

## PURLEY PATHFINDER WALK REPORTS

Distributed with Nov/Dec 12 /Jan13 programme

**Chilterns & Our Gate (Sept 12):-** After feeling almost bereft with no Olympics to watch on TV, the news that Murray had won the Grand Slam gave us all a boost. This was just one of the many topics of conversation when we all met up again after the summer break. A pleasant, gentle breeze was welcomed as we began by making our way uphill from Middle Assendon with red kites wheeling in a blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds. Aaaaah! It was good to be back!

We noticed several deer grazing in the fields beside us which make up part of Fawley Bottom Farm. The *Great British* artist John Piper lived in the farmhouse from the mid 1930's until his death in the 1990's. After a short stretch of woodland we ducked under an arch of red-berried hawthorn to enter a field grazed by a large flock of sheep. They stared suspiciously at us, but our gaze was drawn to the view of stunning Chiltern scenery patrolled by yet more red kites.

Eventually we joined the Oxfordshire Way to ceremoniously walk through a gate sporting a plaque which reads, 'Donated by Purley Pathfinders'. Earlier in the walk having climbed several difficult stiles we were pleased to have supported the Chiltern initiative to replace stiles with gates making the countryside more accessible to all. Some of our ladies who prefer a shorter walk continued along the Oxfordshire Way while the rest of us continued by walking through part of the McAlpine estate. We are always on the lookout for wildlife on our walks but here we were treated to close encounters with some not normally seen. Apart from three herds of deer we saw large numbers of wallabies, ostriches and llamas!

Emerging from woodland we stood on top of a hillside with a truly *Best of British* countryside view over lush, green fields. Wow! Back on the Oxfordshire Way we walked between fields of horses to emerge onto another hillside with yet more stunning views over Middle Assendon down in the valley. We made our way down the hillside, looking forward to the 'pots of gold' (carrot soup) awaiting us at the walk's end in the Rainbow!

After lunch several of us took the opportunity to call into the River & Rowing Museum in Henley to see the collection of John Piper's paintings. Whilst there a lovely ex-England rower enthusiastically explained some of the items in the Museum's Olympic display which include a torch used in the 1948 torch relay, gold medals dating back though many Olympics, and the boat in which Sir Steve Redgrave won his amazing fifth Olympic gold medal.

All in all we had enjoyed a thoroughly *Best of British* day as part of our Best of British theme!

**Nuffield (Sept 12):-** Nuffield is positioned at one of the highest points of The Chilterns and is surrounded by the most fabulous *Best of British* countryside. We began our walk along a very pleasant tree-lined sunken path which emerged onto the top of a hillside with views over lush green rolling fields. The green was particularly appreciated by several of our ladies who had spent some of the summer holiday in hot foreign countries with scorched dry and dusty countryside. As we stood with this glorious view in front of us we all agreed, there is nothing like the English countryside! We walked down the hillside towards the aptly named English Farm. On we went from one lush field to another, dipping in and out of woodland, and all the while soaking up the 'feel-good' vibes from our surroundings. At one point we seemed to be herding a flock of about 50 young pheasants!

Eventually we arrived at Nuffield Church where we paused beside the modest grave of a *Great Briton*, William Morris, Lord Nuffield. After lunch some of us visited Nuffield Place where he had lived from the 1930's until his death in 1963. Recently



acquired by the National Trust, we were pleased to see the work already achieved towards returning the gardens to their former glory – the pride and joy of Lady Nuffield. The interior of the house is like a time-capsule and an excellent example of a complete 1930's Upper Middle Class home. Some may be surprised upon entering one room to discover an Iron Lung there. This serves as a reminder of Lord Nuffield's generosity. Upon discovering many hospitals didn't have an Iron Lung to treat polio sufferers, he bought 700 of them to distribute to hospitals that needed them.

A bicycle in the entrance hall reminded us of his humble beginnings, starting his own business with just £4, repairing and making bicycles. In the garage, a fine Wolseley motor car once belonging to his wife, reminded us of this clever man's progression from bicycles to designing Morris Motor Cars. This had made him one of the richest men in Britain but he gave away much of his wealth to good causes.

Another *Best of British* day had been enjoyed by all, culminating with a great British tradition of tea and cake served in the new National Trust tea room!

**Whitchurch Hill (Sept 12):-** Beginning beside the green in Whitchurch Hill we walked beside properties, noticing the old village well in use until 70 years ago. This fact made us all realise how lucky we are to have running water to our homes here in Britain. The lovely flower tubs surrounding the well are testament to the village's care of the well, and we chatted to a workman who was preparing the well for re-painting. The country lane led us into fields with lovely views over a glorious landscape to 'our' side of the river. Part of our walk took us onto the Chiltern Way Extension on through Path Hill with yet more stunning views, including the water tower at Tilehurst – another reminder of our good fortune to live in Britain. We continued through wonderful fields of tall, colourful clover, perhaps a green manure? All the while we had been conscious of the variety of birdlife around us from small melodious birds in the hedgerows and red kites above, to ducks in a garden pond!

We took our break at Collins End where tree stumps provided seating around a stump forming a 'Round Table' suitable for any King! However the King we discussed was King Charles 1. Nearby we saw a house which formerly served as a pub, renamed The Kings Head after Charles was beheaded! It had borne the inscription, 'che King drank from the bowl, and bowl'd for what he drank'! Between the pub and a majestic oak tree King Charles had been allowed to play bowls whilst serving open

imprisonment during Cromwell's control of the country. We walked beside the oak, marvelling at its great age and the scenes it must have witnessed during its life. Worthy of the title 'A Great Briton'! We returned to Whitchurch Hill by passing close to the fields of Boze Down alpacas grazing contentedly in their fields with yet more lovely views which we shared.

**Autumntime Special – The River Severn (Oct 12):-** Lucky with the weather yet again we made our first stop of the day in Frampton upon Severn, birthplace of Rosamund Clifford, 'The Fair Rosamund'. The village green is referred to as Rosamunds Green and it fitted in well with our Best of British theme as it is the longest village green in England, covering 22 acres! Around the green sit black and white cottages, impressive Tudor and Georgian houses. We, however, headed into The Bell Inn which not only sets the boundary for the cricket pitch on the green, but also serves delicious coffee!



Refreshed we wandered back out into the sunshine to reboard our coach for the short journey to Arlingham. Sitting at a point where the River Severn flows in a large horseshoe, it is surrounded on three sides by our longest river and so an excellent place to begin our walk. From the centre of the village it wasn't long before we joined the Severn Way with a fabulous view along the wide expanse of river towards its estuary. The river proved a picturesque companion for much of the walk. However, peeling our eyes away from the water we also enjoyed views towards the Forest of Dean where the tree-tops glowed with early autumn tints in the sunshine. Hedgerows added their own autumnal touches with the berries of hawthorn and elderberry, shiny blackberries, glistening rosehips, statuesque teasels and frothy old mans beard. Skylarks flew overhead while gulls circled over the river. Lovely!

We took a break to eat some of our picnic near the Parsonage Arms in its idyllic setting beside the river. It was peaceful sitting there, but several times a year the area is full of visitors who come to watch, or ride, the spectacular natural phenomena of The Severn Bore. Several times a month the flow of the river is reversed forming a tidal wave (bore) which sweeps upstream when tides are high. About 25 times a year the tides are very high causing a bore of up to 10 feet high, travelling up to 20 mph making it the largest in Britain and one of the biggest in the world. Today, however, we were content with the peacefulness of the river flowing gently by with the sun reflecting off the white of the wings of gulls.

Soon after resuming our walk we left the riverside to walk across several fields, some edged with the last of the summer's camomile flowers, clover and vetch. We admired a pair of Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs as we returned to the village to walk beside some of its old buildings on our way back to our coach. Once on board we finished our picnics while we made the short journey to Slimbridge Wetland Centre for the next part of our day. Here we could honour a *Best of Briton*, Sir Peter Scott who founded the Trust after recognising the importance of saving wetlands and their wildlife. As the 'Father of Conservation' he also founded the World Wildlife Fund which has become one of the largest conservation organisations in the world.

We looked forward to seeing some of the numerous wildfowl which make the centre their home, as highlighted on Autumnwatch in 2011. In fact, as we entered the visitor centre we were greeted by the Autumnwatch team, albeit cardboard cutouts! The first stop for many of us was the Sloane Tower from where the reward after climbing up several stairs was a spectacular 360 degree view over the Reserve and the Severn estuary. Slimbridge becomes home to 35,000 wildfowl in winter and the autumn migration is awaited with eager anticipation. One of the great achievements of the centre is the conservation of Bewick's Swans. Soon they would be arriving at the centre after making their 3,000km journey from Russia. The Centre provides a vital over-wintering ground for these smallest of the European swans. We were interested to see several Cranes as these had been absent in the wild in the UK for 400 years. Slimbridge managed to hand-rear 21 Cranes, releasing them into the wild on the Somerset Levels where we walked last spring. The Centre are delighted that some have returned to Slimbridge. The Centre is the only place in the world where all 6 species of flamingo can be seen. We enjoyed watching these 'candyfloss on legs' strutting about in their enclosures, especially in the newly built flamingo lagoon where we were treated to a unique legs-eye view through 500 flamingo legs! In the Tropical House we could watch amazingly coloured birds freely flying while in Toad Hall we could see exotic frogs and newts. Lake after lake took us from one continent to another, giving us the opportunity to get up close to fabulous waterfowl, some of which fed from our hands. Several



hides helped us to get up close to the shyer birds such as egrets and redshank, while in the Back from the Brink area we peered through glass screens to see sweet harvest mice going busily about their business. Live cams and recorded footage allowed us



to see beavers and water vole too. This area gave what for many was the highlight of the day – feeding of the otters. A knowledgeable volunteer gave us an interesting talk about the family of otters who delighted us with their playful antics in the pool. They quickly devoured the sprats and trout with which they were hand-fed, often floating effortlessly on their backs, food in paws! We left clutching special purchases from the gift shop after a most enjoyable afternoon.

Our thoughts soon turned to our stomachs with our next stop being the restaurant at Fromebridge Mill nearby. Growing from a corn mill in the days of the Domesday Book it remained powered by the River Frome until the end of its commercial milling life in 1990. Inside, original features and artefacts from its days as a watermill made for pleasant surroundings in which to enjoy a tasty roast dinner followed by apple pie

and custard! A truly *Best of British* way to end our day!