

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORT

FLORA & FAUNA

distributed with Nov/Dec 13 / Jan 14 prog

Midgham Park (July 13):- Not only did the overhanging trees provide welcome shade on this sunny day, but also they treated us to their stunning reflections in the still water of the Kennet and Avon Canal. The stretch we were walking between Woolhampton and Midgham proved delightful with lush, colourful waterside plants in abundance. This *flora* not only added interest to our walk, but also attracted numerous butterflies and insects. We were particularly struck by the beauty of the vivid blue damselflies. Canal boats glided past serenely and it seemed all too soon that this attractive part of our walk was over. However, across the canal we had spotted Midgham Church with its distinctive spire sitting prominently on the hillside, and this 19th century church was our next vantage point. It didn't take long before we were taking our break beside the church from where a good view can be enjoyed of the equally lofty spire of Brimpton Church, and beyond towards Watership Down.

We entered the grounds of Migham Park to continue on a contrasting, yet equally as attractive part of the walk, for now we were surrounded by long waving grasses of rough pastureland. Butterflies were attracted to the area and flitted around us in great numbers. They were everywhere! Lovely! A ha ha afforded a glimpse of Midgham House, dating from the early 13th century, and in which William, son of George 11 spent much of his youth. Infact, a suite of rooms is still known as The Duke's Rooms. On we went in the butterfly haven with feathers and the occasional call betraying the presence of pheasants somewhere nearby. Reaching an area rich in thistles we just had to pause to watch the spectacle of visiting butterflies, with numerous caterpillars also seen on surrounding nettles. What a wonderful place for both *flora* and *fauna*. A swooping buzzard was our final treat as we left the estate to shelter from the sun a while beneath a magnificent hornbeam tree. Back at Woolhampton we made the most of the pretty canalside setting of the Rowbarge to enjoy lunch in the garden.

Woburn Summertime Special (July 13):- Excited anticipation mounted as we spotted several deer through our coach windows as it wound its way through part of the deer park of Woburn Abbey & Gardens. Soon we were walking through the 3,000 acres of glorious parkland and deer park, firstly on a path between lakes across which we had a good view of the impressive Woburn Abbey. Swans and ducks floated on the lakes while dragonflies skimmed above the surfac, and deer bent down to drink - what a brilliant start! Above the trees ahead we could see evidence of two churches in Woburn Village. The tower belongs to the old St Mary's Church which is now a Heritage Centre, while an intricate spire tops the new St Mary's Church. Grasshoppers drummed out a tune, butterflies flitted around us, and a green woodpecker flew across our path as we continued towards another lake. As we walked beside it we watched the huge carp hovering just below the surface of the water, and noted more places favoured by deer at which to drink.



Next we set out on a path between wide swathes of grassland dotted with grand specimens of trees. The day was very hot so many of the nine species of deer in the Park gathered under the trees for shade. We took their lead and sheltered under a fine oak to take an extra drink break. On we went, thrilled every time we came upon one deer herd after another. However, when we stopped for our 'official' break, different species of *fauna* grabbed our attention for we found ourselves high above Woburn Safari Park. Below we watched as elephants, wilderbeasts, rhino, gazelles and more wandered freely. We couldn't wait to get closer and, after our break we descended through woodland to enter a gate into the perimeter of the Safari Park. We walked along, taking time to watch the very different kind of *fauna* from that usually seen on our walks! In the first paddock a zebra came running to greet us, braying noisily, while camels took shelter in their hut nearby. We walked past all the animals seen during our break, but now they were only feet away! We carried on, now passing giraffes, and through a wooded area where we came across wallabies and cute ostrich chicks. We had seen some amazing animals, but we all seemed to have a soft spot for the elephants. An area of woodland frequented by deer took us to where our coach was waiting and it soon whisked us back to Woburn Abbey via Woburn village which gave us the opportunity to see some of this lovely Georgian town with the two churches we had spotted on our walk. Definitely worth a visit one day!



The rest of our day, however, was spent at Woburn Abbey where, after a picnic amongst the flowers surrounding the Folly overlooking the lake, we were free to explore the 28 acres of formal and natural areas of the gardens. Designs by Humphrey Repton in 1805 for the 6th Duke of Bedford resulted in manicured lawns, colourful flower beds, peaceful woodland glades and lakes and ponds. Over the years Repton's original features and themes have gradually been restored and replanted with magically beautiful results. Herbaceous borders burgeoned with summer flowers; trees, some of which no doubt were planted in Repton's day, rise from close-cropped lawns which lead to wild grassy areas where orchids flourish and moths and butterflies dance; a Monet-style bridge spans a lake full of colourful waterlilies while the kitchen garden is a feast for eyes and mouths, with trees in pots drooping with a good crop of Duke of Bedford apples. Carp-filled lakes reflected the beauty all around on this lovely sunny day.

Whilst at Woburn we couldn't miss the opportunity to take a tour inside the Abbey. It was founded in 1145 by Cistercian monks but has been home to the Dukes of Bedford for over 400 years, with the 15th Duke presently being in residence. Inside the Abbey is lovely. Set over three floors, we were guided by informative room wardens as each room revealed private treasures collected by various members of the family over the years. We were awe-struck by the works of art - a magnificent collection of Venetian views painted by Canaletto, the famous Armada portrait of Queen Elizabeth 1, and a range of paintings by other famous artists such as Rembrandt, Gainsborough and Van Dyck. Even etchings by Victoria and Albert were in evidence on the walls in the Queen Victoria bedroom! We were lucky to see other 'works of art' while at Woburn for our visit

coincided with a display of the intricately decorated dresses worn by dancers in Strictly Come Dancing! As well as beautifully decorated and furnished rooms, we visited the unusual Grotto with its maritime theme of shell encrusted walls. In the Vaults we saw the family's collection of gold and silver as well as some fine china. In the tranquil Blue Drawing Room, Duchess Anna Maria, wife of the 4th Duke would entertain friends, creating the tradition of Afternoon Tea!

Well - Purley Pathfinders need no persuading to keep up this tradition, so we ended our wonderful day in Woburn with a cream tea in the Duchess Tea Room!

Dorchester (September 13):- After the summer break during which many Pathfinders enjoyed meeting up for casual walks in the local area, we were pleased to get our boots on ready for the new programme during which we would focus on the changing season as summer slides into autumn. In Dorchester thatched cottages sat in lovely gardens full of late summer flowers. We were pleased that the weather was slightly cooler than that of late and after a lovely summer we felt that autumn was intent on nudging its way forward as we passed trees full of glossy red apples or plump conkers, and hedgerows full of ripening blackberries, rose hips and elderberries. As we rounded a corner we were greeted with a very autumnal scene - the harvest had been safely gathered in to leave a field of stubble across which we had a good view of Wittenham Clumps. Made up of Castle Hill, an Iron Age Hillfort, and Round Hill, we were to make our way up Castle Hill first, but on the way paused to look up and down the Thames from the 'Pooh Sticks Bridge' near Days Lock. We crossed Little Wittenham Nature Reserve which as an SSSI fell nicely in with our Flora and Fauna theme with butterflies flitting amongst the grasses. We climbed up Castle Hill and once at the top took our break alongside the Poem Tree. Sadly it has succumbed to age and looked forlorn as it



lay across the ground. The Victorian graffiti is still visible, and on a plaque nearby we were able to read what Joseph Tubb had carved on the tree in 1844, telling the history of the area. We enjoyed the view over the lovely Oxfordshire Countryside and this view remained with us as we made our way across to the top of Round Hill. Here a topography informed us of what landmarks we were looking at and were pleased to realise we had visited many of them on our walks.

Leaving this wonderful spot we made our way down the hillside to soon follow the Thames until branching off to follow the River Thame back into Dorchester. Here we found the 15th century George, one of the oldest coaching inns in the country, proudly depicted by the bright yellow coach outside! Inside we enjoyed a delicious lunch,

imagining the scene when the George was used as a film set on Midsomer Murders, Poirot and Tom Browns Schooldays.

Tidmarsh (September):- We are lucky to be surrounded by flora and fauna in our area, and we set out from Tidmarsh to discover some of this local treasure. We began with a pleasant stretch of the River Pang where ducks and a pair of swans dabbled in the clear water. A gate allowed us into Moor Copse Nature Reserve in which the 7 acres are managed by BBOWT to encourage flora and fauna for all to enjoy. The Nature Reserve is a mixture of woodland and meadows and we began our exploration in Park Wood where wood piles create a wonderful wildlife habitat, while berried trees and blackberry bushes provide food. 5-Acre Field had recently been cut and the resulting hay removed to encourage the multitude of wild flowers which thrive here in summertime. In the woodland of Moor Copse we noticed several coppiced hazels amongst the larger trees which BBOWT proudly state are home to three species of woodpecker, green, great spotted and the rare lesser spotted.

We left the Reserve to head across the lovely arable landscape of the Sulham Valley edged with a few remaining poppies. We took our break in Sulham Church beside Sulham House, home to the Wilder family since 1712. A beautiful wall-hanging showing cottages of Sulham as a commemoration of the Wilder's many years here, sits amongst many memorial plaques to members of the family.



Back out into the glories of the Sulham Valley we headed back to the Nature Reserve to complete the circuit. The crash of something large moving through the woodland beside us probably meant we had disturbed a deer. Disturbing the pheasants, we walked through another cut meadow edged with oak trees loaded with acorns. The next meadow had yet to be cut and here a good variety of butterflies grazed amongst the nectar-rich grasses and flowers. We paused to watch a kestrel - hover, fly, hover, then dive. Such skill! Soon we were back beside the Pang and we followed its meandering route between banks of lush waterside plants frequented by insects, dragonflies and butterflies. We paused on a bridge to study the clear water in the hope

of spotting a trout. Sadly they were as elusive as the water voles which also thrive here.

Back in Tidmarsh we took time to look inside the Church of St Laurence, passing through the impressive arched doorway to walk on intricately patterned floor tiles between the old pews towards the beautiful 5-lancet windows in the apse. Wall-paintings and a lovely old font were just some of the other treasures to be enjoyed in this pretty part-12th century building. From this old building we made our way to another - the 12th century Greyhound pub for lunch.

Hambleton (September):- (thankyou Laura for this report) Our next walk took us a little further afield as we began in the pretty Chiltern village of Hambleton. During the walk the landscape was influenced by two estates either side of the Henley to Marlow road, namely Danesfield and Hambleton. The red brick cottages of Hambleton have often been used as sets for costume dramas and films. We set off towards the contrasting white buildings of Danesfield, firstly along a long, pleasant stretch of the River Thames where flora and fauna were much in evidence. Early signs of autumn were all around with pollarded trees and horsechestnuts tinged with orange leaves surrounding their many conkers. There was plenty of bounty for the harvest including blackberries, walnuts, rosehips and sloes. Rain towards the end of the walk failed to spoil our pleasure during this lovely Chiltern walk.