

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with June/July '10

The Holies & Lardon Chase (March '10):- What a walk of drama this proved to be! Soon after entering The Holies poor Myfanwy slipped and broke her ankle! Being in the middle of a wood, the attending Paramedic had no choice but to summon the help of the Air Ambulance to transport Myfanwy to hospital! While all this was going on, Jean Bull kindly offered to lead the group on through the delightful Holies which is dotted with primroses in Spring. Taking a break at the stone mazes gave the opportunity to take up the challenge they offer. From the woodland of The Holies the group entered the grassland of Lardon's Chase. Walking along the top edge of the hillside gave stunning views stretching out over to the fabulous countryside on the other side of the winding River Thames down in the valley of the Goring Gap. After stealing a quick look at the equally stunning view from Lough Down, it only left the descent to tackle down the steep hillside. Back at The Bull lunch was enjoyed and a collection taken to be presented to the brilliant Air Ambulance. Latest update – Myfanwy is now out of plaster and awaiting physio. Hopefully she will be back walking with us soon! Thanks Jean for stepping in!

Cheam School (March '10):- Thankfully no dramas on this walk! Infact, we took the sun shining on a mass of catkins along our route at the start of the walk as a good omen! Along the edges of fields we gained clear views across to Watership Down and Cottington Hill. A hare ran across our path as we turned to walk along the edge of a field owned by the Sainsbury family. Up on the hillside we could see the home of Timothy Sainsbury constructed in rather ugly concrete. We didn't dwell on its appearance for long, however, for we were distracted by the beauty of four deer gracefully entering our field. We continued to soon reach the pretty hamlet of Plastow Green. We wandered down its street, admiring the thatched cottages set in their Spring gardens. After a large field we entered a copse by crossing a bridge over the pretty Kingsclere Brook. We took our break here beside the lovely meandering brook with its banks smothered in snowdrops – magical! Soon we entered the playing fields of Cheam Hawtrey School with a good view of the school buildings where Prince Charles was once a pupil. It was while he was here that the Queen announced him to be Prince of Wales. The formal playing fields led us to a 'boy's paradise' – a wooded area complete with stream where the imaginations of any small boy would run wild! A series of little bridges took us over the Ecchinswell Brook and we continued on with a detour to avoid a collapsed bridge further on. We weren't complaining, however, for this route took us into Ecchinswell and along the avenue past 'our' thatched cottage. Here, as usual, the snowdrops wowed us as they drifted either side of our path like a long line of lanterns lighting the way. Wonderful! Passing close to Kisby Farm with its lovely garden complete with small lake, put us back on track and soon we arrived back at Cottismore Garden Centre where we were able to browse through the Spring plants for sale.

Pyrton (March '10):- From Watlington we joined the ancient long distance path of The Ridgeway. We followed this for about two miles, sometimes beside fields and sometimes beside moss covered trees and hedgerows from where numerous birds sang their flirtation Springtime songs. As we turned off The Ridgeway the scenery proved familiar to fans of The Vicar of Dibley for the view before us features in the title scene. We headed for Lewknor and its 12th century church which is also featured. Inside the church is very interesting with memorials, lovely stained glass windows, some of which were designed by William Morris, and an intricately carved font. A frieze on the wall depicts Lewknor and its countryside alongside scenes of the city of London. This was created by the children from the village school who, as part of the School Partnership Scheme, are partners with a school in London. Outside we admired the beautiful thatched school which fits perfectly into the ambience of the village. Leaving the village, we noticed the watercress growing in the pond – a reminder of a past production in this village where people have settled since pre-historic times. After passing a splendid house with gorgeous gardens complete with lake and tennis courts, we plunged back into the countryside, crossing several fields to arrive alongside Model Farm. Built in 1857, it was one of the most technologically advanced farms in the country, its mechanisation revolutionising agriculture. Joining another ancient track, the Lower Icknield Way, we were soon greeted by several hens as we arrived in Pyrton. We walked between its pretty brick and flint cottages, one with an interesting, large dovecote on its roof, to reach the Church. Normally at this time of year the churchyard would be full of wild daffodils. With the lateness of the Spring we had to be content with just a few clumps in bloom, but were satisfied with the beauty of the churchyard smothered in snowdrops instead! Eventually, back in Watlington, we found our cars beneath a sky full of red kites – a wonderful ending to a wonderful walk!

SPRINGTIME SPECIAL:- Spring arrived at last so we headed for the Cotswolds and, this being our History themed year, our first stop was Chedworth Roman Villa. One of the largest Romano-British villas in the country, it amazingly has over a mile of original walls still intact. After an introductory video we wandered out into the sunshine to explore, audio guides pressed to our ears. We were especially delighted to see several fine mosaic floors dating, incredibly, from the 4th century! An area of damaged mosaic allowed us to see the intriguing Roman version of under-floor heating – clever stuff! Two bathhouses were also heated and our audios explained how bathing was treated as a leisure activity in Roman times. Washing seemed a minor task as bathers would be occupied chatting, exercising and playing games!

Further exploration led us to the probable reason for the Villa's location – the Water Shrine. A natural spring, which has flowed out of the hillside for centuries, is captured in an octagonal pool over which would once have been a Temple. We spotted tadpoles and newts enjoying the crystal clear water. The source of water may have been the first attraction, but as we gazed out over the glorious surrounding countryside, little changed over the years, we thought what a perfect place to live! We took a look in the Victorian Hunting Lodge which now acts as a museum housing artifacts discovered during excavation, from bone hair-pins to tableware to bronze horse harnesses to stone altars. There was time to browse in the shop and have a coffee before rejoining our coach for the next part of our trip.

Slowly negotiating the narrow country lanes gave us chance to admire the beautiful scenery with sheep grazing fields intersected by the meandering River Coln. Soon we were flying along on the straight Fosse Way, one of three Roman roads which meet at our next destination, Cirencester. This Roman town of Corinium was second in size only to London. It now proclaims itself to be the Capital of the Cotswolds and we set off on foot to explore this 'precious antique wrapped in newspaper'. Being market day, the market place was busy, just as it has been here since the Domesday Book, with traders selling their wares from their colourful stalls. A short walk through the streets gave us the opportunity to study the architecture of the buildings. Ancient and modern gell together, built in the same mellow Cotswold stone.

With the bustle of the town left behind we entered the peaceful Cirencester Park. Owned by the Bathurst family, the public are generously given access to its 3,000 acres. The first Earl Bathurst lived in the mansion for 60 years, from 1695 until he was 90. He had an unrivalled knowledge of trees and shrubs and with the help of the poet, Alexander Pope, he spent his life here planning and planting the park, the core of which remains unchanged. We benefited from their vision for at each turn a new and wonderful vista opened up. Several follies were built, including The Hexagon at the end of one such vista. We turned to walk part of The Broad Drive which, at 5 miles long, is the longest avenue of trees in the country. The grand horse chestnut trees had fat sticky buds almost ready to burst into a green celebration of spring. Now our view was of the impressive Church tower looming over a confusion of Cotswold roofs. We reached the ornate, Grade 1 listed park gates and passed through into



RIVER CHURN

Cecily Hill which would have formed the edge of the Roman town. We admired The Barracks, a Victorian faux Medieval castle outside the gates before making our way down the Hill past a variety of lovely 18th and 19th century houses.

Our walk continued around the edge of the town by joining the Riverside Walk beside the River Churn. The river widened, and with ducks dabbling in the clear water on one side of us, and a field of sheep grazing on the other, we could have been lulled into thinking we were in the heart of the countryside. Yet the clear view of the Church tower reminded us that the town centre was never far away. Eventually our pretty riverside path led us into the Abbey grounds

alongside the former Gatehouse, the Spitalgate. We walked beside the lake across which we gained another splendid view of the Church. Swans in romantic mood rose up out of the water, their long slender necks meeting to form a heart. Beyond the lake we came to an area where a section of the Roman Town Walls still stand, protected by English Heritage. An Abbey was consecrated here in 1176 in the presence of Henry 11 but dissolved by Henry V111 in 1539. As we walked across a large area of neatly cut grass, paving stones set in the ground helped us gain some idea of the grandeur of the great Abbey.

Passing the Medieval High Cross we entered the Church of St John the Baptist, one of the largest 'Wool Churches' in the country. Its splendour rivals many Cathedrals, and, inside, two Church Wardens were happy to show us some of its treasures – the attractive wine-glass pulpit, the 14th century font, the beautiful fan vaulted ceiling in St Catherine's Chapel, and the replica of the Anne Boleyn Cup. Leaving the Church we walked along Black Jack Street, heading for the Bathurst Yew Hedge. Planted by the first Earl, it is the highest in the world, and conceals the Bathurst mansion.

Nearby we entered The Corinium Museum to be transported back to Roman times, gaining an insight into what life was like as we passed mock-ups of a Roman kitchen, living room, garden etc in this award winning attraction. Its tearoom refreshed us with a cuppa before choosing how to spend our 'free-time'. Inviting alleyways, courtyards and narrow streets tempted us to browse in the interesting variety of little shops. The butcher in the long established Jesse Smith's Butchers kindly poised with a long string of Gloucestershire Old Spot sausages from Liz Hurley's organic farm nearby! Brewers Yard Art Centre was a hive of creativity with glass makers, potters etc at work. Clutching our various purchases we finally gathered in Café Mosaic where we all tucked in to one of the best cream teas ever!

Our coach came to collect us and, as we pulled away from Cirencester we noticed the Jubilee Lamp, erected to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of George V, was now lit as the daylight began to fade at the end of our interesting, informative and most enjoyable day 'with the Romans'.

Rushall Farm (April '10):- Although only a few clumps of bluebells were open, the woods of Rushall Farm proved to be as splendid a place to walk as ever. Fields of sheep with their newborn lambs were never far away with the lambs looking quizzically at us from the safety of their mother's woolly sides. Branching out of the wood for a moment took us into a field full of primroses – a wonderful sight! Eventually the pleasant Greathouse Walk took us past a field of fine horses and a cottage with a lovely garden to reach a field from where the splendour of the Pang Valley stretched before us. Skylarks sang in the sunny sky above us as we crossed fields with a patchwork of colour at our feet as various wildflowers mingled with the green, organically grown crops. Soon we reached Bradfield with its pretty waterside cottages and old mill. We paused to look inside the Church, set in its primrose strewn churchyard. From here we joined the banks of the River Pang to walk along a glorious stretch of this pretty river. Willow trees wept their fresh green branches towards the crystal clear water, while water-loving plants grew at its edge. We particularly enjoyed the clumps of bright yellow marsh marigolds. Across the closely mown grass beside us we gained a good view of the attractive Bradfield College buildings. Further on our path meandered past trees and hedges. Pussy willows looked handsome in the sunshine and blackthorn fizzed with white blossom. A deer stood to watch us as we crossed a bridge over the Pang and headed back to the impressive Black Barn on the hillside ahead. In this idyllic spot we spread out our blankets and settled down to picnic in the hot sunshine with the most wonderful view over the green landscape grazed by sheep and lambs. With St George's Day only days away, we could only describe this part of England's Green and Pleasant Land as 'Perfect!'



ROMAN WALL