

PURLEY PATHFINDERS REPORTS

Distributed with April/May 2014 programme

New Year Walk (Jan 14):- It may have seemed strange that our first walk with the theme 'In Celebration of the Countryside' should take place in a town park! In Purley on Thames we are blessed being surrounded by glorious countryside. However, for those living in town, Prospect Park is an oasis of countryside within easy reach of their homes. The park, Reading's largest, provides a variety of 'countryside' with woodland, meadow, a pond, fine specimen trees and open spaces in which to breath fresh 'country' air. So it was that a large group gathered in sunny Prospect Park for our first walk of 2014, and anyway, with much of the countryside around Purley on Thames submerged in flood water, we decided this was a fortuitous choice of venue!

Having enthusiastically greeted each other after the Christmas break we entered The Rookery. Planted with now mature oaks, this woodland is a wildlife Heritage Site - the squirrels seemed to be enjoying it! Next we headed for



the pond created in a heart-shape by the husband of Frances Kendrick in her memory. Frances was at one time the owner of the Mansion in the park. Various waterbirds enjoyed the habitat provided by the pond while small birds flitted amongst the surrounding willows. Across the parkland we had a good view up to the striking Grade 11 listed Mansion House, while in the other direction we had a view across the Kennet Valley to the far side of Reading. The far-reaching view is how the park got its name - Prospect.

Having explored the grassy areas we paused near the playground where we looked at the wooden sculpture of a dog, crafted in memory of a former groundsman. Soon we were back at the start and so headed into the Mansion House where the efficient staff served 45 of us with a Celebratory New Year Lunch.

Theale & Englefield (January 14):- Within moments of leaving the High Street we were walking in the peaceful countryside surrounding Theale where settlements have formed since the Bronze Age. We took pleasure from the numerous catkins dangling merrily from the hedgerows on this pleasant morning. We crossed the golf course, greeting the sun as it forced its way out despite the clear presence of the moon. Areas of standing water made us even more appreciative of the dry day. We passed many fine trees dotted around the course. One large oak tree flaunted its splendid skeletal shape devoid of leaves, whilst another variety of oak held on to its large burnt orange leaves which sparked a discussion about the many varieties of oak which grace our countryside.

We continued beside a meadow patrolled by a sparrowhawk and we feared for the numerous small birds flitting from tree to tree. Our walk took us between attractive cottages in the hamlet of North Street where we spotted the first snowdrops. Cutting across a meadow accompanied by a red kite, we were soon walking along The Street of Englefield enjoying the cottages and their gardens. Several winter flowering viburnum bodnantense looked pretty dressed in pink blossom on leafless stems, and our thoughts turned to summer days when we spotted a healthy peach tree trained against a sunny cottage wall. We headed for St Marks Church with its spire piercing the blue sky, pausing at the lych gate to pass the time of day with Lady Benyon. Englefield House beside the Church has been home to the Benyon family for over 250 years and on this lovely day it positively glowed in the sunshine and was obviously appreciated by Constable who made it the subject of a painting in 1832. Taking our break at the Church allowed us time to look inside, the East window looking particularly splendid lit up by the morning sunshine.

We continued the walk by wandering down the drive of Englefield House, courtesy of the Benyon family. This allowed us to look across the deer park, the glistening lake, and the polo grounds. Back in Theale we walked through the arch beneath the Church tower to reach the High Street. The Church was another subject for Constable viewed across one-time water meadows which are now buried beneath houses. However, two old cottages featured in the painting still remain. Also remaining are some of Theale's eleven Coaching Inns from the 1800's, Theale being in an ideal position on the main route to Bath and Bristol. Some, like the Bull, still retain their coaching yard and it was in its pleasant restaurant that several of us enjoyed lunch.

Beenham (January 14):- Closure of a bridge across the Kennet & Avon Canal forced a slight change of route to our walk but we still managed an attractive stretch of the canal to begin our walk from Aldermaston Wharf. Gravel extraction here unearthed the remains of a Roman Bathhouse indicating this area has long been popular as a place to live. Apart from the many recently built houses, several boaters had chosen this spot to moor their house-boats for the winter. We walked beside them, the sight and smell of wood-smoke coming from their chimneys emitting a cosy feel to this boating community. We read their interesting names and noted the statement painted on one, 'One Life. Live It!' We Pathfinder ladies were certainly making the most of the lovely sunny winter's morning as we continued beside the still, reflective water. Eventually we crossed the A4 to join a bridleway edged with cheerful catkins. A variety of ducks quacked noisily from a pond but water of another source took our attention as we found

flood water spilling from the ditches to cover our path! Luckily the middle section proved fairly shallow so we 'puddleducked' through in a long line!

The bridleway climbed on a meandering route with views across the Kennet Valley. Eventually we reached the top to stand beside St Mary's Church at Beenham Valence. 'Valence' means 'on the spur of a hill', which suits the setting well. However, the hilltop position may have been why the Church has twice been struck by lightning and burned down! We were glad to see the tower of the 1794 rebuild had survived to be incorporated into the 1859 rebuild. Six bells hang inside the tower, forged from molten metal saved by parishioners after the first fire. Inside the Church the six bell ropes hang down in front of the lovely stained glass West window. Looking around it seemed every square inch of the walls are covered in paintings making for a beautiful internal appearance. Either side of the lovely East window murals line the walls. We were impressed by the portrayals of The Last Supper, and The Crucifixion, just two of many detailed murals painted by Miss Mary Sharp of Ufton Court in 1876.



After a break we left the hilltop to walk down through woodland to join another bridleway. From here we had a good view back up to the Church in its lofty position, its tower stretching grandly up into the blue sky. We were soon reminded of recent stormy weather however as with much splashing and squelching and dodging of fallen branches we eventually arrived back at Aldermaston Wharf where the swollen buds of daffodils gave the welcome promise of the approaching Spring!

Mapledurham & Chazey Heath (February 14):- With storms still battering the country, exploring the countryside as befits or theme has been proving quite a challenge! However, despite the gloomy weather forecast we began our walk from Chazey Heath in the dry. Soon we dropped down a path signed as The Chiltern Way - however on this first week in February the path resembled a small stream with water flowing down it! Luckily it was only shallow, and with gravel beneath for much of the way it proved no hardship for us Pathfinders! Within this gully we had the advantage of being protected from the wind so we all chatted away amicably.

As our path levelled out we gazed Eastwards across fields to spot the distant Blade in Reading town centre, and were pleased to see the unexpected appearance of the sun. Watching hunting kestrels in the field beside us we headed out into the open to cross a field patrolled by a red kite. Flying low he dipped to the ground every now and then, and we admired his skill in these windy conditions. Soon we were protected by the trees of Park Wood where the sight of bluebell shoots gave us all a lift, especially when, through the trees, we gained glimpses of the flooded Thames Valley. Grateful for the dry path we continued on through the wood to reach the statue of Old Palm looking out from on his plinth across the watery scene below.



Our route took us to Mapledurham Village which greeted us with huge swathes of snowdrops - lovely! When we reached the gateway to the Mill we gasped at the sight of the water flooding around it. It was amazing to witness the flooded Thames from this side of the river, spotting the Lock Keeper's house in Purley rising forlornly out of the flood. We entered the churchyard of St Margaret's Church where snowdrops scrambled amongst the gravestones.

The William IV clock signalled it was time for our break which gave us time to look inside the Church with its separate Catholic Chapel and reminders of the village's participation as a set in various films.

As we left the Church the rain began to fall but we had a good surface beneath our feet - in fact a track originally made by Richard Blount of Mapledurham House in around 1600 to link Mapledurham with Reading. It makes a good path for walkers, however, as one surprised driver discovered, not for vans after being directed along it by SATNAV! We sent him off, hopefully in the right direction, and continued ourselves with a good view across the Thames to spot Purley Park, The Roebuck, and the rather overpowering new footbridge at Tilehurst Station. Swans, moving temporarily from their normal home, gathered in a fairly dry field - we stopped counting when we got to 50! Our walk ended on a path beside the golf course and, with mud in evidence and the rain falling we were glad to arrive back at the Pack Saddle where we were warmly greeted - not only by the friendly staff, but by the log fires and glowing candles. The ideal setting in which to enjoy lunch!

Local Walk in lieu of Swyncombe (February 14):- With Swyncombe suffering with muddy paths after the recent wet weather it was decided to walk from Pangbourne into Whitchurch and along part of the Hardwick estate. This proved very pleasant and everyone seemed in good spirits - or perhaps this was because that very morning the date had been confirmed for our Birthday Trip to Highgrove Gardens!! Yeah!