

## PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with June/July 2012 programme

**Goring (March 12):-** With no waterside route available from Pangbourne to Goring we climbed up through Whitchurch to join the Thames Path as it rises and falls high above the riverbed. The lightly wooded path proved delightful at this time of year as buds began to unfurl in hedgerows and on trees, and the earth put on its green clothing of new shoots. The birds were in full voice to add to the pleasant ambiance. As we continued along we found ourselves high above the grounds of Beale Park where we spotted some of its wide variety of waterfowl, either on the lakes, or venturing out onto the river. We left the Thames Path briefly to climb into Hartslock Nature Reserve where we took our break, enjoying the lovely view along the Thames as it made its way beneath the Brunel Bridge – a fitting view as our walk was to highlight Brunel as a *Best of British*.

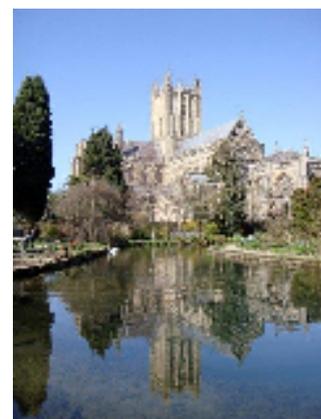
Resuming our walk it wasn't long before we were walking close to the river at last, passing beneath the bridge to enter Withymead Nature Reserve in which a mole had been busy making molehills. The river appeared calm and still as we gazed across to the former Ilam building. Our attractive riverside path eventually led us into Goring where we took advantage of another of Brunel's achievements by boarding a train to take us back to Pangbourne.

**Sulham & The Pang Valley (March 12):-** We are lucky in that we don't have to go far to enjoy wonderful countryside in Spring. We gathered near Little Heath School and were soon walking through woodland and out into fields with lovely views all around. The Wilder Folly can be seen from afar but now we walked right up to it, its archway framing Sulham House. We listened to the romantic story associated with the Folly before continuing out into the oh-so-green of the Pang Valley. Sulham House could be seen clearly across the fields and we made our way in its direction to eventually arrive at Sulham Church set below it. We took our break in the churchyard, cheerfully smothered in primroses. We also took the chance to look inside the lovely Church interior with its Wilder wall hanging and stunning stain glass. The second half of our walk took us into fabulous Sulham Wood where we enjoyed more signs of Spring. Our walk finished across open fields where we were serenaded enthusiastically by flocks of skylarks. Such a joyous Spring sound!



**Springtime Special to Wells & Cheddar (March 12):-** We were blessed with warm sunshine and a deep blue sky for our first *Best of British* trip which took us into Somerset. Upon arrival at Wells, Britain's smallest city, we walked across Cathedral Green, the magnificent Cathedral dominating the area. We stood before the West front which carries the largest gallery of sculptures in the World – nearly 300 of them! Promising ourselves a visit to the Cathedral at a later date, we passed beneath the archway of Penniless Porch, aptly named as from here since 1450 beggars have asked for alms. Today buskers played with a hat at their feet. Entering the Market Place we were greeted by a colourful array of market stalls. We managed to stay focussed on our theme by aiming our gaze downwards to where, on the pavement, lies a plaque commemorating Mary Rand's World Record long jump to win Gold in the 1964 Olympic Games. Proudly her home city has depicted her massive jump on the pavement, 6.76m, or in Purley Pathfinder ladies, 21 ladies long! Leaving the Market Place we crossed a drawbridge over a moat to find before us the splendour of the medieval Bishop's Palace, home to the Bishops of Bath & Wells for the past 900 years. After coffee we were met by our four Guides who took us on a tour of the wonderful gardens. We could imagine the former grandeur as we passed through an opening in the wall of the ruined Great Hall. Now it acts as a spectacular climbing frame for numerous plants. Passing some of the garden's many specimen trees such as the tulip tree, the black mulberry and the tree of Heaven, we climbed up banks of primroses and daffodils onto the ramparts with the moat below. From our high vantage point we enjoyed lovely views back over the gardens, while over the rampart walls lie swathes of green of the former deer park. To one side our view stretched to Glastonbury Tor. Our garden tour continued past the beginnings of a stumpery, a box-hedged 'Dutch' garden, a yew-edged 'hot border', and an area being prepared for a new parterre. The design will emulate the Tudor Rose carved beneath a window overlooking the area.

Passing through a doorway in the rampart walls we were awed by the view of the Cathedral stunningly reflected in one of the Well-Pools from which Wells gets its name. We could see why this view is the most photographed view in Wells. Wow! The deep blue sky made the perfect backdrop, and transformed the Well-Pools into deep blue bodies of water. We crossed the water via a willow-draped bridge to discover more well-pools fed by springs which we could see bubbling up from the bottom of the pools. Before entering the Palace grounds we had seen the string attached to a bell below a window overlooking the moat. For 150 years swans have learned to pull on the rope to



ask for food. Today, however, the swans decided to join us on our tour. We left them serenely gliding on the well-pools and continued past the arboretum which was planted in 1977 to commemorate the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Back inside the main body of the garden we passed its diverse collection of flowers and plants to reach the entrance to the Bishop's private Chapel, in use since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. We had to be satisfied with only seeing inside this part of the Palace, but promising to return to see more, we returned to our coach for the next part of our day.

After eating our picnics on the coach we arrived refreshed in the medieval town of Axbridge on the southern slopes of the Mendip Hills. We began our walk from the Market Square, overlooked by the impressive 'wool-church'. We also noted the attractive black & white timbered building, now a museum, but once King John's Hunting Lodge. Soon the town was left behind as we walked out onto the Somerset Levels, the largest, most



important wetland habitat in Britain. Eight rivers criss-cross the Levels and we began by walking beside the Ellenge Stream. Despite the low water level we saw numerous fish darting in the water. As its name implies, The Levels form a level landscape which made the backdrop even more stunning, surrounded as we were by the Mendip Hills with a view of the dramatic Cheddar Gorge like a gash in the hillside. 34 areas of The Levels are designated SSSI's and the bird-life was much in evidence as were many butterflies. With our long, chattering crocodile we guessed there would be little chance of spotting an otter despite the fact that they

flourish here! An unscheduled detour on the walk took us along the River Axe where wading birds were busy in the mud banks alongside this much fuller channel of water. Back on track we walked beside the Cheddar Yeo in which the water is of such good quality that some is diverted into the Cheddar Reservoir for local drinking water.

We left The Levels to walk beside fields of sheep with their tiny lambs to reach the reservoir. After our exposed walk on The Levels we took our break, grateful for the gentle breeze wafting across the large expanse of water, gathering up the coolness from its surface. Across the 2/3rd mile diameter of the Reservoir we could see the beginning and end of our walk – the Church in Axbridge and the Gorge in Cheddar. We made use of the Strawberry Line, a long distance footpath along a disused railway, to take us to Cheddar. Here we rejoined the delightful Cheddar Yeo which emerges from the Cheddar caves as the largest underground river in Britain.

As home to award-winning authentic Cheddar Cheese, our first stop in Cheddar had to be the home of the Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company. Unfortunately our detour meant we had missed the cheese-making process for the day, but we could see the large vat of the newly produced cheese, and a video condensed the 8-hour process into 20 minutes. We eagerly accepted the offer to taste the finished cheeses and, with our taste buds awakened, the shop till rang as money passed hands in exchange for wedges of tasty, authentic, cave-matured Cheddar!



Further up the Gorge we visited Gough's Cave in which the cheeses are left to mature in the constant 11°C. We entered the cave to marvel at the wonders within – the great chambers of 'St Paul's Cathedral', 'King Solomon's Temple' and the 'Diamond Chamber'.



Multicoloured stalagmites 'flow' to form huge solid 'waterfalls' and frozen 'rivers'. Beautiful illusions created by the reflections of stalagmites in pools of clear water wowed us, like the 'Swiss Village'. Modern technology has linked DNA of The Cheddar Man, a 9,000 year old skeleton found in the caves, to a descendant living in Cheddar today! Pondering on this amazing fact we left the caves to emerge, blinking, back into the sunshine. There was just time to browse in a few of the interesting, individual shops as we wandered back through Cheddar village to the Wishing Well Café. Here we were treated to a very generous cream tea and pots of welcome tea. Leaving Cheddar we had one more treat in store as, settling back into our coach, our driver drove us up Britain's highest inland limestone Gorge, climbing 900 feet in 3 miles. Fantastic!

**Luxters Vineyard (April):-** (thankyou Mandy for this report) Starting from the car park at Luxters Vineyard, we made our way through beech woodland where we stopped to look at the clumps of primroses and then took the path downhill whilst enjoying the wonderful views over the Hambleden countryside. At Colstrope Farm we changed direction to walk up the valley and watched many soaring red kites. The famous windmill above the nearby village of Turville, which was central in the classic film 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' was seen in the distance. Cowslips and

violets were spotted too. On reaching the village of Skirmett we decided to postpone our banana break as the heavens opened. We considered a quick coffee stop in the Frog pub but decided to continue as the shower was stopping. Brick and timber framed cottages were passed on the other side of the road. A bench inscribed 'Rest Awhile' was the ideal place to stop for our banana break. We had a go at translating some Latin on a sign near the remains of a tree. We continued along the road and then began our climb uphill, where we watched some wild deer running away from us. Continuing on through woodland and grassland we reached Luxters vineyard which covers 2.5 acres and walked back to the carpark. We enjoyed our picnics in the courtyard. For those of us doing the tour



we listened to an introductory talk and were told the first vines were planted in 1982, with the first harvest two years later. Our tour 'behind the scenes' took us around the winery, brewery and liqueur production facilities, grape pressing, bottling and labelling plant and was followed by a tasting of a varied selection of wines, & liqueurs. The wines have won many awards and the firm 'Chiltern Valley Winery' is the only one of its type to have been awarded a warrant for providing the Royal household with alcohol for seven consecutive years. Surely BEST OF BRITISH. Luxters can design a unique label for their wines for anyone, to mark a special celebration.. A browse in the cellar shop proved to be

quite a challenge- whether to go for wine, beer, liqueur or other gifts. The liqueurs were all lovely - Blood Orange, Damson Vodka, Mead, Ginger Wine, Sloe Gin and Irish Cream to name a few. Well, if you come back to shop for Christmas you will find all your favourites in 100ml bottles, so you can buy a selection. We, of course had much smaller tastings than this, as we were driving home.

**Remenham (April 12):-** It was rather ironic with the recently announced hose-pipe ban that we should drive to Mill End in rain! Luckily, upon arrival the rain eased and we began our walk initially in the dry, soon to cross the spectacular weirs alongside the 14<sup>th</sup> century Hambleden Mill. Over the lock we enjoyed seeing swathes of cowslips on the grassy verges as we followed the Thames to reach the hamlet of Aston. From here we joined a high path which cut between large fields making up part of the Greenlands Estate, the largest single area protected by the National Trust covenants. As we strode out, our high vantage point allowed us lovely views over the Thames flowing down in the valley below. We took our break in the porch of Remenham Church where the conversation quickly turned to Reading Football Club's recent promotional success!

The second half of our walk was beside the Thames, at first alongside part of the Henley Royal Regatta course to Temple Island from where the 1 mile 550 yard course stretches to Henley Bridge. Here in 1829 the very first Oxford/Cambridge boat race took place. Avoiding the stream of flood water running alongside our path, we continued to soon be walking opposite the Henley Management College, an Italianate mansion built in 1871 for Mr W.H.Smith. Recrossing the Hambleden weirs we returned to our cars, wet but cheerful after our picturesque walk.

**Dorchester (April 12):-** The bright yellow coach on the forecourt of The George reminded us of its past as a coaching inn, and, being 15<sup>th</sup> century, it is the oldest coaching inn in England. Our walk took us along the picturesque Dorchester High Street, the wisteria in flower on the Old College catching our eye. Down Malthouse Lane there was more to admire with a plethora of thatched cottages amidst blossoming fruit trees, all the more pleasant a scene in the bright sunshine with which we were blessed after days of rain. Soon buildings were left behind and we headed across fields towards the Dyke Hills. We walked beside these Iron Age ramparts, serenaded by numerous skylarks. Lovely! Beside Day's Lock we crossed the Thames via a bridge which is the scene of much activity each March during the Pooh Stick Championships which attracts contestants from all over the world! Beneath us the Thames flowed very fast, fuelled by recent rain, but we continued in glorious sunshine into the Little Wittenham Nature Reserve. Through this marvellous SSSI we gained access to the path to the top of Castle Hill, one of the Wittenham Clumps which had dominated our view. Surrounded by cowslips we took our break beside the Poem Tree. A plaque helped us to read this Victorian piece of graffiti carved by Joseph Tubb in 1844. The clear day allowed us outstanding, far-reaching views over the Oxfordshire countryside, the Thames snaking its way through a landscape patched with yellow rape fields. Continuing round the hilltop completed our 360 degree *Best of British* view! Wow! On reaching the top of the second 'Clump', Round Hill, we spent some time by the plaque which gave pointers to landmarks within our extensive view. Julie Andrews may have sung 'the hills are alive', but as we drifted down the hillside we felt very alive with the memorable sights we had witnessed still fresh on our retinas! The Thames flowed beside us as we made our way back into Dorchester where we enjoyed lunch in The George.

Afterwards we crossed into Dorchester Abbey where we were delighted to view the John Piper Exhibition. It highlighted this local *Best of British* artist's contribution to the development of modern art in British churches. Displayed were some of his paintings, stain glass designs, drawings and ecclesiastical vestments. We recognised some of his works seen on our walks, for example windows in Turville, Nettlebed and Fawley. Seeing this wonderful exhibition after our glorious walk left us feeling we had been on one of our trips! Fabulous!