

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS
Celebration of the Countryside

September/October 2014

Springtime Special to Brownsea Island (April '14):- Our 2014 Springtime Special proved a wonderful trip with the sun shining from a deep blue sky throughout our time in Dorset as, first, we boarded the ferry for a trip across the bay to Brownsea Island. The commentary on board directed our gaze to the grand houses of Sandbanks and on across Poole Harbour. Once on the island we began with a walk which took in many of the habitats that make Brownsea such a haven for wildlife. Through woodland and heathland we were delighted to spot three of the island's population of red squirrels. All the while we had fabulous sea views and when walking along the beach we were thrilled to see oystercatchers which nest in the sandy bank. Several deer live on Brownsea and these were responsible for the disappearance of all the heads of the daffodils in the Daffodil Meadow! Daffodil export was an important industry on Brownsea in the past, and on reaching Pottery Pier and the remains of houses we were reminded of another of its former industries, pottery.



Brownsea Island is recognised as the Birthplace of Scouting and our walk took us through the camping field to the Baden Powell Trading Post. We took over the veranda as we took a break, basking in the hot sunshine while texts came through from family in Purley telling of torrential rain and thunderstorms! Tearing ourselves away from this sunny spot we continued on, passing the Scouting Commemorative Stone. Quietly we passed through pinewoods, hopeful of seeing more red squirrels here, for each feeds on seeds from 100 pine cones per day! We ended our walk by passing the reserve managed by the Dorset Wildlife Trust with its two lakes glistening beneath the blue sky.

After a picnic shared with hens and peacocks we had free time to explore more of what the island has to offer - the Church with its interesting notice boards and memorials, the Visitor Centre with its displays, and live webcam focussed on the wildfowl out on the lagoon,

the hides in the DWT reserve from where a close-up view could be seen of oystercatchers, sandwich terns, avocets and more. No wonder this spot was chosen by the presenters of Autumn Watch in 2008. Of course for the less energetic there was the opportunity to just sit a while on one of 50 benches around the island to soak up more of those glorious sea views!

All too soon we were boarding the ferry and once back on the mainland our coach drove us the short distance to Bournemouth where free time allowed us to soak up the sunshine in this award-winning town. Seven miles of beach allowed us to get the sand between our toes, with some ladies even taking a paddle in the sea. The Winter Gardens with colourful flower displays, aviary and crazy golf were all enjoyed, and sea-view cafes lining the Prom soon filled up with Purley Pathfinders indulging in cups of tea and ice-creams! Our day ended with a wander along the Pier to find our restaurant right at the end where, whilst enjoying the unrivalled views, we tucked into fish and chips! What a great day!

Chazey Heath (May '14):- From Chazey Heath we headed for the hamlet of Tinker's Green, startling a pheasant from within the blue blanket of bluebells in the wood beside us. After admiring the thatched properties we turned into a bridleway, its edge delightful on this May day with the purple of honesty mixed with the cream of cow parsley below hawthorn hedgerows full of May blossom. As we passed beneath a fabulous oak in full leaf its canopy provided shelter from spits of rain. Ahead the blue sky tempted us on and, sure enough, we soon found ourselves walking in much brighter conditions. Birds sang loudly from hedgerows in which dog-roses, holly, hazel, brambles and honeysuckle now joined the hawthorn to provide a succession of food for birds and nectar-rich flowers for insects. Arriving at Cross Lanes Fruit Farm we walked along its boundary with a view across the orchards backed by yellow rape fields. Some fruit trees held blossom, promising food for us in the form of fruit to buy at the Farmer's Market in the autumn! A red kite watched our approach from a tree in front of us before taking off to glide with ease above our heads. Our path dropped down between pleasant woodland and the yellow rape seen earlier. Young leaves of beech trees looked fresh and green, their canopy allowing welcome rays of sunshine through. We climbed out of the valley on a woodland path, emerging at the top to enjoy a wonderful view back across to the orchards of Cross Lanes, then on through a paddock where we admired the huge 'candles' on a horse-chestnut tree. The second half of our walk proved less woody than the first with a series of vast arable fields, their crops rippled into waves by the slight breeze. Skylarks sang joyfully as our long line of ladies cut their way through crops on a narrow path for nearly a mile. Eventually we reached the end and, with damp trousers from the wet crops, courtesy of earlier rain, we took a bridleway edged beautifully with bluebells, and canopied by fresh new beech leaves. It led us into woodland to finish our walk through a haze of bluebells. Birds sang and sunshine glinted through the occasional clearing and, in good spirits, we arrived back at the Pack Horse for lunch.



Ladle Hill (May '14):- (Thankyou Josie & Sue for this report). On a lovely sunny day we were soon walking in the peaceful Hampshire countryside through the Sydmonton Estate. We spotted the Laundry Cottages across the fields, passed on the Ecchinswell walk in March. Sydmonton Court, the country home of Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber soon came into view, followed by a glimpse of the redundant Norman Church in which he composed some of his beautiful music. Then began the steady climb up a track between wooded slopes, with views towards Watership Down. We had a short pause for breath and looked down on the isolated Shepherds Cottage where Richard Adams lived and wrote 'Watership Down', although only a chimney was visible today between lush foliage on trees surrounding it. Onwards and upwards on the track we reached the Wayfarers Walk and took

our banana break on the Downs to take in the glorious, clear, long distance panoramic views with fields of rape and the lush foliage on trees glowing in the bright sunshine. We even had an aerial view of Sydmonton Court through the trees. We continued on the Wayfarers Walk, passing ancient barrows and tumuli, gently climbing to the summit of Ladle Hill, an unfinished Iron-age hill-fort at 768 feet. We admired the glorious view again, looking across the busy A34 below, over to Beacon Hill, at 872 feet, the highest point on these Downs. We soon reached a cairn which has grown somewhat over the years (and some of our ladies added to it!). This marks the point where we left the Wayfarers Walk to make the descent down a tree-lined path back to the start. Everyone agreed this was a perfect walk *'in celebration of the countryside'*

Rotherfield Greys (June '14):- From Rotherfield Greys we took a path down through woodland where bluebells now in seed betrayed a good display earlier in the season. Now into June, everywhere plants looked vibrant and trees stood in full leaf. Walking along the bottom of a large sloping meadow we spotted several wild flowers amongst the swaying grasses, whilst across the meadow we spotted the mellow building of Greys Court. Eventually we were walking along the drive in front of it, looking forward to a visit later on. Meadows and woodland strips led us into woodland where, despite muddy patches, we enjoyed a pleasant walk with views now and then across glorious countryside. Back down in the valley we made our way to The Maltsters Arms. If we weren't feeling patriotic after such a lovely British Countryside walk, we soon were as preparations were in place for a special D-Day dinner that evening at the pub. They had made a real effort with 'bunkers' made from sandbags, patriotic flags flying, and tablecloths depicting all things British! We wandered into the sunny garden where we were served lunch. Afterwards some of us returned to Greys Court for a touch of aromatherapy provided by the fragrant displays of roses in the walled gardens. Fab!

Exlade Street (June '14):- We met in Exlade Street on a sunny morning, looking forward to a new walk for the group. Our expectations were gratified as we set off on a gently climbing path hugged by its swaying meadow grasses. The grasses gave way to a healthy crop of wheat and, once at the top of the climb we paused to look down across to the peaceful hamlet of Exlade



Street. A sign notified us it is a mile to Woodcote and we soon reached the village via more lush meadows. In contrast we continued across the manicured grounds of the Oratory School and then across Woodcote village green. We paused at St Leonard's Church, rebuilt in 1845 on 12th century foundations, and passing an old font thought to be Norman, we went into the Church through a door restored in 1953 to commemorate the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Inside we found a bright interior courtesy of the sunshine flooding through three colourful windows in the Chancel depicting Jesus Christ in the centre one, with St Leonard and St Andrew on either side. Back outside we noticed that to the side of the neatly manicured churchyard, an area had been allowed to grow wild as part of the Living Churchyard & Cemeteries Project. To date 118 different species of wild flower have been identified here. Brilliant! We heard how in the 16th century the church couldn't afford a clergyman to officiate regularly in the chapel which originally stood here. Worshipers chose to either walk 3 miles to the Church at South Stoke or the 1

mile to the one in Checkendon. We continued our walk following the route probably taken by the majority who chose to walk to Checkendon! On the way we stopped to chat to a man scattering seed for the small birds flitting in and out of the hedgerow - a daily task when walking his dog and one the robin and tits had obviously become accustomed to! Here in the Chilterns red kites are a common sight but as we walked beside a field in which a farmer was at work on his tractor we saw the more unusual sight of a whole flock of red kites following him along hoping for a free meal. A marvellous sight!

We continued to *Celebrate the Countryside* as we passed through meadows and crop fields, some splashed with red poppies. The 'candles' on horsechestnut trees had now gone to leave small fruits slowly developing into autumn conkers. A track took us between high banks of ferns and nettles with hedgerows full of hazel to provide nuts, brambles to provide blackberries, blackthorn to provide sloes and dog roses to provide nectar for appreciative animals and insects. Views through gaps allowed a view across more fields splashed with poppies, a reminder of the centenary of WW1 and also the D-Day commemorations this week. We were further reminded of these events as, upon reaching St Peter and St Paul's Church in Checkendon, we passed through the lych-gate which acts as a memorial to those who fell in both World Wars. Further reminders came within the simple beauty of an etched window, the work of Lawrence Whistler, in memory a local artist & sculptor, Eric Kennington. Kennington along with his exhausted, war-weary battalion is depicted in his painting, 'The Kensingtons at Laventie, Winter 1914', and now hangs in the Imperial War Museum. We took time to reflect on this and other memorials and stained glass, as well as 13th and 14th century wall paintings in this lovely Church. Above the font a modern stained glass window depicts the woods and countryside around the Church and we continued our celebrations as we walked on through crop fields and fields of cut hay drying in the sunshine. Back at the Highwayman we enjoyed lunch in the pleasant surroundings.

Sulham Valley (June '14):- With only 2% of the wildflower meadows which existed in the 1930's remaining, it was with great delight that we entered the BBOWT Nature Reserve near Tidmarsh to find ourselves walking through several meadows, their meadow grasses littered with a wide variety of wild flowers! In turn these attracted numerous butterflies which added to the wonderful spectacle, the Reserve being especially proud of their colonies of brimstone, orange-tip and silver-washed varieties. We continued through woodland which is home to all three varieties of woodpecker - green, greater spotted and the rare lesser spotted. Another flower-filled meadow took us to a gate where we chose to leave the Nature Reserve for now to enjoy walking through the arable fields of the Sulham Estate. We felt totally immersed in the countryside and upon spotting a pill box sitting in a crop of barley edged with the red of



poppies we paused to reflect on how lucky we are to be able to walk freely in such beautiful surroundings right on our doorstep, and also to reflect on the recent D-Day commemorations. We made our way to Sulham Church to take our break in this special place with its memorials to the Wilder family of Sulham. Further crop fields took us back into the Nature Reserve to enjoy more of its wonderful wild flower meadows. We ended with a delightful walk beside the River Pang which took us back to Tidmarsh where we took time to pass through the three continuous, elaborately carved arches of its lovely church to look inside at its wall paintings and beautiful lancet windows.

Shiplake (June 14):- (Thankyou Laura for this report) It was a perfect summer morning when we left Shiplake Village to soon pause at the lock which looked so pretty with geraniums and petunias in full bloom. We spotted a family of young coots in the reeds as we continued along the River Thames. Our next stop was Shiplake Church where, in 1850 Alfred, Lord Tennyson married Emily Sellwood. Afterwards he wrote a poem of thanks to the Vicar who married them, 'You were he that knit the knot'. Just five months later he became Poet Laureate! Our walk continued through glorious Oxfordshire countryside passing several fields of dancing lilac poppies which are grown for the pharmaceutical trade. With the temperature rising we enjoyed walking through shady woodland before our final leg along an avenue with imposing houses hidden down long drives. Back at the Baskerville Arms we enjoyed lunch outside in the sunny garden.



Wimbledon Strawberry Walk (July 14):- Into the second week of Wimbledon, and with Murray dominating the conversation, we began our annual Wimbledon Strawberry Walk from Tutts Clump. Here the countryside celebrated the sunny day with ripples of red from poppies and blue from cornflowers amongst the fields of ripening barley. Above us skylarks sang with gusto, no doubt pleased with the warm thermals sending them high into the sky. The sunshine had brought out the sportsmen too as we crossed, firstly the Bradfield Golf course and then the playing fields of Bradfield College. We enjoyed a pleasant walk beside the River Pang before a narrow path bordered by honeysuckle stopped us in our tracks with its sweet scent. From Bradfield Village we crossed fields grazed by sheep and their juvenile lambs before heading into the coolness of the woods of Rushall Farm.



Here foxgloves prettily transformed clearings with their drifts of purple and lilac flowers and birds serenaded us with their songs. After a break beside the wonderful Black Barn we continued along a path narrowed by the enthusiastic growth of the hogweed on either side. As we forced our way through we disturbed a multitude of butterflies which flitted wonderfully around us. We were especially pleased to see a large number of marbled whites. We entered a field which was quite a contrast with its closely sheep-cropped grass. The top of a church came into view and soon we were walking beside St Denys Church in Stanford Dingley. A walk through this



peaceful village straddling the River Pang is always a pleasure. With, sadly, no time to linger we left the village to snooze in the sunshine and made our way to reach the pretty rose-clad cottages of Rotten Row. We took in a quick drink before climbing out of the hamlet. At the top we leant on a gate beyond which lay a fabulous field smothered in cornflowers. What a truly special, and sadly rare, sight! Soon we arrived back at Merryfields PYO Farm where the friendly owners had the urn boiling ready for tea to drink with our picnics. Afterwards, armed with punnets of various sizes, we headed out into the farm to gather the sweet fruits of summer to eat later as we relaxed in front of Wimbledon on the TV!