

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with February/March 2012 Programme

THANKYOU! Thankyou all so much for the wonderful gift I received at the Christmas Party! I am so excited to be going to Highgrove, and the champagne tea will be a bonus! Westonbirt is a wonderful place to visit so I am also thrilled to be visiting there as another part of my present. With an overnight stay it looks set for a fantastic two days. I am hoping to visit in late May which is such a lovely time in the garden, and with the added bonus at that time of year of the rhododendrons and azaleas in bloom in Westonbirt. I can't thank you enough!

Autumntime Special (October '11):- It wasn't too long before our coach drew up in Winchester, one time capital of England. From the imposing bronze statue of King Alfred we walked towards Winchester Cathedral where coffee was waiting for us in a private suite next to the Refectory. Our walk would be following in the footsteps of the poet Keats along a route which inspired him to write 'Ode to Autumn', and as we entered the Cathedral Close we appreciated his description of medieval buildings 'mixed up with trees'. We enjoyed the wealth of wonderful buildings in the Close, especially the much-photographed Cheney Court. We passed beneath Kingsgate, one of only two surviving ancient gates to the city. On top sits St Swithun upon Kingsgate, a rare survivor of a medieval church built upon a city gate, and still in use today. Walking along College Street we spotted our next Art link, the home where Jane Austen spent her final days. It sits alongside buildings of Winchester College which dominates the whole area. Within a few footsteps our route became rural as we joined the banks of the River Itchen, just as Keats would have done. In the water, still 'most beautifully clear' as described by Keats, we spotted several trout as, no doubt, did the kingfisher who was patrolling the river! Over bulrushes we gazed across sports fields to attractive buildings of Winchester College, whilst our view the other way stretched towards St Catherine's Hill where it is said the game of cricket was invented.

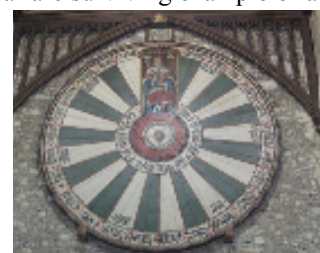


We continued along our pleasant route, edged with an abundance of michaelmas daisies, then crossed a bridge to enter a meadow with a view ahead of St Cross Hospital. We detoured slightly to take a look through the archway to this marvellous clutch of buildings, founded in 1132 and still functioning as an Almshouse. Luckily one of the Brothers agreed to allow us down the drive to see the Norman Church, described as a miniature Norman Cathedral. However, the highlight for us all was the view of the Almshouses, the oldest in England. We agreed with the description, 'England's most perfect'! We could have asked for the Wayfarer's Dole, bread and beer, given to travellers for centuries, but instead we headed back to the riverbank for our snack and drink from our backpacks!



We were reminded of Keats words in 'Ode to Autumn' as we crunched our way through leaves along an autumnal avenue of trees. We paused to chat to a film crew in the process of filming a BBC documentary, 'Olympic Dreams' which will be screened early in 2012. They filmed us crossing a stile, but I don't think they were impressed with our athletic skill! We joined a lush path, now with the Itchen Navigation as our watery companion. Formerly used to transport heavy goods in horse-drawn barges, it is now a haven for wildlife such as kingfishers and water voles as recently featured on Countryfile. At the main entrance to St Catherine's Hill our eyes followed the winding stepped path leading to the Iron Age hill fort top. However, we continued walking closely to the Navigation edge which made a very pleasant route back to Winchester. On reaching the city we walked beside the best remains of the City wall, amazingly at full height in places.

Back beside the River Itchen, the reflective water led us to the end of our walk at the City Mill, a rare surviving example of a working corn mill. During a period of free time the Mill was just one of numerous places to visit. Others included the Great Hall inside which can be seen the striking King Arthur's Round Table, and, of course, Winchester Cathedral. The latter gave many Art links. It doubled as The Vatican in the Da Vinci Code, and St Paul's in Elizabeth the Golden Age. Inside is a permanent exhibition outlining the life and times of Jane Austen set beside her grave, memorial plaque and Memorial window. In the Crypt stands Sound 11, a lead sculpture by Antony Gormley, while the library holds one of the finest of the great 12th century illuminated Bibles, sumptuously decorated with scenes depicted in pure gold. Coinciding with our visit, the music of Liszt floated on the air from a piano recital in the North Transept, an added Art bonus!



Leaving Winchester, a short drive took us to our next treat, Whitchurch Silk Mill. We were greeted by our guides who took us on a fascinating tour of the 1800 mill still powered by the River Test. Over three floors we were shown the lengthy process of creating beautiful silk items from the humble looking cocoons of the silk moth, each one made up of a mile of silk thread! Eventually we could handle the different gorgeous silks - organza, satin, taffeta and ottoman. After our guided tour we were allowed to wander at will, with various videos telling more of the story of the Art of Silk Making. Outside we could appreciate the mill's picturesque setting on an island with Richard Adams as a neighbour (another nice Art link after last week's walk on Ladle Hill!) We watched the powerful waterwheel turn, in use since 1870, and looked for trout in the clear River Test. Having learnt the time and patience in producing the silk, we browsed with appreciative eyes in the shop, a wonderland of all things gorgeous! Our visit ended in the Tea Room where friendly volunteers served us tea and delicious cakes. We were surrounded by photographs, reminding us that the mill is much in demand for theatrical costumes. Various stars were photographed dressed in Whitchurch silks produced on the historic looms including Kate Winslet in the bonnet worn in Middlemarch. Other familiar productions include Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Titanic and Cranford. A wonderful Art filled trip!

Bagnor (October 12):- After our fabulous autumn trip to Winchester we resumed our weekly walks in the local area with a walk in West Berkshire from Bagnor. We enjoyed a pleasant walk through the village with its River Lambourne fronted cottages, to soon head along the Lambourne Way with snatched views over the glorious Lambourne Valley through gaps in the hedgerows. As the River Lambourne flowed in to join us we arrived at Boxford, understandably called 'a photographer's dream'. We took a detour to walk past some of its beautiful thatched cottages, their names betraying a former era, including the lovely converted mill with its white lattice windows. We headed for the Church where we were welcomed inside to join in with the regular village coffee morning. As we downed cups of coffee and savoured the cakes on offer we were given a short, guided tour of the Church, with special pride being shown to a small slit window complete with hinged wooden panel. Its discovery during repairs in 2010 caused much excitement for it has been dated to the times of the Saxons. As such it is the oldest working wooden window in England! We wandered outside to get an even better view of this special architectural feature, and also to soak up the calmness of the Quiet Garden, perfectly positioned beside the flowing Lambourne at the bottom of the churchyard.



We continued our walk by climbing out of the village and onto the common grazed by sheep. Our path took us into the autumnal woodland ahead before more open fields gave us a good view across to Watership Down. Upon returning to Bagnor we took the opportunity to pop into the Watermill Theatre to pick up the latest programme of performances to take place in this wonderful former corn and paper mill, mentioned as such in the Domesday Book!

Aston Tirrold (October 11):- As we progressed through our next walk from the pretty village of Aston Tirrold, we were delighted to see that all the stiles have now been replaced by gates, making for a much easier passage! Accompanied by a Red Kite we continued our Art theme by heading for Cholsey Church. Here we found the grave of Agatha Christie, author of over 70 Poirot and Miss Marple mysteries. Part of her own life was, in fact, a mystery for after her first marriage broke down she 'disappeared'. In reality she had retreated to a quiet hotel in Harrogate! The exotic locations which began to appear in her books are down to her second marriage which was to Max Mallowan. She accompanied him on his travels with his work as an archaeologist. At the request of Queen Mary, Agatha Christie wrote a radio play, later adapted for the stage. This play, called *The Mousetrap*, has run continuously since 1952!

We continued by heading towards Lollingdon Farm, passing some friendly donkeys, including a foal. In 1914 John Masefield and his family moved to Lollingdon Farm and he took great pleasure in walking up Lollingdon Hill and as we followed in his footsteps we could see how he was inspired by the views over the Berkshire Downs. However, he was much affected by the evil of war. He went to France to work for the Red Cross, and to America to lecture about the war. He was made Poet Laureate in 1930. Enjoying our walk so much that we didn't want it to end, we agreed with Masefield's sentiments in his poem, *Tewkesbury Road*, in which he describes the delights of walking 'under the flying white clouds and the broad blue lift of the sky'. A wonderful walk!

Cane End (October 11):- With still plenty of glorious autumn colour to enjoy, we were glad of the sunshine to enhance the wonderful colours of the beech trees as we began our walk at Cane End. We would be walking within a complete necklace of beech woods, including Withy Copse, Nippers Grove, Valentine Wood, College Wood, Hawhill Wood and Nuney Wood. With rays of sunshine glinting through the leaves, and the trees sprinkling their golden bounty over us, we enjoyed being enveloped within the woods for most of the walk – surely the best way to soak up the very best of the autumn season!

Pangbourne College (November 11):- The sight of a kingfisher skimming across the river's surface gave our hearts a lift as we walked beside the Thames at Pangbourne during the rather sombre week of Remembrance. After a climb through woodland and across fields to Upper Basildon, we made our way along the drive towards Pangbourne College. Founded in 1917 as a Nautical College to prepare boys for the Merchant Navy, it is a fitting place for the Falkland Chapel, built as a memorial to those who died, many at sea, during the Falkland War of 1982. Opened by The Queen in 2000, its shape resembles that of a ship, and stepping inside we felt a sense of calm, its shape also being described as that of cupped hands in prayer.



We reflected on the loss of 255 servicemen and 3 islanders as we read their names listed on plaques in the foyer. Once inside the main area of worship our eyes were drawn to the striking Memorial window. A lively sea in vibrant shades of blue, green, yellow and grey surrounds the Falkland Islands depicted within Christ's Cross. We sat before it to reflect on, not only the casualties of the Falkland War, but also on all those who are remembered during Remembrance services this week. Outside we entered the peaceful Memorial Garden with its water feature flowing over a relief map of the islands. At the back of the Chapel we pondered on the Memorial Cairn, its construction incorporating 255 stones brought back from the Falklands – one for each serviceman. Mark Goreth, a veteran of the campaign, was asked to produce a sculpture to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the conflict. After revisiting the islands for inspiration he chose the albatross as his subject. The resulting three life-size bronze birds are said to depict the Courage, Endurance and Fragility of the campaign. However, they also stand for the Past, Present and the Future of the islands, and with this positive thought in mind, we continued on our way by dropping down fields to Tidmarsh. A walk along the lovely stretch of the River Pang back to Pangbourne was just what we needed to keep our spirits high.

Crowsley Park (November 11):- Glorious countryside of open pastoral fields edged with glowing autumnal trees made an excellent start to our walk from Sonning Common. Various birds of prey hovered overhead while toadstools added interest at our feet. Eventually we reached the gates of Crowsley Park, topped by intimidating 'Hell Hounds' with spears in their mouths. Former owners of the Park were the Baskerville family, with Henry Baskerville being the High Sheriff of Oxfordshire in 1847. Once through the gates we passed the imposing Crowsley Park House, a grade 11 mansion bearing the Baskerville coat of arms above its door. Arthur Conan Doyle was a regular visitor and stories about the family's association with fierce dogs were among the inspirations for his novel, 'Hound of the Baskervilles' published in 1901. Being in the ownership of the BBC since 1943 gave us further Art links, with the tower carrying the BBC receiving station aerials being used in the BBC TV series of Doctor Who. The then Doctor, Tom Baker, is seen climbing up the tower before falling to the ground to be transformed into Peter Davison!

We made our way through part of the 160 acres of the Park, the site of many satellite dishes and aerials. Sadly many of the fine trees, planted from 1685 in seven avenues radiating from the house have been lost. We paused along one part-remaining avenue with a view towards the mansion, imagining ladies 'taking the air' in fine gowns in the 17th century. The ladies of Pathfinders chose to take a break within a cluster of sweet chestnut trees. A herd of White Park Cattle lay peacefully nearby. We recognised the head shape of this very old breed as the logo for the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, and were pleased to learn that the Trust's interest in them has increased breeding cows from 60 to over 450.

Our walk continued through further glorious countryside, now arable but still edged with golden trees. Pheasants flew noisily up from patches of sun-ripened sweetcorn. Despite being surrounded by ploughed fields, autumn colours, and holly bushes laden with berries signifying the approach of winter, we felt the need to discard our coats in the lovely sunshine! Can this really be late November!? Arriving back at the Bird in Hand, the new owners spoil us over lunch with tables laid with complimentary water and bowls of chips. We'll be back!

Warborough (November 11):- Despite the 'mist of the season' early on, we assembled in the picturesque village of Warborough with the sun showing itself in an increasingly blue sky. During our Art year it was fitting to meet on the green alongside the Six Bells pub as they have both featured in several Midsomer Murders. The pub has been cast as 'The Luck in the World' and 'The Black Swan'. In real life perhaps it should be renamed 'The Eight Bells' as in 1955 the nearby 12th century Church had two new bells fitted giving it a peal of eight! We crossed towards the newsagents where the flat above housed Sgt Scott in the Midsomer Murders episode, 'Bad Tidings'.

We left the pretty thatched cottages surrounding the green to follow the course of a stream, its dry bed testament to the dry autumn. We enjoyed the hotchpotch of thatched and timbered cottages and Victorian villas as we made our way out of the village. After crossing a busy main road we were soon back into peaceful surroundings on the outskirts of Shillingford. We paused at the riverbank to chat to a fisherman and to soak up the pleasant view along the Thames. The river looked serene on



this still day, but a nearby watermark high up on a wall betrayed its potential force. We followed a lane to eventually reach the impressive Shillingford Bridge. Here we joined the riverside path for almost a mile, giving us plenty of time to savour the pleasant surroundings with activities from numerous waterfowl, and with autumnal colours and berries all around us.

Increasing activity from ducks on the riverbank heralded our arrival at the Waterfront Café at Benson. On this mild November day it was a bonus to be able to sit outside beside the river to enjoy our coffee and delicious cakes from the café. Generously we shared some with the numerous ducks!

After this peaceful interlude we resumed our walk to return to Warborough. On the way we had good views of Wittenham Clumps and were reminded of previous walks there which had passed the Poem Tree. It was interesting to learn that Joseph

Tubb who was responsible for carving the poem was a resident of Warborough! Yet another good link to our Arts theme!

Turkey Tinsel:- With a glorious sunny day and clear blue sky it was difficult to believe we were on our pre-Christmas walk! However, this was confirmed when, after a lovely walk around the Arborfield area, we returned to Henry's Street Garden Centre where we sat at festively decorated tables complete with crackers. After tucking in to lunch we wandered around the Centre's Christmas Wonderland with decorations in every colour at each turn. Even the real Dancer and Prancer had turned up to greet us! We left in jolly mood in no doubt that, despite the warm, sunny day, Christmas was really just around the corner!

Winter Wonderland & Party:- The sun low in a clear blue sky showed off our very own Winter Wonderland here in Purley to great effect. The Thames resembled a deep blue lake. Cormorants, grebes, several pairs of swans and ducks added activity to the otherwise calm water, while alpaca watched up comically from the opposite bank. Returning to St Mary's Church the party began. Tables groaned under the weight of the feast that awaited us. Within a short time little remained, and we sat back with coffee and Christmas cake ready to enjoy the entertainment. A mix of memories, poetry and music confirmed what a fabulous year of Art – themed walks and trips we have enjoyed. This was followed by Marjy performing some of her highly amusing poems. The party ended with beautiful singing by the Pathfinder Choir, with us all joining in with a take on 'Jingle Bells' and the traditional 'We wish you a merry Christmas'! A satisfying end to yet another fabulous year of walks.