

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS FLORA & FAUNA

Distributed with Sept/Oct 2013 programme

Local 14th Birthday Celebration Walk (May 13):- Fourteen years ago on a bright May morning, the very first Purley Pathfinders walk took place with 8 ladies. Fourteen years later, 50 of the 90+ members met beside the Kennet & Avon Canal for an anniversary walk. From the peaceful canal we headed for Theale where the busy main street was soon left behind as we followed delightful, hidden paths which eventually took us across the golf course to the hamlet of North Street. From here we made our way to the village of Englefield, and after walking along the attractive village street, we took a break in the Parish Church of St Marks, its spire penetrating high into the blue sky. We continued along the drive of the imposing Englefield House, passing the lake and the deer park. Back by the Kennet & Avon Canal we settled down, surrounded by cowslips, in the picnic area to eat our lunch and share a large birthday cake. Next we headed back to Englefield House by car to recreate a visit enjoyed on our first birthday. The gardens were as spectacular as ever with huge banks of colourful rhododendrons and azaleas. Birds sang with gusto, and deer were spotted away in the deer park. We wandered freely, soaking up the beauty and heady scents on this lovely sunny afternoon - a lovely way to celebrate during our *flora and fauna* year!

Rushall Farm (May 13):- Perhaps it's because the season is so short that walking through a bluebell wood in May is such a joy! We were fortunate to time our walk through the woodland around Rushall Farm when the bluebell season was in full swing. Every sense was awakened with the sight of these beauties transforming the woodland floor to a deep blue and tingling our noses with their sweet perfume. Never far away, sheep called to their young offspring which in turn ran to nuzzle into the cosiness of their Mother's woolly bodies. As we approached the farm on a path high above a chalk pit, we heard the elated chatter of children. Hens clucked and a donkey brayed and we shared in the visiting school children's pleasure of this wonderful place.

After enjoying a wonderful view across the Pang Valley towards the college buildings of Bradfield, we wandered down a field in which primroses and bluebells had intertwined to weave an amazing colourful carpet. Back into woodland where ferns unfurled from their tight springs, then through a field of sheep and lambs we headed for the pretty complex of buildings surrounding Bradfield Church from where the bells rang out a welcome. We meandered along the riverbank of the Pang, spotting trout hovering in the clear water. Birds sang as they flitted from hedgerow to hedgerow. We passed an orchard full of blossom floating above a froth of cow parsley, and young Highland Cattle came to peer at us from over their fence. We had much to reflect on when, back at the Black Barn,

we gathered together to eat our picnics.

Birthday Special (May 13):- We also celebrated our birthday further afield with a celebration trip to the Cotswolds. Our day began in the *Cotswold Gem*, Tetbury where we explored the wealth of interest making it one of the finest Cotswold market towns. We continued Tetbury's association with the wool trade by heading across fields grazed by sheep with their lambs. Eventually we entered the grounds of Westonbirt School from where we had a good view of the impressive frontage of this one-time Manor House. It belonged to the Holford family and it was Robert Holford who, with his great enthusiasm for gardening and landscaping, began the planting of Westonbirt Arboretum. We walked beside the pretty cottages of Westonbirt village to reach the arboretum where, after a picnic lunch, we were free to explore some of the 17 miles of paths through 2,800 species of trees!



Following the suggested route we were greeted at every turn with one burst of colour after another from the rhododendrons and azaleas. Stealing our eyes away from these *look at me* specimens we cast our eyes over and up into magnificent trees, marvelling at the loftiness of pines, the girth of oak trees, and the sheer wealth of shape, form and texture all around us. This being our *Flora and Fauna* year we took time to sit in the bird hide to watch a variety of birds, including a greater spotted woodpecker, come to feed. At the end of the day it was time to feed us so we gathered together in the restaurant where we were served a delicious cream tea before heading back to the coach which soon resembled a garden as purchases of one plant-filled bag after another were deposited! Special reminders of a very special place.



Bucklebury Farm (June 13):- Continuing our theme, our next walk began from Bucklebury Farm Park. Within moments of setting off we were immersed within the beauty of the Pang Valley with green fields all around. In a corner of one we paused to gaze at what at first we thought was a small deer. Suddenly it loped off into the hedgerow and we could see that it was actually a hare. More *fauna* joined in the enjoyment of the lush meadows as a pheasant strutted by, peacock butterflies flitted over nectar-rich meadow flowers, and skylarks sang as they performed their aerial bop. Our route led us into woodland in which bluebells, although now nearly over, still gave a pale blue haze to the woodland floor. Leaving the shelter of the trees we found ourselves in a meadow ablaze with bright yellow buttercups. It has been said that weeds are just flowers in the wrong place. Here in this meadow the breathtaking beauty of the buttercups confirmed they were definitely in the right place! Although June, we were pleased that at last the May blossom was beginning to transform the hawthorn into a mass of white.

Trees were the main focus of the end of the walk as we made our way through the woodland of Bucklebury Common. We walked beneath the famous rows of oaks, the first avenue having been planted to commemorate a visit to Bucklebury Manor by Queen Elizabeth 1 in the late 1500's. Further oaks have been planted to honour the Victory at the Battle of Waterloo, to commemorate a visit by Queen Elizabeth 11 in 1972, to mark the 80th birthday of the Queen Mother in 1980, and in 2000 to celebrate the new Millennium. The oaks provided welcome shade on this hot day and, upon discovering a blackbird's egg beneath the canopy, we stood in humble recognition of the value these fine trees have offered in the form of shelter to humans, birds and insects for over 400 years!

We returned to Bucklebury Farm Park where we were welcomed in to picnic before a tractor and trailer took us on an exciting ride through the farm's deer park. We paused beside a large herd of red deer and, while our knowledgeable driver gave us an insight into these majestic creatures, we held out food which the deer gently ate from our hands. How wonderful it was to be so close! We noticed a red deer hind keeping her distance. Then we saw the reason - she had with her a newborn calf, just one hour old!

Our tractor ride continued into the next field where again we stopped, this time beside a herd of fallow deer. Being a little shyer they didn't come close for food, but the red deer soon appeared over the hilltop, running towards us in the hope of another handful of food or two! After our lovely treat we looked around the rest of the Farm Park to see the newborn reindeer, young bores, goats and rabbits etc. Lambs bleated loudly from the lambing shed and when the farmer arrived with bottles of milk we were each given a bottle to feed them! A lovely way to end our enjoyable *flora and fauna* filled day.



Warburg (June 13):- We began our next walk down in a valley with the trees of the Warburg Nature Reserve rising up all around us. We made our way up into them, first passing through a flower-rich chalk grassland corridor. After the climb we cooled off beneath the trees as a descending path took us beside a dormouse village in the form of nesting boxes set a couple of feet up trunks of trees. The last of the bluebells created a delicate blue haze then, out into the open, our path was lined with colourful aqueilega. On we went, now between frothy cow parsley, to arrive at Crocker End. We admired the attractive cottages set in their pretty gardens before entering a meadow in which we gained a good view of Soundess House across the buttercups. This fine house was once home to Nell Gwynn, and more recently, Michael Hesseltine. With lungs full of good clean air we arrived back at the Warburg Visitor Centre where, after a picnic, we were led by a Warden into special areas of the Reserve with its diverse habitats and rich variety of plants and animals. He pointed out and named numerous wildflowers, including several species of orchid, and showed us areas where reptiles are allowed to thrive. After our tour there was the opportunity to look at displays in the Visitor Centre, sit in the hide to watch feathered visitors to the pond and feeders, and to walk through the Reserve's latest project, a Wildlife Garden. Our day here confirmed what a magical place the Warburg Nature Reserve is!

Watership Down (June 13):- Passing the imposing 'Cathedral of the Downs' Norman Church in Kingsclere with its bedbug weathervane, we soon crossed over a pretty stretch of water in which ducks showed off their sweet brood of ducklings. Weeping willows leant over to dip their fronds into the cool water - a tempting prospect on this hot day! Resisting the temptation to linger, we headed for an opening in the hedgerow through which we had a good view of Watership Down ahead. Our path took us alongside the gallops, although we had no desire to quicken our pace on this sunny day! Instead we enjoyed our arable surroundings with the fields sporting the calming blue of linseed which in turn complimented the blue of the speedwell which scrambled along the edge of our path. Skylarks sang melodiously from the blue sky above and, for the time being we enjoyed this relaxed stretch for we knew that very soon we were in for a climb!

Sure enough, a wooded strip took us to the bottom of Watership Down and the climb began. Spider webs and cuckoo spit were much in evidence in the long grasses which unfortunately made spotting any orchids difficult. However, luckily we did see a few patches of fine pyramidal orchids growing near our upward path. The climb gave us increasingly good views back over a fabulous patchwork of fields in a variety of green interspersed with the bright glow of yellow rape. Once at the top we ambled along Watership Down with complete understanding of Big Wigs comment to his furry friends in Richard Adams's famous story, "Come look! You can see the whole world from up here!" We saw no rabbits sharing our view, but we were content with the numerous birds, moths and butterflies flitting around us.

After a break to refresh and to soak up the view, we continued onto Stubbington Down on a path through lush grasses. Our next target loomed ahead - the mast on Cottington Hill. A buzzard hovered with ease overhead, and with skylarks encouraging us on we set out towards our goal. Once there it was decided it was a good place to settle down on the soft grass to eat our picnics with the far-reaching views laid out before us like a glorious, tapestry. It was easy to appreciate how such scenery inspired Richard Adams to put pen to paper! We dragged ourselves away to complete our walk, sailing down the hillside on a track cutting between fields dotted prettily with wild poppies, vetch and camomile. We ended our walk with our lungs full to bursting with fresh air and our heads full of 'feel-good' endorphins. Brilliant!

Ewelme & The Watercress Beds (June 13):- Within moments of leaving our cars in the lovely village of

Ewelme we found ourselves walking along the edge of one scenic field after another. There was plenty of *flora and fauna* with fields dotted with poppies, skylarks singing, pheasants strutting and hedgerows full of frothy elderberry flowers and attractive dog roses. Red Kites hovered overhead as we headed for a clearing at the edge of woodland. Here we perched on convenient logs for our break, surrounded by beech trees which allowed glints of sunshine through to brighten the scene. We continued beside more fields edged with numerous wild flowers until we reached a large field full of happily routing pigs. Swallows swooped across our path as we returned to Ewelme village where we wandered along the peaceful street lined with attractive cottages set in pretty summery gardens. Soon the stream full of watercress flowed in



to join us, rising from the Kings Pool on which ducks bobbed unhurriedly. We also took our time as we explored the complex of ancient buildings made up of the village school, the Cloisters with the surrounding Almshouses, and the interesting Church. Our lovely walk ended with lunch at the Shepherds Hut where, afterwards, we were met by volunteers from the Watercress Centre. Firstly they took us on a guided tour of the Nature Reserve at the end of the village, set on the site of a former mill. Here we spotted grey wagtails dipping into the clear water with its swathes of water crows foot, and hidden beneath bushes we uncovered a few orchids. Secondly we were led around the Nature Reserve surrounding the Watercress Beds Visitor Centre and old watercress beds. The Reserve has recorded 75 species of bird and many were on show for us with red Kites high in the sky, swallows low over our heads, a wren and blackbird singing in a tree, and a kestrel swooping before us as it hunted for its prey. Some of the 20 species of butterfly recorded here flitted amongst the grasses. Our leaders were proud to point out several hedgehog houses, installed after the Hedgehog Rescue Centre, Tiggiwinkles, deemed the site a suitable place to release rescued hedgehogs back into the wild. To date 34 hedgehogs have been released here in three stages. Back in the Visitor Centre we were able to watch footage from night cameras set up around the hedgehog boxes. Not just hedgehogs featured, for also getting in on the action have been a mouse, a muntjac and even a polecat! Sipping welcome, refillable teas we watched a film taken in the 1960's showing the backbreaking work involved in planting, caring for, harvesting and packing the watercress at that time. A slide show of fabulous photographs of flora and fauna snapped at the Reserve ended our wonderful *flora and fauna* - packed day.

Wimbledon Strawberries (July 13):- We couldn't have wished for a better start to a summer's day walk as, with the sun shining on us, we walked through fields full of bright red poppies! Wow! Heading for the River Pang our walk continued in this scenic vane as we walked along the banks of a particularly pretty stretch of this lovely river. Across a field of sheep we spotted the spire of St Denys Church and soon we were walking through the delightful village of Stanford Dingley. Benches on the green provided a shady place for our break before continuing, now climbing, to Rotten Row. On this hot day we paused for a drink break in this attractive hamlet with its rose-clad cottages. We welcomed the shade provided by a tunnel of trees which led us back to Merryfields PYO Farm where we were warmly welcomed as always by the owners who brewed up fresh tea to go with our picnics. Afterwards we set out into the PYO fields armed with punnets to fill with juicy strawberries and delicious gooseberries before

browsing for other tasty fresh fruit and vegetables from the shop. Then it was time to head home to watch Wimbledon on TV whilst tucking in to some of the *fruits of our labour!* Pimms anyone!?