

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with April/May 2016 programme

New Year Celebration Walk (January '16):- Eagerly we gathered on a bright and frosty morning ready to explore the sleepy backwaters of Theale. Jolly catkins dangled from hedgerows and daffodil shoots stood unusually high on this January morning - the sign of a mild winter. Flocks of tits flitted around us along a lane as we headed for the golf course. Various 'obstacles' stood



in the way of a group of golfers, but to us they were a joyful part of our walk - a brightly coloured pheasant strutting across one green while a flock of white gulls and a pair of geese gathered on another! From the narrow path taking us away from the golf course we had a good view left to the tower of Theale church and, to the right, the spire of Englefield church, both features of our walk. First we had to pass through the hamlet of North Street with its pretty cottages, their gardens already drifting with snowdrops and some early daffodils. Soon we were walking along The Street of Englefield ready to take our break at St Marks Church. Inside we admired its treasures such as the east window dating back to the 13th century. Despite our new theme of *Caught in the Frame* not yet started, we couldn't stand so close to Englefield House without mentioning its part in various films such as The King's Speech, X Men: First Class, and Great Expectations. The house was

another subject for Constable. Finishing along Theale High Street we tried to imagine the buildings painted dark green as they were in 1997 for the filming of scenes from The Borrowers! After our walk a tasty New Year's Celebration Lunch was enjoyed in the function room of the 17th century Bull.

Rushall Farm (January '16):- It was a perfect winter's morning - white frost, blue sky and sunshine - when we met beside the 18th century Black Barn to begin a lovely walk through the woodland of Rushall Farm. The shoots of bluebells for which the woods are renowned were already much in evidence. Reaching a high point above the farmhouse we paused in the sunshine to gaze over the gorgeous Pang Valley. Woolly bundles of sheep could be spotted grazing the lower fields and the whole scene was one which tickled the *feel good* endorphins into overdrive! We finished our wonderful walk with big smiles on our faces, so pleased we had bothered to scrape the ice off our cars to join what turned out to be a sunny blue-sky walk!

Dinton Pastures (January '16):- On reaching the banks of Black Swan Lake in Dinton Pastures Country Park we were greeted with a sight more often associated with the seaside as the wind, courtesy of Storm Gertrude, whipped the surface of the water into large waves! A swan flew in to land rather ungainly on the choppy surface. Luckily for us our walk was to continue within the shelter of bands of trees as we set out to explore the lakes of the Park, soon inhabited by wildlife once gravel extraction ceased. The wintry bareness of the trees allowed us a good view over the lakes as we kept our eyes peeled for some of that wildlife. A row of cormorants stood perched along a log in the middle of one, swans, geese and ducks glided on others and two herons stood like question marks at the waters edge of another. We crossed the River Loddon twice, once near attractive Sandford Mill and then via a footbridge on which we paused to watch the water rushing beneath. Our walk ended at The Jolly Farmer where the new owners and a cosy open fire welcomed us in for an excellent lunch.

Swyncombe (February '16):- Our *Caught in the Frame* theme began with this walk which also coincided with Candlemas Day when traditionally snowdrops are blessed. It was apt, therefore, to start beside St Boltoph Church in Swyncombe with its churchyard buried beneath drifts of snowdrops - or Candlemas Bells - which bring people flocking here each February to enjoy Snowdrop Teas. Beside the path the ground was turned yellow by aconites which gathered like vintage choirboys, their heads appearing above ruffled collars. Inside the Church we noticed the blue crosses around a window and medieval wall paintings, both said to have been made by medieval Knights before leaving for the Crusades. The Coat of Arms of the Chaucers and de la Poles are *Caught in the Frame* of a fine stain glass window, Alice, the granddaughter of the poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, and wife of William de la Pole, having inherited the Swyncombe estate. Leaving the Church in its valley we headed up through parkland, using the view as an excuse to pause and look down over the expanse of green. We noted the Jacobean Manor House standing beside the Church, *Caught in the Frame* during Inspector Barnaby's investigations in an episode of Midsomer Murders! Today, however, all was peaceful and quiet with sheep manicuring the green pastures and red kites wheeling overhead in an increasingly blue sky. The Chiltern Way took us through pleasant woodland where sunlight glinted through the bare trees, eventually leading us into Cookley Green. Snowdrops scrambled beside our path as we passed attractive cottages set around the village green.

We continued in an alternating landscape of bands of trees and open farmland. Bluebell shoots sprang up and green shoots could be seen on the hedgerows. We passed Dame Alice Farm where daffodils joined the snowdrops along with primroses and even a few celandines. We got the feeling that the countryside is already shaking off its winter clothing and embracing the coming of spring. When we took our break with a view across the fields towards Watlington Hill we unexpectedly basked in the warm sunshine! We were brought back to 'February' however as, after passing through a band of trees, now on The Ridgeway Path, we were blown along by sudden gusts - no doubt the fringe of Storm Henry! Thankfully our route soon turned into the shelter of trees and after a climb we stood on the hilltop with a splendid view down into the green valley towards Swyncombe. Down we went to finish our fabulous walk in the Chilterns.



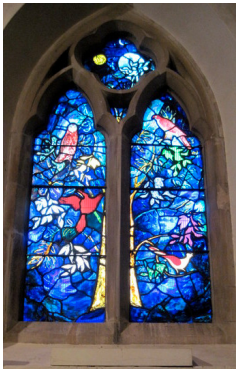
Mapledurham (February '16):- We were grateful of the gravel on the track when we began our next walk from Chazey Heath, for a small stream ran down with us after recent heavy rainfall! Across the golf course we had a good view of The Blade in Reading as we appreciated the sunshine and patches of blue sky, unexpected after a less promising weather forecast! Down through Park Wood we noticed the bluebell shoots standing tall throughout the woodland floor. They were joined by primroses as we reached the statue of Old Palm with its view down over Mapledurham. Soon we were wandering through the village, noting the greenhouses recently *Caught in the Frame* in the TV series The Big Allotment Challenge. Snowdrops and primroses scrambled amongst the old cottages and in the churchyard. The unspoilt village attracts film makers with Miss Marple, The Forsyte Saga, Sharpe and The Eagle has Landed being amongst several filmed here. In the latter 'Churchill' is taken into Mapledurham House while another scene shows the mill leat as the site of a dramatic rescue by a German Paratrooper! We chatted to the Miller before leaving the village, passing ducks, geese and swans dabbling in the wet meadow beside us while cows, refined to the farmyard, blew longingly through wet nostrils towards the green pastures. Large flocks of noisy rooks outnumbered the red kites patrolling the farmland. Suddenly the wind whipped up, courtesy of the third storm in as many weeks, Storm Imogen. We were glad to walk with shelter from trees as we made our way back to the cosy Pack Saddle for lunch.

Ecchinswell (February '16):- With a frost expected after night temperatures as low as -6 degrees we gathered in Ecchinswell wrapped snugly in warm coats, hats and gloves. Within minutes these were discarded as the sun blazed down from a very blue sky! Blessed with this glorious morning we set off along snowdrop-edged paths to soon climb out of the village gaining clear views across to Watership Down, '*Caught in the Frame*' in 1978 featuring stories told by Richard Adams to his daughters. We will walk on Watership Down later in the year but for now we walked beside Nuthanger Farm which also features in the story as the place where the rabbits were fattened for the pot!. This stretch of the walk proved extremely pleasant with verges scattered with yellow posies of primroses and tiny spears of crocuses amongst the dazzling pearls of snowdrops. As we dropped down the hillside, daffodils trumpeted joyfully to the beautiful day.

Through the lyrical landscape of Lord Lloyd Webber's Symonton Court estate birds sang with gusto and some of Lady Lloyd Webber's polo ponies came over to say Hello. After a wonderful snowdrop-lined avenue we wandered past the pretty thatched cottages of this conservation village to the Royal Oak for lunch.



Nettlebed (March '16):- It was in Nettlebed that Ian Fleming created James Bond but we were *Stirred not Shaken* during our lovely walk - first by the beauty of the John Piper windows *Caught in the Frame* inside the church, and then by the beauty of the countryside. Fittingly on this St David's Day a cheerful row of daffodils accompanied us out of the village and as we headed across Nettlebed Common the vibrant yellow of gorse joined in the spring celebrations. A sweep of green pastures led us into woodland with its bluebell shoots before another glorious sweeping valley led us into the Warburg Nature Reserve. Songful birds were much in evidence and by taking our break in the bird hide at the Visitor Centre we were able to watch a variety of birds constantly visiting the feeders. We wished we could stay longer but we continued past drifts of snowdrops to walk along Bix Bottom, pausing by the atmospheric ruins of the 12th century church in the care of English Heritage.



Soon we were walking through the hamlet of Crocker End, an area often *Caught in the Frame* for Midsomer Murders. Returning to Nettlebed we recognised another haunt of Inspector Barnaby for he has been filmed propping up the bar of the White Hart!

Sonning Common (March '16):- An eerie mist over the Millennium Green set the scene for our walk for soon after climbing fields, part of the Chilterns AONB, we stood before the gates of Crowsley Park. On the gateposts statues of fierce hounds with spears in their mouths added to the drama as we passed through to find ourselves in front of the former home of the Baskerville family. Arthur Conan Doyle was a regular visitor of the family and it is believed that stories about their association with fierce dogs inspired his book The Hounds of the Baskervilles! Despite the mist having cleared and the sun now shining from a blue sky, the property still looked rather sinister!

Thankfully a more cheerful scene was set with daffodils and smiley celandines lifting their faces to the sun as we walked through the parkland grounds, now owned by the BBC. We noticed the huge satellite dishes over to one side which would look more at home in outer space. However, the nearest intergalactic episode came in 1980 when scenes from Dr Who were *Caught in the Frame* here and the then Dr Who, Tom Baker, fell to the ground to be transformed into the new Dr Who, Peter Davison! Exciting stuff!

Ponies grazed amongst the trees and as we took our break beneath a cluster of sweet chestnut trees we surveyed our surroundings and decided that the scene resembled that of The New Forest - lovely!

We left the Park to walk along the edges of large agricultural fields with rabbits hopping in and out of the hedgerows beside us. Our walk ended at The Herb Farm where we breathed in the 'feel good' vibes of this lovely place while we enjoyed lunch.

