

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORT

Distributed with Nov/Dec '11 / Jan '12 programme

Wimbledon Strawberry Walk (June '11):- After a few days of scorching heat we were sure the players on Centre Court were just as relieved as us when we gathered in temperatures a few degrees lower than of late. In South Stoke we admired the lovely cottages draped in roses and wisteria, their doorways guarded on either side by tall hollyhocks standing sentry style. A signpost directed us to the Ridgeway and the Thames Path where the two long distance trails join to form a splendid route beside the river. Our path took us along the riverside edge of a meadow rich in wildflowers such as meadow sweet, comfrey and wild geranium. With skylarks singing melodiously above we knew we were in for a wonderful walk!

A train sped over the Brunel Bridge as a pleasure boat glided serenely under it. Our path took us beneath the bridge into a cut meadow which allowed better vision of the river in which we spotted shoals of fish in the shallows. Various ducks, and swans with their cygnets, bobbed on the swell created by passing boats. Further along we came upon 100 or more Canadian geese sunning themselves on the riverbank. Being disturbed upon our approach they entered the water with much disapproving honking! Despite the huge number they had soon organised themselves in such a way that their downy youngsters were grouped protectively in a central 'nursery'.

The next field we entered looked stunning with the flowers and giant seed pods of cultivated lilac poppies. Wild red poppies mingled with them along our path – not two colours we would normally put together, but here in Nature's clothing the blend was stunning. Suddenly the alert, long ears of a hare popped into view as he stood on his haunches to eye us up. Obviously not impressed with what he saw, he loped off into the dense cover of the poppies. Our Thameside path continued to provide variety, and the next field held a crop of ripening corn.

A narrow path led us into the churchyard at North Stoke where graves lay amongst purple campanula. A grave marked with a large cross is that of Dame Clara Butt. Elgar wrote 'Land of Hope and Glory' for this Victorian contralto for which he received his knighthood – a nice link with our recent Art-themed Worcester trip. More Art links could be found in the Church where some fine 13th century frescoes decorate the walls. Then, as we left the churchyard we passed the former home of the actor, Michael Caine.

Our route formed a rectangle so soon we were walking on the other side of the poppy field. Back amongst long meadow grasses, rippling in the welcome breeze, butterflies danced at our feet, in danger of being stepped upon. A deer bounced through the long grass which concealed a choir of grasshoppers. Eventually cottages draped in roses heralded our arrival back into South Stoke. From here a short drive took us to Hildred PYO farm where we spread blankets on the ground. Soon we were sprawled upon them, feasting on the fruits of our labour - that Wimbledon favourite - freshly picked strawberries, every bite releasing the sunshine stored within each sweet berry! Delicious!

Cookham (July '11):- (thankyou Ann for this write-up) On a bright, warm morning we gathered in Cookham, the home village of the artist, Stanley Spencer, born June 1891. The seventh son of eleven children, the family lived in 'Fernlea' in Cookham High Street. No doubt he and his siblings had walked the banks of the Thames on many occasions, and this is where we began our walk. We followed the river for about two miles, passing ducks, swans, and even a herd of cows cooling their feet in the shallows. We eventually left the riverbank to walk through pasture to the foot of the hill leading up to Winter Hill. The views as we climbed were fabulous, giving us plenty of excuse to pause and take our minds off the long climb. Reaching the top we took our break to enjoy more of the lovely views, although slightly more obscured than at our last visit with the growth of the trees. We continued through lanes and fields to reach the John Lewis golf course where we received a cheerful wave from a couple of golfers. Arriving back at the car park, warm but invigorated, there was the opportunity for anyone who wished to visit the Stanley Spencer Gallery in the village.



Summertime Special (July '11):- Even at 9.30am the sun was already shining strongly in a clear blue sky, so coats were left on the coach while we settled ourselves in the Thameside garden of The Trout Inn at Lechlade. There was plenty of river activity to tempt us to linger as we enjoyed morning coffee and biscuits, but with a full day planned we dragged ourselves away. The statue of Old Father Thames originally lay at the source of the Thames nearby. Now he lounges in the colourful garden of St John's Lock at Lechlade where we found him at the start of our walk. The view upstream of the spire of Lechlade Church gave us our first Art link, for it inspired Shelley to write his poem, 'Stanzas in Lechlade Churchyard'. We however, turned to walk downstream to follow the river from this first (highest) lock on

the Thames to the smallest at Buscot. As the crow flies this is a relatively short distance, but the numerous twists

and turns of the river made it considerably further! However, we enjoyed every minute with the riverbank a delight, burgeoning with a myriad of colourful wild flowers.

At Buscot Lock we crossed the river to pass the quaint, old Lock Cottage. Originally the lock keeper would not only collect the toll for use of the lock, but also guard the fish in the 'fish stews' beneath the cottage floor. It sounded a damp place to live, but is now a cosy holiday let in the safe hands of the National Trust! Robert Campbell owned much of Buscot from 1859 and near the lock we could see Brandy Island, so named because here Campbell built a distillery for the production of brandy! Now it is a valuable wilderness for wildlife.

With our Art theme in mind our next stop was Buscot Church where the morning sunshine showed off the East window depicting 'The Good Shepherd' to stunning effect. William Morris's company, Morris & Co. was commissioned to produce the window and it was designed by Burne-Jones. The Georgian Rectory next door gave another nice Art link for it was left to the National Trust on the condition that tenants must have an American literary connection. The present tenant is an American author! We left via the attractive lych gate and, enjoying the cooling spray from the weir, we re-crossed the river to walk through the stunning lockside gardens. We continued following the river's meanderings with much to see along the way. Bees feasted on the emerging flowers of teasels while butterflies were spoilt for choice with a feast of wildflowers. The occasional boat glided by, swans dipped their long necks deep into the water, birds flitted amongst the feathery seed-heads of reeds, or skimmed across the surface of the water scooping up unsuspecting insects. On reaching the marina at Easton Hastings we left our watery companion, replacing it with fabulous cornfields. Soon we spotted the buildings of Kelmscott village, their golden Cotswold stone walls blending perfectly with the sun-scorched corn just as if they had 'grown up out of the soil'. This is how the Kelmscott cottages had appeared to William Morris who described Kelmscott as 'a Heaven on earth'. The village contains several buildings associated with Morris and as we made our way to his former home, Kelmscott Manor, we admired the Morris Memorial Cottages with their relief of Morris sitting beneath a tree in the Manor's garden.

Morris loved the harmony of Kelmscott Manor in its setting and we appreciated this too as, upon our arrival, we settled ourselves on the grass to picnic beside the stream which forms one boundary of the garden. Afterwards we gathered in one of the barns which holds an exhibition on the life of Morris. Here our Guide told us some of the history of the Manor before leading us into the front walled garden. We walked up the much photographed path



lined with standard roses, leading to the front door. Enthusiastically we entered the house where stewards guided us from room to room, four downstairs, three upstairs, and three in the loft. Now under the ownership of the Society of Antiquaries, each room contains many examples of Morris's work and possessions, and those of his associates. As we made our way through his former home we could appreciate Morris's philosophy to 'have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'. At once we recognised his famous patterns, Strawberry Thief, Millefleur, Willow Boughs etc. One wall held Morris's first attempt at embroidery entitled, 'If I Can'. We saw the bed in which he was born, adorned with a cushion cover embroidered by his daughter, May. The William Morris Room contains a bed so loved by Morris that he wrote a poem in its praise. May worked the lines of the

poem into a pelmet which hangs around the bed, and also made the bed curtains in the beautiful 'Trellis' design. Morris took a joint lease on the manor with the artist, Rossetti, and The Tapestry Room was once Rossetti's work room. He would often work at an exquisite bureau made from olive wood inlaid with ivory. Seemingly abandoned on the table lay his old box of paints. Rossetti's painting of Morris's wife, Jane, 'The Blue Silk Dress', hangs in the White Room. We saw a copy of the 1896 edition of the Kelmscott Chaucer, beautifully produced by the Kelmscott Press. After climbing the split-stepped staircase we explored the loft rooms, two simply yet beautifully furnished. The third holds samples of textiles, each depicting one of Morris & Co's designs – Fabulous!

We made our way outside to explore the grounds and outbuildings. We saw the Brew House with its original bread oven and coppers and the quaint three-seater Privy. The gardens are a delight with inspiration for Morris's designs at every turn – apples, pears, wild strawberries, medlars, swathes of wild flowers etc. A large Mulberry Tree dating from the 1660's inspired Morris to write his poem, simply called, 'Mulberry'.

We were spoilt for choice in the shop, an Alladin's Cave of beautiful items all sporting Morris & Co designs. Difficult choices made, we headed back to our coach which took us to the other side of the village so we could quickly visit the Church where Morris is buried. Soon we entered Buscot Park where the Art theme continued as inside the house we enjoyed the collections of pictures, furniture, ceramics and objets d'art known as The Farringdon Collection. We were especially interested in works by two of Morris's associates, Rossetti's 'Pandora' modelled on Morris's wife, and the wonderful series of paintings by Burne-Jones known as 'The Legend of the Briar Rose'. The lovely weather enhanced the exploration of the extensive grounds with the Four Seasons Walled

Garden, the life-sized Terracotta Warriors, and the Harold Peto Water Garden being particular highlights. We had fun recapturing our youth as we took turns on the adult-sized swings in the Swinging Garden! The clock in the Clock Tower showed 5.15pm so we headed for the tea room. Here artists have covered the walls with flamboyant murals, yet another Art link as we proficiently indulged in the Art of Eating Cream Teas!



Tidmarsh (Sept '11):- Our first walk of the new term was a favourite local one. Continuing our Art theme we were conscious of the presence of The Barn at the start of the walk, being the home of Purley Players!. Soon we were meandering amongst the trees of Sulham Wood, already beginning to look slightly autumnal. Recent wind had plucked several horse-chestnut fruits from their branches, each spiky shell bursting open on the woodland floor to reveal the swelling conker within. After several pleasant minutes we left the shelter of trees to drop down a field, startling a young deer. On across water meadows we watched a heron soaring on huge wings, no doubt returning from a fishing trip on the River Pang. Soon we were at the river ourselves, crossing it via a bridge upon which we paused to take in the pretty scene from our vantage point above the rippling water.

Arriving in Tidmarsh we noted the millstones outside the Mill House. We were reminded of its link with the Arts for it is the former home of Lytton Strachey, a biographer and member of the famous early 20th century Bloomsbury Group. Furthermore, he shared the house with an artist, Dora Carrington, and her husband, Ralph Partridge. We wandered down the lane to find the point where an inn has been for many years, being well placed on the Turnpike road from Wallingford to Basingstoke. The present building, The Greyhound, dates from the 16th century and we were lured into the cosy interior by the smell of the coffee waiting in readiness for us.

Having spent the first half of the walk dodging showers, we enjoyed the interlude at the Inn. What a pleasant surprise when we stepped outside to find a much brighter morning awaiting us! Happily we continued along a lovely stretch of the River Pang, our path made even more enjoyable by the beautiful flower spikes of Rose-Bay Willowherb and lilac blooms of Great Willowherb. Further on colour was provided by a tunnel of hawthorn and holly, both species heavy with berries. Our path took us alongside a field which is home to magnificent Highland Cattle. Reaching the outskirts of Pangbourne we made our way along the footpath back towards Purley, enjoying the lovely views across the valley.

Shiplake (Sept '11):- Having shared in the celebration at Mapledurham Lock of David Walliams's heroic swim along the Thames, our next walk entailed a very pleasant wander along a 2½ mile stretch of the Thames Path, beginning by a good Art link in the form of The Theatre Mill at Sonning. Unlike during the excitement of the previous week, the river was peaceful and quiet and apart from enjoying all the usual delights of the riverside, our route was enhanced by the profusion of berries and fruits in the hedgerows including spindle, rosehip, hawthorn and sloe. Red Kites soared in the sky on this lovely day and all seemed well with the world – the walking induced endorphins were certainly working overtime! Eventually we arrived at Shiplake by the Shiplake College Boathouse. A very pleasant few moments were spent taking our break by the river. Afterwards we left the swans to bob about on the water as we headed for the site of our next Art link, Shiplake Church. We walked up the aisle just as Emily Sellwood had done in 1850 when she married the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. We do see variety on our walks, and the next part took us on a path cutting between a crop of 8 foot high maze! On we went amongst the pleasant trees of Shiplake Copse before returning to The Flowing Springs where we enjoyed lunch.



Eversley (Sept '11):- It dawned another lovely day as we crossed the border into Hampshire to begin our next walk at Eversley. It was to be a walk of two halves, the first being woodland. Lovely wide, gravelly tracks took us on an undulating route through the trees with sunshine glinting through the canopy. Our path was edged with wonderful swathes of purple heather and the most amazing collection of fungi ranging from clusters of tiny heads to large 'dinner-plate' varieties. The colours ranged from yellow to orange to red, our favourites being the red domed ones with white spots. One of the paths we followed is known as Welsh Drive for here in the 18th century cattle were herded on their way to Eversley Market from Wales! The only hoof marks now visible were those of the odd horse, but we were distracted from these with yet more profusion of fungi. Suddenly an area opened up and we found a plaque mounted on a pillar proclaiming that this area had been granted an award by the Sand & Gravel

Association for its excellent reclamation of a gravel pit. Standing beside the plaque, we found the lovely wide view it had once provided has now been lost with plantings of further trees.

Eventually we left the woodland to come alongside a grand Rectory, home to Charles Kingsley whilst Rector of Eversley from 1844 until his death in 1875. It was whilst living here he wrote his most famous works including

The Water Babies in which Tom, thought to be modelled on a boy sweep who regularly swept the Rectory chimney, is taught moral standards by Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid. Good lessons still applicable today! Kingsley was keen that the, mainly illiterate, villagers should gain a good education. In 1853 he founded the Charles Kingsley Church of England Primary School in Eversley. We passed St Mary's Church and looked forward to visiting it later in the walk.

In contrast to the closeness of the woodland, we now walked in the openness of huge expanses of green fields grazed by friendly horses. A path around the fields was marked by lines of oak trees, part of their heavy crop of acorns lay at our feet having fallen during recent winds. Eventually we reached a beautiful row of almshouses which form a wonderful memorial to Charles Kingsley. This second part of the walk provided a loop which led us back to the Church where we walked up the church path between an avenue of Irish yew trees, planted during Kingsley's time at Eversley. Standing tall nearby is a fine Wellingtonia raised from a seed taken from a fir cone brought back from America by Charles Kingsley. His grave in the churchyard is marked by a white marble cross.

It was nice to see the Church being used during the week by the community, but unfortunately the Art class in full flow prevented us from seeing the displays about Kingsley in a dedicated area inside. However, we admired the 'Water Babies' window put in place in 1942 to mark the centenary of Kingsley in Eversley. Posters advertised the forthcoming Harvest service upon which we pondered as we continued walking on paths beside recently harvested crops. We cut through a smallholding with the pleasant distraction of a pond brimming with all manner of ducks and geese. Alpaca 'grinned' at us from their paddock whereas two sturdy Highland Cattle decided to completely ignore us. Before continuing we paused to look back over the patchwork of farmland through which we had passed, spotting the grand Rectory nestled within. Watched from a distance by a cautious deer we finished our walk through a strip of woodland where the ground was covered in dramatic ferns and yet more fungi – wonderful!

Ladle Hill (Sept '11):- We were back in the depths of the Hampshire countryside for our next walk, with the sunshine causing the variety of colours on the gradually changing leaves to positively glow. Walking within the Sydmonton Estate we spotted, across the fields, the row of Laundry Cottages passed on our February snowdrop walk. Snow was far from our minds as we enjoyed the 'Indian Summer' on this late September day. Soon the impressive country home of Lord Lloyd Webber appeared in front of us, framed by stately cedar of Lebanon trees.



We walked between mossy staddle stones as we made our way down the drive, pausing where a wooden door is set into the hedge. Having been left intriguingly ajar, we were tempted to peek inside, for within lies the former Chapel in which Lloyd Webber has composed some of his most beautiful music. Living at Sydmonton Court in this wonderful setting beside Watership Down must surely continue to be an inspiration to him. The surroundings certainly worked for us, as with a song in our hearts we began a steady climb up a hedged track towards the lightly wooded slopes ahead. As the track entered a tunnel of trees, the welcome gentle breeze plucked a flurry of tiny yellow leaves to shower us with leafy 'confetti'. Rays of sunlight broke through the canopy and,

somewhere from within it, a jay could be heard... (Oh dear! The inspiration from the countryside was rubbing off on me!) Suddenly the tunnel ended and we blinked in the bright sunshine. We chose this idyllic spot to take our break with green fields, grazed by sheep, dipping down beside us to rise again towards Watership Down. A tractor moved up and down the plough-lines of a further field, while a combine harvester gathered in the precious crop from another. Nestled within this glorious country scene we spotted the chimney tops of Shepherd's Cottage, former home of Richard Adams. Here he was inspired to tell his children tales of the furry creatures who live nearby. These stories finally went to print as the well loved 'Watership Down'.

Through a gate we continued our walk along part of the Wayfarers Walk, the chalky soil reminding us that this is part of the North Hampshire Chalk Downs. A panoramic view stretched in every direction. From our high vantage point we looked over a patchwork of arable and pastoral fields dotted with groups of autumnal trees. Shortly we gained an aerial view over Sydmonton Court, appreciating the grandeur of the composer's mansion. Our path took on twists and turns as it skirted prominent mounds, the remains of the Iron Age Hill Fort on Ladle Hill. Skylarks flew with their familiar bobbing motion, spontaneously bursting into song, while butterflies added colourful movement to the scene. From the Hill Fort at 760 feet we gazed across to the slightly higher Beacon Hill which at 872 feet is the highest point of the Downs. However, this topographical fact didn't prevent us feeling we were on top of the world!

We watched a Red Kite gliding effortlessly down in the valley and it was time for us to make our way down too. After a lingering final look over our wonderful surroundings we scattered pheasants as we began the descent down a track enclosed by hawthorns heavy with berries. Occasional fruit trees had deposited their golden crab apples onto our path, leaving us no choice but to crunch our way over them. A final stretch between open fields ended our truly inspirational walk.