

Thatcham Discovery Centre (Sept 09):- Many Sites of Special Scientific Interest feature amongst our 'Favourite' walks and on this one we wound our way around the amazing Thatcham Reedbeds – a SSSI being one of the largest stands of reeds remaining in the country. The tall reeds, sporting the first tinges of autumn colouring, swayed spectacularly in the breeze above our heads. In this important habitat 43 different species of moth were found in one night on a recent survey, and the reeds prove an important food source for 40 species of insect which feed only on reeds. Eventually our path opened up as we arrived at the Kennet & Avon Canal. We walked past the black and white locks then crossed the canal via the swing bridge to exchange our waterside path for one which passed the immense green at the end of Newbury Racecourse. Devouring juicy blackberries from the hedgerows, we began to climb towards the woodland ahead, pausing half-way to admire some boisterous piglets alongside our route. On reaching Bowdown Wood we read the information board before entering this largest Woodland Reserve in Berkshire. Its variety of habitat of woodland, streams and heathland is invaluable to a range of fauna and flora, and is noted for its 300 species of fungi. We enjoyed looking for fungi, and were pleased to pass a stretch of bank covered in purple flowering heathers, while birds and butterflies flew around us. Very pleasant!

We swapped the woodland for the contrasting openness of Greenham Common. In 1995 1.25million tonnes of concrete was removed from the Common, and now the area has been reclaimed by Nature, making up our second SSSI visited today, managed by BBOWT. As we took our break, we watched numerous wagtails hopping and feeding at one of the Common's many waterholes. Next we strode out across the open landscape grazed by cattle and Exmoor ponies. The Common holds a wealth of wildflowers and these, plus the attractive butterflies flitting around in the sunshine, were very pleasing. The clearness of the day gave us a good view across to Watership Down and the mast on Cottington Hill.

We left the Common to drop down a bridleway and cross the River Kennet where a family of swans floated effortlessly on the clear water. Soon we arrived at the Kennet & Avon Canal, and, grateful for the shade, we walked along its banks. We waved to the cheerful couple gliding past in their narrow boat, partially obscured by the swaying reeds and other waterside plants growing at the water's edge. Turning away from the Canal, we made our way back to walk beside the glistening lake of the Thatcham Discovery Centre. Outside the Visitor Centre we sat surrounded by some of the many waterfowl on the lake, and enjoyed our lunch after our interesting walk.

Hurley (Sept 09):- We couldn't leave this historic village, one of the oldest settlements on the Thames, without first seeking out some of its treasures. Beside the 12th century church we noticed the Cloisters and the Refectory wall, remnants of the old Priory, dissolved by Henry V111 in 1536. Nearby one of the oldest surviving dovecotes in the country, dated 1087, sits in the grounds of an Elizabethan Tithe Barn, built in 1306 to replace a much earlier one. Sadly there was not time to explore all the delights the village has to offer as it was time to start our walk to another ancient Thameside settlement, Marlow.



So, clutching shiny, freshly fallen conkers in our hands like some sort of stress balls, we set off. Quickly the conkers were confined to our pockets as we reached the Thames to walk beside its smooth surface glistening in the strengthening sunshine – what could be more stress-relieving than this! We approached the elegantly curved Temple Bridge which, at 88yards long, is the longest hardwood bridge in Britain. We paused in the middle above the flowing water which reflected the blueness of the sky, and enjoy the views up and down the river from this lofty spot – Beautiful!

We watched the boating activity at Temple Lock and, further on, commented on the peaceful scene of a sail boat gliding effortlessly along – its red sail making the most of the very slight breeze over the water. Eventually the riverside grasses on the opposite bank changed to the neatly mown lawns of Bisham Abbey. We learned something of its colourful past whilst looking out for celebrities now that it is home to the National Sports Council. Beside it, Bisham Church looked lovely in its riverside setting with its imposing square Norman tower. Eventually we rounded a bend in the river and the stunning waterway entrance to Marlow came into view. The landmark spire of All Saints Church dominated the skyline alongside the glistening suspension bridge. Surely one of the most picturesque entrances to any town along the Thames! It was nice to see families enjoying the riverside, with ducks and swans clambering for the food offered by tiny hands.

Our thoughts turned to our refreshments, for morning coffee awaiting us at the George & Dragon! After our refreshing interlude we crossed into Higginson Park, drawn to the colourful flowerbeds overlooked by the 9 ½ foot high bronze statue of Sir Steve Redgrave. Unveiled by the Queen in 2002, this statue celebrates one of Marlow's many famous residents. Our return path took us parallel to the river along a tree-lined route providing grateful shade on this hot September day. However, our walk ended back out in the sunshine as we passed through Hurley Lock on our way back into Hurley village where we enjoyed lunch in the Red Lion.

Warburg Nature Reserve (Oct 09):- We headed for one of our *Favourite* Nature Reserves, The Warburg Nature Reserve set deep in The Chilterns. We began by climbing out of the valley and as we wound our way amongst the yellows, browns and golds of the changing leaves we felt truly ‘immersed in autumn’. Wonderful! At the top we joined the Oxfordshire Way to descend past a ‘Doormouse Village’ - a series of nest boxes positioned a few feet from the ground so that the branches of trees form a natural network of footpaths. Suddenly we emerged from the trees to be greeted by the full magnificence of Bix Bottom. Wow! Once down in the ‘Bottom’ we wandered along the lane to pass close to the atmospheric ruins of St James Church. Through more delightful woodland we emerged into an open pastoral landscape to arrive at the lovely hamlet of Crocker End. After enjoying the gorgeous cottages our eyes gazed across to the grand property of Soundess House, the one-time home of several famous people including Michael Hesselstine and Nell Gwynn! The splendid garden holds fine trees and a walled garden, but we didn’t spot the yew bower where Nell Gwynn evidently sat to look across to the distant Windsor Castle from where here lover, Charles 11 would send her smoke signals! We weren’t sure of the validity of these facts, but we thought it made a good story! Back at the Warburg Visitor Centre we picnicked in the garden before being met by Giles, a Warden on the Reserve who we had booked to take us into special areas of the Reserve to search out some of the 900 species of Fungi which grow here! We learnt some of their names, some obscure, but for others, such as Turkey Tail, Birch Bracket and King Alfred’s Cakes, it was easy to see how their names came about!

Autmtime Special to Savill Garden (Oct 09):- Surveyed by several wild parakeets we began our walk in The Royal Landscape under an ever brightening sky. The first half of the day was to be spent exploring The Valley Gardens. The Obelisk beckoned to us through the trees and soon we were passing it to walk alongside the Obelisk Pond. As the sun began to shine, the surface of the water became transformed into a canvas, painted with reflections by the surrounding autumnal trees. Through an avenue of rather special ‘Tulip Trees’ we reached a copse of Silver Birches from where we emerged alongside Smith’s Lawn. Home to the Guard’s Polo Club, it is suitably decorated with horses and riders either sculpted in bronze or fashioned from bushes, topiary style. From here we entered the Heather Garden where we enjoyed the colourful Heathers and structural Drawf Conifers – both National Collections.



Walking deeper into the Valley we became surrounded by a wealth of trees, both bold structural evergreens, and breathtakingly beautiful deciduous trees flaunting their autumn colours. Berries added interest here and there, and we were stopped in our tracks by a ‘Strawberry Tree’, actually a dogwood, *Cornus kousa* Chinensis, which sported an abundance of richly red strawberry-shaped fruits. They looked good enough to eat, but we resisted, instead turning our attention to the sweet chestnuts which lay ankle deep at our feet as we made our way to the Plunkett Memorial. We took a break here, enjoying the lovely view down a colourful vista to Virginia Water glistening at the bottom. With pockets bulging with sweet chestnuts we resumed our walk by heading down between drifts of hydrangeas still covered in colourful large blooms, to reach the banks of this extensive 18th century man-made lake. From our path we soaked up the continuing autumn spectacle of purples, reds, oranges and yellows of the deciduous trees, the grandness of tall evergreens, their tops outlined in the blue sky, and the fungi decorating the ground in a variety of shapes and colours. We gazed across Virginia Water beside us, spotting the mock ruins of an ancient temple made up of Roman Corinthian pillars, given as a gift to George IV. Further on we came across another Royal gift, this time to Queen Elizabeth 11. Towering 100 feet in the air stands the impressive Totem Pole made with wood from a 600 year old Western Red Cedar. Our eyes scanned the Pole to identify the 10 parts, from ‘Cedar Man’ at the bottom to ‘Man With Large Hat’ at the top! From here we made our way back to the Obelisk where we sat around picnic benches in the sunshine to eat lunch.

For the second part of our day we were met by our Guides who were to give us a tour of the Savill Garden. Looking splendid in the sunshine, we started in the Winter Garden where we were surprised to learn the area has over 30 different species of oak and over 20 species of beech. A bridge took us over a pretty, reflective pond after which we paused beside a ‘young’, 30 year old Ginkgo Tree – the oldest species of tree on earth. The Savill Garden holds several plant collections, and the National Collection of Acers gave us much pleasure with their glorious colours as we passed them on our way to the Alpine Meadow. Beds of Hydrangeas still flaunted huge flower heads, and Sorbus trees vied successfully for attention with branches heavy with berries. The Savill Garden holds interest all year round, and in Summer Wood we were lucky to see a few huge flowers remaining on the Magnolia Grandiflora. Further on, despite having finished flowering, the knarled stems of an old Wisteria gave interest, spiralling up like a complicated sculpture. We marvelled at the huge leaves of a Kiwi Fruit Vine, clothing its host tree, and much of the surrounding area, with a mass of vibrant red. We walked between the Herbaceous Borders, the second longest in Britain. These were delightful, packed with flowers ranging from the reds of Dahlias to the yellows of Canna Lilies, both complementing the colours of the surrounding trees. We entered the Temperate House, a large unheated glasshouse with beds burgeoning with colourful tender plants, and a multitude

of flowers cascading over the sides of huge hanging baskets. Near an interestingly designed water feature lay a large display of pumpkins, squashes and gourds – their diversity of shape and colour forming quite a talking point.

Back out in the sunshine we passed The Dry Garden where plants survive in 3 feet of gravel, and on past Yuccas, their large white flowers exploding upwards to great effect. We entered the Golden Jubilee Garden, laid out as a series of ‘rooms’. The high hedges surrounding the garden, the sound of the water cascading down the striking Water Feature, and the soothing planting palette of blue and lilac, all combine to give a wonderful sense of privacy and calm. We left this peaceful place to head for the intriguingly named ‘Hidden Garden’. Dissected by ditches, we followed a winding path which led us past a stumpery planted up with ferns, and past areas smothered in dainty cyclamen. We emerged alongside a stream with a fine view over golden leaves up to The Savill Building, impressively constructed with an undulating roof mimicking the contours of the landscape. We made our way towards it via the Chinese Bridge, below which huge carp swam just below the surface. We passed areas planted for winter interest with golden grasses, colourfully stemmed shrubs, and trees with lovely bark as on the pure white trunk of the Black Dragon tree.



Once inside the Savill Building we were struck by the magnificent ceiling constructed with 12 miles of timber, a mix of larch and oak from the Royal estate. We found displays to enjoy, a well-stocked shop to explore, and gorgeous cakes to sample! A very enjoyable way to end our wonderful autumn day in the Royal Landscape.

Great Chalk Wood (Oct 09):- Climbing high above Goring rewarded us with marvellous views back over the village and across the Thames to the Berkshire Hills behind. We turned our attention back to the Chiltern Hills as we wound our way through The Great Chalk Wood. At times our path was undermined by the numerous rabbit warrens along this stretch. We soaked up the beauty of the burnt orange of the beech leaves before emerging out into the open once more with wonderful views across the winding Thames far down in the ‘Gap’. Now walking through fields we stopped to admire the unusual apple-cum-overgrown-rosehip shaped fruits of a rare medlar tree. Colourful hedgerows burgeoned with the more common fruits and berries of spindleberry, sloe and hawthorn, with rosehips entwined amongst them. Lovely. We entered the Hartslock Nature Reserve, a BBOWT site of special interest. We took our break here, giving time to enjoy the splendid view before us of the tree-dotted Berkshire Hills rising above the valley floor, the grounds of Beale Park and the church at Lower Basildon nestled amongst the glowing autumn trees. Cutting through the valley, the River Thames glistened as it swept along from beneath the Gatehampton Brunel Bridge. Fabulous! Our retinas sent ‘feel-good’ feelings to our whole bodies which stayed with us as we dropped down the hillside to follow the Thames Path into Goring, passing beneath Brunel’s imposing bridge on the way as a boat chugged under it and a train sped over it! Continuing beside the river we arrived back in Goring to the lovely welcome from a flock of geese as they gave an arrow-head fly-past, red arrow style!

Stonor (Nov 09):- If looking for one word to sum up our first walk in November it would be ‘Breathtaking!’ Breathtaking scenery, autumn colours, views and aerial displays by large flocks of Red Kites. Wow! The November sun even shone with warmth in the blue sky as we climbed from the hamlet of Pishill to reach the Stonor Estate, the undulations of the Chilterns enhancing the beauty of our surroundings. We paused at the top of our climb to look across a ploughed field which swept down to meet a green field grazed by horses in the valley before the land rose again to form a wooded hillside above. We made our way down into the valley to soon be climbing once more, this time through the grounds of Stonor Park. As we gained height, so we gained a splendid view down over beautiful Stonor House set within its protective valley. Adjoining the house lies the pretty chapel which is still used today, and behind the ‘E-shaped’ Tudor building we spotted some of the Italianate garden. Our high vantage point allowed us to look down onto the canopies of several grand trees in the parkland grounds – a mix of majestic trees in various stages of leaf change, sculptural bare trees rising up from the centre of their ‘skirts’ of fallen leaves, and magnificent evergreens like the Cedar of Lebanon. Deer ran amongst the trees, and we could look down onto the outstretched wings of several Red Kites, their colours enhanced by the sunshine.

Tearing ourselves away from this glorious spot, we continued through trees to eventually enter the Turville Estate high above Turville Village and Turville Heath. We paused for our break, entertained by a dozen or more Red Kites putting on a stunning show, swooping to land beside us before effortlessly rising high on the thermals of this lovely sunny day. Continuing, we spotted the Turville windmill on the hillside opposite, visited on past lovely walks. We entered typical Chiltern beech woodland, aglow with sunshine-lit golden leaves. A winding path beckoned us to follow its golden trail into the depths of the wood, lit by sunbeams. Magical! Eventually our route dropped down into Pishill where we were warmly welcomed into the Crown. Over lunch we reflected on our walk. Yes, the word is definitely ‘Breathtaking!’

Aldworth (Nov 09):- For our Armistice Day walk we met in Aldworth to take a leafy path to the church. Inside we studied the Millennium tapestry, poignantly having a square with lines from Laurence Binyon’s, ‘To the

Fallen', embroidered across a mass of poppies. Outside in the graveyard we paused by the grave of this local resident, respectfully adorned with a posy of poppies. Thoughtfully we headed for the Downs, the lung-fulls of fresh air we breathed now all the more sweet. At 11 o'clock we stood just inside a field and there, with the beautiful Berkshire countryside spread before us, we stood for a two-minute silence.

Continuing, we headed for Lowbury Hill, one of the highest points on the Ridgeway. We joined this ancient route which took us between hedgerows still holding an abundance of food for the numerous birds which clambered for their share. Back in Aldworth we ended our walk with lunch at The Four Points.

Inaugural Gate Walk (Nov 09):-



Purley Pathfinders is glad to support the 'Donate a Gate in the Chilterns' scheme which replaces often high and awkward stiles with user-friendly gates. With 'our' gate now in place we set off on a glorious autumn day to find it! We began with a gentle climb towards Fawley, remarking on the beauty of the autumn leaves even this late in November. From a leafy path through trees we emerged onto a lane near Fawley with red Kites circling overhead, a large flock of sheep grazing in a field, and models of two cows standing motionless nearby! Soon a footpath led us away from the lane and suddenly, there stood 'our' gate complete with its plaque, 'Donated by Purley Pathfinders 2009'. Yeah!

With exhilaration we walked through the sturdy wooden gate, appreciating the ease of movement after two difficult stiles earlier on in the walk! As we mingled around, it was good to see locals also appreciate using the gate as they walked their dogs. Photos taken, we resumed our walk which proved a delight as we passed fields and walked through beech woods, both in which we spotted herds of deer, and even some wallabies! The sun continued to shine, adding sparkle to the golden leaves, and with extensive views over the Thames Valley near Henley we felt on top of the world!

Passing the grand Benham House in its woodland setting we entered an enclosed path between fields, this time containing ostriches and llamas! Our interesting walk continued along the Oxfordshire Way and suddenly we found ourselves standing high above Middle Assendon with a glorious Chiltern view. We sailed down the hillside feeling we had certainly 'struck gold' on this walk with all the beauty and interest seen along the way, including walking through our gate for the first time. It was only fitting, therefore, that our *golden* walk should end at The Rainbow!



Nuffield (Nov 09):- From across a golf course we entered a sunken, tree-lined path. We followed this pleasant, enclosed route for half a mile so the contrast was very noticeable when we emerged onto the top of a huge field which tumbled down into the valley in a wide swathe of green. Our lofty spot gave us fabulous views over the English countryside, and we strode out into it to pass the aptly named 'English Farm'. Eventually we entered woodland owned by the Woodland Trust and we paused here for our break, giving time to discover more and more interesting and unusual fungi on the woodland floor. Out of the woodland we passed easily from one field to another with the help of newly installed gates replacing difficult stiles. Just like 'our' gate, what a difference they made! Enjoying the view over the Oxfordshire countryside we walked the ancient Ridgeway path to arrive at Nuffield. In the churchyard we found the unassuming grave of Lord Nuffield, William Morris of Morris cars fame. Back across the golf course we returned to the Crown Inn where we enjoyed lunch.

Turkey Tinsel (Dec 09):- After a pleasant walk along tracks, field paths and through woodland around Arborfield we returned to our *'favourite'* garden centre, Henry's Street, where the tables were laid festively in readiness for us. Crackers pulled and jokes groaned over, we tucked in to a Christmas celebration lunch before getting even more into the festive mood by looking around the garden centre's magical Christmas Wonderland, complete with creatures from 'Narnia' and real, live reindeer!

Christmas Party (Dec 09):- Another year of walks ended with a walk around our own special piece of wonderland in Purley. Afterwards we filled St Mary's Church as we tucked in to the fabulous shared lunch. Over coffee and cake I reminisced in poetry over a year of *Favourite* walks, trips and social events. Marjy then treated us to two of her amusing poems – her Purley Pathfinders poem described us down to a tee! I was so moved by your generosity when I was presented with several presents. My day at the Jean-Christophe Novelli Academy is sure to be a highlight of 2010 for me! Thankyou all so much!! The party ended with the 'Pathfinders Choir' leading us in a Christmas singalong. A jolly way to end our year of *'Favourites'*.

(If you missed the review of the year you will be able to see it on the website soon)