

TENTH BIRTHDAY WEEKEND at BOURTON on the WATER see separate sheet

TENTH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION at ENGLEFIELD (May 09) We celebrated our Tenth Birthday locally by repeating our very first birthday outing. From Englefield we enjoyed a circular walk taking in Theale and North Street, calling in to the church at Englefield on our return. Afterwards we had lunch in the Long Gallery of Englefield House before exploring its wonderful gardens. Huge banks of rhododendrons and azaleas brought colour and drama to the garden, whilst the trickling stream brought movement and reflection. We all thoroughly enjoyed spending time wandering in and out of the different areas, all gloriously planted, whilst reminiscing over ten wonderful years of walking as a group. Here's to the next ten!

Greys Court (May 09):- Climbing up a hillside we soon reached the pretty hamlet of Shepherds Green where we admired the gorgeous cottages and pretty gardens. Along the road we passed The Lamb Inn, one of the oldest buildings in the area, dating back to the 16th century when it was a farm workers cottage. We walked through a stretch of woodland which proved very pleasant despite the fact that many of the bluebells were already going to seed. In contrast, the next stage of the walk took us through parkland grounds with fine, individual trees standing out against the skyline. We headed for Bromsden Farm where we spotted a large bronze statue of a horse. Walking in front of the farm we kept our eyes open for anyone famous for this former home of Harold MacMillan is now the home of actor Simon Williams of *Upstairs Downstairs* fame, and his wife, actress Lucy Fleming, daughter of Peter Fleming. After dropping down beside woodland, we now entered it to climb back up under the dappled shade of the beech trees. Our walk finished with a stroll across the National Trust parkland which led to Greys Court. We found a nice shady spot beneath some trees to enjoy our picnic before entering Greys Court for a browse around the stunning walled gardens where the famous wisteria was putting on a good show for us. We climbed the tower to gain a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside, refreshing ourselves after our exertion with tea and cake on the lawn! It's just got to be done!

SOCIAL to ENID BLYTON'S GARDEN:- We were blessed with a super sunny evening for our tour of the two acre garden of Old Thatch, former home of Enid Blyton. We entered the thatched lych gate, just as Enid Blyton had done, to find the house described by her as 'just like a house in a fairytale'. We soaked up the beauty of the many areas which have been transformed by the skill of the present owners, garden designer Jacky Hawthorn, and her husband David. We loved the texture and worn appearance of the timbers which make up the rose walk created in Enid's day, and the evening scent of the roses which tumbled along its length was magical. This led to a newly created area where huge circles of different texture form ideal places to position benches alongside the stream which Enid had been delighted to discover at the bottom of the garden (although this was fairly dry after a dry spell). Another area held collections of grasses, while the circle garden is built around a wonderful ageing pot overflowing with water. We ended up in the cottage garden where annual cottage flowers vied for position where their seeds had fallen, resulting in a wonderful tangle of colour with the little pond dug by Enid herself at the centre. In the dining room of Old Thatch an interesting film show outlined the history and development of the house and garden.. Afterwards we headed for the kitchen which used to be a barn when the house was an Inn, and used by Dick Turpin to stable his horse Black Bess! Now it is a welcoming space where tea and cake awaited us!

Watership Down (June 09):- On a lovely morning we left the imposing church of Kingsclere with its bed-bug weather vane, (reminder of the uncomfortable night spent by King John at one of the local Inns!), and soon were walking along a lane with a view up to Watership Down. Soon we were climbing up the hillside with an increasingly good view behind us, giving us the excuse to pause now and then! Cowslips gone to seed were in evidence, but sadly, with the grass allowed to grow long, the usual swathes of orchids were not. We reached the top to stand and just look. Wow! Before stretched miles of countryside divided into fields of various shades of green with the occasional yellow of rape. Breathtaking! We crossed the gallops (what a wonderful place to ride!) and headed towards 'Big Wig's Beech Hangar' where in Richard Adam's famous story Big Wig uttered the immortal phrase, 'Come look! You can see the whole world from up here!' And so it seemed we could! We strode out across the top of the Downs on part of the North Hampshire Ridgeway with our next goal, the mast on Cottington Hill, looming ahead. Eventually we were alongside the mast and, as it can be seen for miles, so we could see for miles from beneath it. We chose this spot to picnic, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the stunning landscape stretching away below us. All too soon it was time to leave and make our way back to the civilisation of Kingsclere, but we took with us the memory of the sights we had witnessed during our wonderful walk.

Ewelme (June 09):- From the ancient village of Ewelme we headed for the Downs where we walked beside a field which formed the canvas for the amazing sight of poppies mingled with the yellow of spring-sown rape

stretching away into the distance – worthy of any art gallery exhibition! After a short break in pretty beech woods alongside the Icknield Way, we joined the Chiltern Way. Ahead on the distant skyline we saw the distinct mounds of Wittenham Clumps and looked forward to our forthcoming walk there. For now we enjoyed being immersed within the glorious landscape of open fields and downland where smooth green fields appeared to have been ‘ironed’, and fields of crops flowed away in waves. Eventually we arrived back on the outskirts of Ewelme where a cluster of pretty cottages and converted barns sat alongside a field of Heberdean sheep. Soon we were walking in the heart of the village along the High Street lined with old cottages each with burgeoning gardens of scented roses, honeysuckle and wonderful cottage garden flowers. We passed the Watercress Beds and followed the stream where trout darted in the clear water, and near the village pond we stopped to admire the Millennium wall plaques on the village hall, designed to show the wildlife, countryside and the history of the area. We were to soak up some of this history as we passed the village school, dated from 1437, making it the oldest church school in England. Quietly we entered the Cloisters where 13 Almshouses are set around a courtyard. Built by William de la Pole, they are the earliest brick buildings known to exist in England. The history of the area seemed to soak into our very souls as we climbed from the courtyard into the church. Inside we found the Thomas Chaucer tomb, son of Geoffrey the poet, and the tomb of Alice Chaucer, Geoffrey Chaucer’s granddaughter. There was much of interest to see in this holy place, including Medieval wall paintings and lovely brasses. In this village time appeared to have stood still, but for us it was time to leave the church via the churchyard, passing the grave of Jerome K Jerome of Three Men in a Boat fame. We made our way back to the Watercress Beds where we were welcomed into the Visitor Centre by some of the volunteers who help preserve the redundant beds as a Nature Reserve. We ate our picnics whilst watching a film show of the history, and the hard work involved in the production and harvesting of the Watercress Beds. Slides showed some of the varied wildlife which inhabit the site now that it is cared for by the Chiltern Society. Wet and dry meadows form habitats for both flora and fauna, including the rare water vole, 20 species of butterfly, and over 50 species of birds. We were taken on a guided tour of some of the Reserve, crossing the chalk stream, controlled by oak dams to a depth of 4 to 6 inches. Watercress still grows in the spring-fed water which emerges from the Chiltern Hills at a constant temperature of 10 degrees. Dragonflies flitted above the surface and butterflies grazed on the nectar from numerous wild flowers in the meadows. Unfortunately a second area of the Reserve was not explored for, just as we were setting out for this, the rain came down heavily. We decided to leave this treat for another visit, but left feeling we had learned a lot more about the production of the humble watercress, and this wonderful Reserve. We were happy to give a donation for the continuing upkeep.

Wittenham Clumps (June 09):- Having spotted the distinct mounds of the Clumps on last week’s walk it was lovely to be standing below them ready to start today’s walk. A diagonal path up the 250 foot high Round Hill meant the climb was not too steep, and it was made more enjoyable by the butterflies which fluttered around us as we walked between swaying grasses. At the top we paused to take in the start of the 360 degree view which we would enjoy today. We found a Topograph which pointed our gaze over many landmarks which we have passed on previous walks. We worked our way around the hilltop to see below us the church at Little Wittenham with its 14th century tower. Reminiscent of a Julie Andrew’s song we sailed down the hill to take a look inside the church which is set alongside the Manor House, once lost to James 11 in a card game! It was returned to the opponent on the condition he never gambled again! The church holds a reminder with an Ace of Spades window. We crossed the Thames via the ‘Pooh Sticks Bridge’ then followed the river along a pleasant path beside fields of hay bales across which we spotted the Abbey in Dorchester. We left the Thames to follow the River Thame for a short while before heading into Dorchester where we entered the Abbey via an avenue of red roses. Inside the Abbey is just beautiful! We took time to explore before meeting outside in the courtyard for our morning break. On leaving the town we passed some of its gorgeous cottages set in wonderful gardens. We headed for the well preserved Dyke Hills which once formed the defensive line for the town, and followed them to arrive back at the Thames besides pretty Day’s Lock. Back at the foot of the Clumps we took a path through delightful Little Wittenham Nature Reserve where wild flowers mingled with grasses to form a feast for some of the 474 species of moth and 32 species of butterfly to be found here. In Little Wittenham Wood we passed the pond which is home to the largest population of rare crested newts in the country. All the while we were gradually climbing and eventually we stood at the top of the second Clump, Castle Hill, to complete our 360 degree view. We studied the plaque upon which is written a copy of the poem carved by Joseph Tubb in 1844 on the nearby Poem Tree. We made our way back down the hillside to finish our exhilarating and picturesque walk.

Wildflower Farm (June 09):- We were greeted by Bob Anderson and his wife Rosanne who took us on a lovely tour of the farm which they manage. Here wild flowers are grown for seed production, and this process meant we benefited from fields planted up in blocks of single varieties – marvellous! Bob explained how areas are set aside for wildlife, and right on cue, a deer ran out in front of us! Different habitats serve different species so Bob took us through Oak Tree Wood, alongside the flower-rich set-aside headland, and through the wild flower meadow where Bob named several of the flowers growing there in a tapestry of colour. Afterwards we picnicked beside the dragonfly pond before exploring the garden planted up with 150 named species of wild flowers. How wonderful!