structure built as part of the Millennium celebrations. Also the Watch House which used to house a large telescope.

Re-boarding our coach we made the short journey to Exbury Gardens, passing many sweet New Forest ponies on the way. Exbury Gardens have been described as *Heaven with the gates left open*, and on this glorious day the description fitted perfectly. We set about exploring as much of Rothschild's fabulous 250 acre woodland garden as possible in an afternoon. Some took advantage of the buggies which took them on a 40 minute tour, with knowledgeable drivers pointing out special areas and trees. Others followed the garden map on foot but whichever way we chose we all enjoyed this wonderful place - The Sundial Garden with the sundial brought by Rothschild from Inchmery House, surrounded by colourful flower beds with large dahlia heads attracting numerous large butterflies: the many carp-filled ponds giving stunning reflections of surrounding trees: The Viewpoint with views over the Beaulieu River: The Rock Garden, one of the largest in Europe, hosting many structural evergreens as well as pretty autumn flowering cyclamen. Fungi could be found almost everywhere, and of course everywhere we looked we were greeted with the sight of magnificent trees, many sporting autumn colours, while evergreens provided shape and height. The Five Arrows Gallery held a stunning display of Nerines alongside paintings and textiles with the evocative theme, *Wild Autumn in Art*. The Exbury Steam Train gave us all a thrilling ride through the American Garden likened to *New England in the Fall*. What a wonderful afternoon we had in this Paradise! A delicious cream tea finished off our fabulous autumn trip in traditional fashion. Fab!



Cholsey & Aston Tirrold (Oct 13):- Still buzzing after our wonderful autumn trip we set out on our next local walk from Aston Tirrold. After rain we welcomed patches of blue sky and sunshine for our walk which took us across field after field within lovely countryside to eventually reach Cholsey Church. Here we stood beside the grave of Agatha Christie, our walk timed perfectly with the *Final Four* episodes of Poirot about to be screened on the TV! We remembered other well-loved characters created by Christie during her writing career while we took our break. The churchyard proved colourful with sorbus trees loaded with bright berries. A green woodpecker hopped around in the grass before flying off with an indignant whistle at our disturbance of this otherwise peaceful setting. The second half of our walk led us to Lollington Farm, one-time home of poet laureate John Masefield. The beautiful rolling countryside all around the farm inspired him in his poetry, often forming a contrast to the horrors he had witnessed during his time in the Navy during the War. After listening to one of his poems we continued in inspirational mood within this wonderful autumn landscape with hedgerows full of autumn bounty enclosing wide undulating fields. We returned to find our cars partially buried in horse-chestnut leaves. Eagerly we stuffed our pockets with shiny conkers, aware that the very feel of them in our palms never loses that satisfying magic!

Turville (Nov 13):- Our arrival in the Chiltern village of Turville coincided beautifully with the beech woodland's transformation of the countryside into a golden paradise. What a wonderful sight! Many of the lovely brick and flint cottages of Turville have featured in a variety of TV series, while the Church with its stunning John Piper window features as St Bartholomew in *The Vicar of Dibley*! Today all was quiet and peaceful, so leaving the village sleepily behind us we climbed gently towards the tempting beech woods with the *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* windmill looking down on us from up on the hilltop. A pleasant route through the wood led us along the Chiltern Way on which we dropped down a field to another pretty Chiltern village, Fingest. We paused by a long wall on which were displayed over sixty cleverly carved pumpkins! A climb allowed us to look down over the village clustered around its Church, and to enjoy the autumnal glories of the surrounding countryside. At the top of our climb we delved into more beech woodland, then out along the top of a rolling field, all the while soaking up the beauty of the autumn season. Back in



Turville a dozen Red Kites swirled above us in the blue sky as we made our way to the Bull & Butcher for lunch.

Great Chalk Wood (Nov 13):- *thankyou Laura for this report.* On an beautiful sunny warm morning we left the village of Goring to immerse ourselves in the multi-coloured surroundings of The Great Chalk Wood. Fabulous! Red Kites as usual were in evidence as were remaining rose hips and even some blackberries. We took our break on top of the Hartslock BBOWT from where we shared the wonderful view with a flock of sheep. The Thames snaked away below us to pass beneath the Brunel railway bridge. Our return route to Goring took us along its rather muddy towpath thanks to recent rainfall, but with the warming sunshine of the day glinting on the river, no-one minded at all!

Blewbury (Nov 13):- We entered Blewbury beneath a confetti of yellow leaves, and as we made our way through the village we admired the variety of attractive cottages, some thatched, some with herringbone brickwork, and some timber-framed. The old thatch-topped cob walls, once the boundaries of farms, now enclose many a well-tended garden, while the names of the houses, such as Forge Cottage, reveal more of a by-gone age. Blewbury owes its growth to the many streams which meander through the village, some resulting in a one-time thriving watercress production. We walked beside one of the clear flowing streams, then past the almshouses to the Church where we paused to take a look inside.



A country path with views across to Wittenham Clumps led us to the neighbouring village of Aston Tirrold. Here grand houses make up the village around the Church of St Michael in which we took a peek whilst having our break. Continuing on we reached a lane and by crossing over it we passed from Aston Tirrold into Aston Upthorpe with its many attractive barn conversions. Inside All Saints Church the simple interior is decorated with wall paintings. The lack of coloured glass in the windows was not an issue, for the poppies displayed in the windowsills with a backdrop of orange autumnal leaves seen through the glass proved a match for any stained glass!

In the lovely sunshine we made our way back on a well-trodden path at the foot of Blewburton Hill. To our left green fields dotted with autumnal trees rose to the Downs, whilst ahead Blewbury looked beautiful engulfed in autumn colours. No wonder this inspirational village has been home to several writers. Miles of horse-riding countryside was perfect for Dick Francis when writing his novels which centred around horse racing, and the glorious countryside no doubt inspired country-loving Kenneth Grahame, whilst perhaps the various farms inspired Barbara Todd to write the tales of *Worzel Gummidge*!

Rushall Farm (Nov 13):- We began by navigating a pleasant meandering path beneath trees which still, amazingly, clung on to the last of their autumn leaves. Reaching a field we paused to gaze out across the flock of sheep towards Bradfield where we could make out some of the college buildings. Back into woodland we crunched our way through the autumn leaf-fall, the occasional call and the odd feather betraying the presence nearby of pheasants. We paused to look up into the heights of thuja trees, appreciating why their tall, straight trunks are favoured in totem-pole making! We left the wood to walk down a track with buzzards and red kites reeling in the fields beside us. A sheep-filled field led us on to reach the buildings of Bradfield College in its pretty waterside setting. We took our break in the Church, saddened at the news that it is soon to close. We took advantage to look around its many treasures while we could. Our walk continued beside the pretty River Pang where ducks, moorhens and swans shattered the reflections caused by the sunshine of the lovely autumn morning. Across the College playing fields, the brick and flint of its buildings glowed attractively in the sun's rays. We continued beside the Pang until our path turned to cross over its waters and lead us back to the stunning Black Barn of Rushall Farm.

Turkey & Tinsel (Dec 13):- After pausing to have a group photo beside a giant inflatable Father Christmas on the forecourt



of the garden centre, we began our walk in festive mood. The one-time *Floral Mile* looked rather bare in wintertime, but soon we headed across fields to then take a winding path through a pretty copse to emerge near 16th century Northbury Farm, originally a Manor House. Soon we reached the 12th century Church at Ruscombe set in the heart of the Ruscombe Conservation area. Upon entering its cosy interior we discovered what a lovely church this is with attractive stain-glass windows, several wall paintings and intricately carved doors. We continued our walk by heading out of the Churchyard via the west gate which gave us the opportunity to see the clock on the West wall of the Church, dedicated to those who fell in WW1. Pausing while the group climbed over a stile gave us the chance to watch numerous young pheasants in their enclosures beside us. Grassy tracks and areas of woodland led us back to the Horse & Groom for a festive lunch before crossing over to Wyevale Garden centre to soak up the Christmas atmosphere created by the range of goodies on offer for the festive season.

Christmas Party (Dec 13):- Our local winter wonderland walk gave us plenty of opportunity to see Flora & Fauna during our final walk of the year. We took advantage of a lovely dry day to walk beside the Thames at Purley where a tree provided perches for numerous cormorants. Grebes, mallards and other more fancy ducks bobbed about on the water, geese grazed in the waterside meadows, and herons stood on watch on posts. Trees were festively decorated with baubles of mistletoe while bullrushes formed attractive cover for waterfowl. The whole scene looked peaceful and serene with pockets of blue sky reflected in the still water. As our path reached a point opposite Whitchurch we looked across to flocks of alpacae while the Red Kites as ever patrolled the sky. The sound of birdsong filled the air as a flock of chaffinches squabbled in a hedgerow, and a number of great tits flitted from branch to branch. We left the river to walk beside Springs Farm where sheep were contentedly grazing. Then as we made our way along the bridleway our Flora and Fauna walks ended with a flourish as a slow worm wriggled across our path!

Back at St Mary's tables groaned with a wide variety of food prepared by members. This soon disappeared as over 80 Purley Pathfinders tucked in to the delicious fare, washed down with warming mulled wine. Over tea and Christmas Cake the usual review of the year was heard. We all agreed it had been a great year of walks and trips. Marjy entertained us with a couple of her amusing poems before the Pathfinder Choir sang some Christmas songs. We all heartily joined in with *We Wish you a Merry Christmas* to end yet another enjoyable Christmas Party.

Thankyou all so much for your generous gifts which I received at the party. The painting bought from the exhibition at Exbury Gardens hangs in proud position in my day room and has been much admired by visitors over the holiday. The Mill at Sonning has been booked for a comedy performance on 31st January and Roger and myself are really looking forward to this lovely treat! I have positions in mind for the wall brackets once the spring is here, but while I wait for the spring flowers in the garden I can enjoy the first of the monthly bunches of flowers which has been delivered to my door! Thankyou! Thankyou!

Nicki x