

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORT

HISTORY

Distributed with Feb/March '11 programme

Upper & Lower Basildon (Sept 10):- The sun forced its way through cloudy skies to greet us at the start of the new term. The parish of Basildon is divided into two settlements, Upper & Lower, and we set out to explore them both, along with the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Beauty between the two. We began with a stretch of roadside walking, but this gave us the chance to look at the variety of properties, spotting puffballs and cyclamen along the verges. Watched by a red kite we were soon crossing fields to enter mixed woodland which dropped down to the outskirts of Pangbourne. Here we joined the towpath along a pretty stretch of the river, overhung with willows. Eventually we arrived at the river entrance to Beale Park in Lower Basildon where we took a break, ever watchful for the blue flash of a kingfisher. Gilbert Beale gave 350 acres 'to the people' in 1956 and the Beale Trust now boasts the foremost collection of birds in Europe. Continuing in his generous spirit, the Trust has opened a permissive path through its land so, after watching a steam boat from the recent Boat Show manoeuvre its way from the lake to the river, we walked beside the peaceful lake and joined the permissive path through a wonderful area of trees thoughtfully planted with wildlife in mind. On this September morning the area positively glowed with berries on the rowan, spindle, elder and hawthorn, colourful fruit on crab apple trees, and hazelnuts-a-plenty. Our walk now involved a steady climb beside the splendid wall bounding Basildon Park. The mansion played its part in history having been used in WW1 as an army convalescent hospital, and in WW2 as a barracks, training ground for tanks, and as a prisoner of war camp. As our path finally levelled we followed a track back to Upper Basildon, emerging beside the oldest building in the parish, dating from 1500, the now closed Beehive Pub. Happily the 1728 Red Lion remains open and welcomed us in for lunch.

Blewbury (Sept 10):- After exploring the lovely village of Blewbury we made our way along a field path known locally as Coffin Way. It links Blewbury with Ufton, so it was that we eventually reached the pretty thatched cottages of Ufton. From here we gradually climbed towards the Berkshire Downs where we were greeted with wide skies and wonderful views. Striding out across the Downs proved a lovely, exhilarating experience. We circled Churn Knob where St Birinus preached, converting the King of the West Saxons making Christianity acceptable in England. We took in the outstanding view from this lofty spot before dropping down the hillside through a windfall of apples. Wonderful!



Views from Churn Knob

Charity Walk (Sept 10):- With Myfanwy's dramatic Air Ambulance rescue from The Holies earlier in the year, it was an easy decision to choose this wonderful service as the beneficiary of our Charity walk. It was lovely to see Myfanwy back with us as we joined our route along the Kennet & Avon Canal which proved very pleasant with plenty of activity from boats and waterfowl, and, lucky us, a kingfisher! After coffee in the garden of the Visitor Centre we continued on to eventually reach Woolhampton. As our walk clashed with the Great MacMillan Coffee Morning we all boarded the train from Midgham station and returned to Purley where one of our ladies, Gillian, provided us with a soup lunch in aid of the charity. All in all a good day with over £200 being raised for MacMillan, and £575 for the Air Ambulance! Well done everyone!

Wallingford (Sept 10):- As befitting our History year we set off to explore historic Wallingford, beginning beside the 900 foot long town bridge with its 19 arches where William Conqueror forded the river with his troops on his way to London to be crowned King of England – a good historic start! We made our way to Bullcroft Park, site of a Norman Priory. Dissolved in 1524, the site now offers a large park for the residents and visitors of Wallingford. We came across an obelisk, once a war memorial, on which we tried to decipher the worn carvings. The Park is edged with part of the original Saxon bank and ditch which we crossed to leave the area. We passed the location of the North Gate and soon reached the Friends Meeting House. Built in 1724, we were lucky to be invited in to see the garden – a peaceful oasis, yet so near to the busy town centre.

Wallingford Castle was one of the largest, strongest, and most important castles in England. We entered the site of the Castle's remains via a wonderful old door. Built by order of William the Conqueror in 1067, the castle was destroyed in 1652 by Oliver Cromwell. We noticed the Old Malthouse of the Castle Priory, now home to Wallingford Rowing Club where Steve Redgrave was a member. On the way to the oldest church in Wallingford, St Leonard's, our attention was drawn to a smart red sports car sporting a Union Jack and the number plate ROW. Closer inspection revealed its owner to be Zac Purchase MBE, Olympic gold medal winner in Beijing as part of Team GB's rowing team. Aptly our next stop was beside the Thames, pausing at Lower Wharf where malted barley from the nearby old Malthouse could easily be ferried to London.

We were reminded of the town's former defences as we looked over into Kinecroft within the old Saxon banks. This open space was used for Anglo-Saxon fairs. We passed the Museum which displays Wallingford's rich history on our way to the Market Place. Here we ended our interesting and informative walk beside the decorative Victorian water fountain, sitting amidst the historic buildings of the Town Hall, 1670, Corn Exchange, 1856, and St Mary le More Church with its 17th century tower constructed from some of the stones of the demolished castle.

Ufton Nervet (October 10):- During our walk from Ufton Nervet our history theme was never far from our minds. We left the ancient settlement via a path beside Medieval fishponds. Soon we were gazing down a long avenue lined with grand oak trees with the Elizabethan, Grade 1 listed Ufton Court at the end. We followed a horse and rider down the drive, imagining bygone days when this would have been a common form of transport! Our imaginations were further stretched when, standing in front of the impressive mansion, we tried to visualise when, in the 16th century, it was owned by the Catholic Perkins family with priests hiding behind moving walls and under floorboards! As we walked beside the boundary hedge further clues to its history were revealed as we spotted the Medieval fishponds in the grounds.

We took our break with wonderful views over the Kennet Valley, spotting Englefield House in the distance – a landmark throughout the rest of the walk. We passed through Ufton Green with its animal pound, and on between fields of horses with increasingly good Kennet Valley views on our way to Sulhampstead. The spire of St Peter's Church came into view and we headed towards it to reach Ufton Nervet beside this, its now redundant church.

Bucklebury Common (Oct 10):- This walk took place entirely within the Bucklebury estate, an area rich in myths and legends. However, we weren't put off by tales of ghosts, grisly apparitions, or even a ferocious, prowling Mammoth! Instead we were determined to enjoy the beauty of the autumn colours filtering into the landscape of the common, one of the largest in England. We began beneath an autumnal canopy with an apple-laden orchard on one side, and views across rolling fields on the other –an excellent start! After working our way through Bushnell's Wood we continued in the openness of a large field with glorious Pang Valley views. Eventually we crossed the River Pang to arrive at Bucklebury Village where we entered its ancient Church, mentioned in the Domesday Book, through the Norman South door surrounded by 12th century carvings. Immediately our eyes were drawn to the vividly coloured East window. The influential Winchcombe family had their own private pew installed, and we studied the sundial window within it, spotting the lifelike fly cleverly engraved onto it. We could have spent much longer in this interesting Church but with the sundial and fly reminding us that 'Time Flies', we left to climb out of the village.



Coronation Oak

Having enjoyed the harvest festival displays in the Church, we noticed further signs of autumn as we walked beside fields patrolled by white flocks of birds, and entered woodland sprinkled with fungi. Near the top of our climb we found ourselves walking beside the boundary of Bucklebury Farm Park, spotting some of its resident goats beyond the fence.

We were again reminded of our history theme when we stopped in awe at the grandeur of the Coronation Oak. Its huge girth betrays its great age. Beneath its spreading branches, 1,200 people picnicked to celebrate the Coronation of Edward VII in 1902 as outlined on a plaque affixed to the trunk. Still beside the Farm Park's boundary, we began our descent. Its famous deer herds stood at a distance, the stags bellowing for superiority in this season of the rut. Eventually we were walking along the banks of two Medieval fishponds and finished with a walk through the trees of Bucklebury Common, ending beside the Millennium Oaks. Their planting in 2000 follows a 400 year old tradition, with oaks also being planted to commemorate a visit by Queen Elizabeth I, Wellington's victory at Waterloo, and Queen Elizabeth II's visit. We entered the Bladebone beneath the scapula of a whale (or is it the bladebone of a Mammoth!?) to enjoy lunch.

Autumntime Special (Oct 10):- On a sparkling autumn morning we arrived at Stonehenge for the first part of our history packed day. Walking slowly around the impressive World Heritage Site, the deep blue sky formed the perfect backdrop to the ancient circles of stones set in the expanse of Salisbury Plain. The sun caused shadows of the huge stones to lie across the ground, and we listened with interest to our audio guides which told how the stones have been aligned with the midsummer sunrise and midwinter sunset like some giant prehistoric sundial! Afterwards a browse in the shop and a warming coffee set us up for the next stage of our day. Our coach transported us to Old Sarum and, after eating our picnic whilst being entertained by a Harris Hawk, we began our walk. Originally an Iron Age Hillfort built around 500BC, Old



Stonehenge beneath a blue sky

Sarum is one of the most important landmarks in the history of Wessex. Romans, Saxons and Normans have all left their mark, especially the latter who built a town, castle, Royal Palace and Cathedral. We explored all that remains of the Cathedral and, even though just the foundations remain, we could tell what an impressive structure this would have been on this hilltop position. Walking around part of the ramparts of the old town we could see the spire of the new Cathedral, founded in 1220 – our goal for today’s walk. The route between the old and the new proved very pleasant with much of it beside the River Avon and through the Avon Valley Nature Reserve. We



Salisbury Cathedral

were greeted into Salisbury by numerous ducks, swans and coots. A period of ‘free time’ allowed us to explore this ‘city in the countryside’ further – its historic streets, alleyways, half-timbered buildings, characterful shops and inviting cafes. Cathedral Close, described as the largest and most beautiful Cathedral Close in Britain warranted exploration too – Wren Hall, Wardrobe Military Museum, Mompessen House, and the former home of Sir Edward Heath, Arundells, all overlooked by the magnificent Cathedral. Later we gathered in the largest Medieval Cloisters in Britain ready for our guided tour of the Cathedral. Four guides led us in small groups around this beautiful building. There was much to see with highlights being the wonderful stain glass windows, the stunning ‘living water’ font, the oldest working clock in Europe and numerous memorials. Luckily a boy’s choir assembled in the earliest complete set of choir stalls and, accompanied by the Willis organ, we were treated to delightful musical renditions. Magical! In the Morning Chapel we were entranced by the Rex Whistler memorial – an engraved glass prism rotating to show three different

images of the Cathedral. After our Runnymede trip we eagerly entered the Chapter House where is displayed the finest of only four surviving original Magna Carta documents, sealed by King John in 1215. Amazing! After our enlightening tour we entered the Refectory Restaurant where tables were laid ready for us to enjoy a cream tea, with a stunning view through the glass roof of the magnificent spire rising 404 feet above us, reaching into the deep blue sky. Fabulous!

Hambleton (Nov 10):- The name of the village derives from the Anglo-Saxon original meaning ‘crooked or undulating valley’. We left the village via a valley of *crooked* pastoral fields sheltered within the *undulations* of the Chiltern Hills burnished with gold from the beech trees on this lovely autumn morning. At Mill End we crossed the Thames by means of walkways above the spectacular weirs alongside the historic and picturesque Hambleton Mill. We continued in glorious countryside to reach Aston, passing a field of Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs on the way. Climbing from the hamlet took us onto high ground above the Thames Valley from where we enjoyed far-reaching views. We took a break near Remenham Church with views up and down the river along part of the Royal Regatta Course. The river accompanied us for some time until we reached Hambleton Lock to cross the weirs once more. As we crossed the final fields, the village of Hambleton tempted us towards it with its beautiful brick and flint cottages surrounding the similarly constructed Church. We passed the Jacobean Manor House which, in 1646, offered a bed for the night to Charles 1, and where Lord Cardigan, leader of the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade was born some 150 years later. Inside the Church we found the sea chest which he took with him to the Crimean War. Beside it, dominating the area, sits the 14th century alabaster memorial to the Cope D’Oley family. Back outside we breathed in the wonderful quintessential Englishness of the village, and could see why it has been chosen as the setting for several films and television programmes.

Gate Walk(Nov 10):- The strong winds of the previous night had deposited a thick orange carpet along the route which we took to climb from Lower Assendon towards Fawley. A host of red kites soared overhead whilst the



hedgerows beside us were alive with small birds, tits, finches etc, flitting from branch to branch. As we approached ‘our gate’ we were greeted by the sight of balloons! Molly had arrived before us and decorated our gate in celebration of its first birthday, having been sponsored by Purley Pathfinders in 2009. We posed for photographs beside the gate which sports a plaque bearing our name. Continuing our walk we meandered through woodland owned by the McAlpine family. Amongst the trees we were lucky to see some of the family’s collection of animals – deer, ostriches, llamas and wallabies! Our exhilarating walk continued along the Oxfordshire Way, bringing us to the top of the hillside overlooking Lower Assendon where we took time to breath in the glorious autumnal scene. We dropped down the

hill where at the end the Rainbow offered pots of gold in the form of bowls of carrot soup!

Reports on Wasing, Dorchester, Turkey Tinsel and the Party next time.

Thankyou so much for your generous gifts to me! I feel so lucky to be part of such a great group of ladies!