

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

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FLORA & FAUNA

Aston Upthorpe Downs (March 13):- Following our quest for flora and fauna on our 2013 walks we met at the foot of Aston Upthorpe Downs. These wonderful chalkland downs are usually a colourful mosaic of chalkland wildflowers at this time of year. With the lateness of the spring we resigned ourselves to the fact that the cowslips which we had particularly come to see would not be in flower. Despite this we were determined to enjoy the walk and so, in temperatures little above freezing, we made the exhilarating climb up the Downs. Reaching the top we found ourselves standing in a thin layer of snow! How pretty it looked, and we decided the dull crunch of snow beneath our feet was preferable to the squelching of mud experienced over the last few months! We made our way around the base of Lowbury Hill, the highest point of the Berkshire Downs. The far-reaching views over the wintry landscape were stunning. Didcot Power Station, providing the walker with a useful landmark for 43 years, looked eerily dejected with the power having been switched off just three days earlier.



We began the descent, passing a flock of gulls enjoying a paddle in a large puddle! It was disappointing not to have seen the cowslips but we were cheered by the pleasant song of numerous chaffinches, and catkins tried their hardest to provide a sunny glow to the wintry scene as we finished our walk with a glow to our cheeks!

Springtime Special to The Wye Valley:- The River Wye is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and also a Special Area of Conservation so during our Flora and Fauna year it proved the ideal venue for our Springtime Special. Our day consisted of two walks with the first beginning 120 metres above the River Wye on Symonds Yat Rock. We set off enthusiastically and soon arrived at the Internationally famous RSPB Viewpoint. Here we took advantage of the telescopes set up by RSPB volunteers and focused on a male Peregrine Falcon which posed beautifully for us on nearby Coldwell Rocks. Peregrine Falcons have nested on the ledges here for 20 years, and the knowledgeable volunteers gave us much information about them, although a nuthatch sitting just above our heads tried desperately to drown out their voices with its lovely song! The viewpoint also gave us wonderful views up and down the river and into seven counties. Wow!

Our walk continued through the mosaic of broadleaf and conifer trees which provide a variety of habitats for wildlife. Birds serenaded us from the trees which at last had begun to show signs of green during this late spring. Catkins lit up our route while green bluebell shoots smothered the woodland floor. We imagined the wonderful sight this will be in a few weeks when the flowers emerge. Before ending our walk we took advantage of another viewpoint – this one giving us a good view of Symonds Yat East and West, divided by the River Wye. Below us, rocks caused the river to form frothy rapids, frequented by brave canoeists.

We rejoined our coach and hungrily gobbled up our picnics as it transported us to The Gateway of the Wye Valley, Ross-on-Wye. Situated in the Area of Natural Beauty of the Wye Valley, Ross is widely acknowledged as The Birthplace of Tourism. In 1745 boats were chartered to take visitors along the river. Passengers included many poets, writers and artists drawn to the beauty unveiled during these Grand Tours.

We began our own Grand Tour on foot, following the River Wye as it meandered through parkland meadows alongside the town. Part of our walk followed the John Kyrle Walk. Known as the Man of Ross for his unselfish commitment to Ross-on-Wye and its people, Kyrle was responsible for much of the *beautifying* of the town and surrounding landscape. We passed two striking sculptures of swans in flight, set along the riverbank in a modern-day attempt to continue this *beautifying* theme. We enjoyed the activity on the river, often seen through a veil of weeping willows sporting their fresh new leaves.



Eventually we left the river to take a parallel route back towards Ross. Along here we saw fluffy pussy willow, promising fat sticky buds on horse chestnut trees, and cheerful celandines scrambling along hedgerows. We drew nearer to the 13th century Church of St Mary the Virgin, the spire of which we had seen throughout most of the walk. Alongside the Church we entered The Prospect – an area of beauty, peace and tranquillity. John Kyrle leased this area for the enjoyment of the people of Ross. He also provided the town

with water by installing a huge reservoir beneath The Prospect, filling it by pumping water up from the river. We spent some time in this special place with its colourful flowerbeds and majestic trees. A topograph directed our view over the river to far-away places such as The Sugar Loaf in Abergaveney, and to The Malvern Hills.

After exploring the area fully with its Town Beacon and Memorial Cross, we left to explore more of this *picture postcard* town. We admired the 14th century sandstone Almshouses on our way to the attractive 17th century sandstone Market Hall. Alongside it stands the impressive black and white, timber-framed John Kyrle House sporting a *Man of Ross* plaque. We passed the Man of Ross pub with complimentary words about Kyrle on a large plaque. Outside stands another *beautifying* sculpture, this time of leaping salmon. We made our way back to the coach via the Thomas Blake Memorial Gardens. This Victorian carried on the work of Kyrle by spending much of his money to benefit the town and its people.

Back on the coach we set off for the third part of our special springtime trip – a visit to the International Centre for Birds of Prey. Once at this *hidden gem* we were free to wander along the Hawk Walk, Owls Courtyard, and amongst the numerous enclosures all set within lovely gardens. Many of the birds sat outside on posts so we could get up close to them for some

great photo opportunities. It was great that the very first bird we saw was a Peregrine Falcon – no need for a telescope this time!! Time allowed a wander within the lovely grounds including a woodland walk where the trees rose up from drifts of wild daffodils. Stunning! We also spotted frogspawn in a lake supporting frogs, newts and fish.

Having fully explored, we settled on benches overlooking the daffodil-studded Flying Field ready for our next treat. Jemima Parry-Jones MBE introduced the Flying Demonstration and soon we were all enthralled as first a Laner Falcon and then a Harris Hawk demonstrated their amazing flying skills as they endeavoured to catch the lure. The Star of the Show as far as we were concerned came next – a Peregrine Falcon. It certainly showed how it has gained acclaim as the fastest creature on earth, being capable of reaching speeds of up to 200mph. It sped over our heads and circled around at such speed that it was difficult to keep an eye on where it was. Absolutely thrilling! After a nice day the wind began to strengthen so, for the safety of the birds, we all moved into the Flying Demonstration Barn where Jemima opened a box to reveal a gorgeous Barn Owl. How beautiful it looked as it demonstrated its stealth as it silently flew for us. The show finished with a fabulous Grey Buzzard Eagle with an impressive wingspan.

All too soon the show was over so we all made our way to the café where award-winning baker, Angela, served us with a scrummy cream tea. A great way to end our fabulous day in The Wye Valley!



TWYFORD (April 13):- We thought the starting point for our next walk, The World's End PH, aptly named for it sits beside a ford which held a large sign announcing it 'unpassable' after the floods of the past months! Luckily our walk took us in a different direction and on a sunny dry day which meant we were free to enjoy looking for flora and fauna rather than the best way to avoid the mud! At last we began to see signs of spring as we passed through Nature Reserves in the Twyford area. We ducked beneath arbours of frothy white blackthorn blossom and passed cheerful yellow gorse bushes and fluffy pussy-willows. Buds on trees split to reveal their leafy treasure within and birdsong filled the air. We walked near several lakes which form part of the Loddon Reserve. Weeping willows stooped over to admire their fresh green reflection, mirrored in the still water. Several herons took to the sky while cormorants lined up along a partly submerged tree trunk contentedly drying their outstretched wings in the sunshine. Ducks and swans settled on nests or foraged for food from within the depths of the water - up tails all! Joining the banks of the River Loddon we were pleased to see Berkshire's Flower, the Loddon Lily, in flower. Their bright white blooms combined with glossy yellow celandines to light up the area beautifully.

We basked in the sunshine as we took our banana break on a bridge over the river. A buzzard patrolled the sky searching for his own snack! Our walk took us on through woodland where the cry went up, 'bluebells!' Here and there the distinctive blue blooms could be seen amongst their less advanced companions. A week or so and this area will a picture of deep blue!

A spring bunny hopped along in front of us as, with a sense of great optimism after such a long winter, we finished our lovely springtime walk with lunch.

Ardington (April 13):- On a glorious sunny morning we began by walking through the village of Ardington, rebuilt as a 'Model Village' by Baron Wantage in the 19th century. With its delightful black and white, timbered cottages and pretty stream we didn't argue with its description! We crossed the stream, one of three which we would encounter during our walk, those being Ardington Brook, Lockinge Brook and Ginge Brook. Providing power to drive watermills, they played an important part in the prosperity of the villages in the past. As we delved deep into the countryside, birdsong filled the air while blossom trees deposited petals daintily at our feet. Maintained as an organic area, we were in for a treat as wild flowers thrive, spilling out of hedgerows and dotting the fields with colour.



Our route took us to Lockinge, another picturesque, downland village with more timbered cottages set in gardens filled with sunny primroses and daffodils. Lockinge, in The Vale of the White Horse, has a great association with horses so it was no surprise to pass several, their riders hailing a cheery 'Good morning!' However, as we rounded a bend, a fine figure of a horse could be seen standing in pride of place on the village green. This is a bronze, life-size statue of Best Mate. Trained in Lockinge, he was one of the most loved horses in the history of horse racing, and three-times winner of the Cheltenham Gold Cup.

Crossing the Lockinge Brook we gained a good view along the water to the church with its tower reaching up into the blue sky. We continued our search for flora and fauna, but in the grounds of a grand property we were surprised to see a rhino standing alongside a lake, albeit a model one! We were pleased we had brought sunhats as we continued in the sunshine with a long, gradual climb on a track between rolling green fields. Eventually we reached the Ridgeway along which we were rewarded for our effort with outstanding views over miles of wonderful countryside. We spotted the village of Ginge down in the valley and, in the unfamiliar heat, were pleased that our downward path was within the shade of a strip of trees. Reaching the edge of Ginge village we walked on a path high above the Ginge Brook with its banks full of wild flowers. A lane cutting between banks of cowslips, primroses and even a few bluebells, took us into West Hendred where we walked through the churchyard buried in primroses, daffodils and cowslips. From here an easy, grassy path between vast crop fields took us back to Ardington where we paused at one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture in England, Ardington House. Work was underway in preparation for a wedding - what a lovely setting with the front lawn blue with anemones. We promised ourselves a revisit in August when the house is opened to the public.

Finishing our fabulous walk we headed for the village tea room for lunch - a special place to end this rather special walk.