

**Hailey (March '09):-** This wonderful 'get away from it all' walk took us deep into unspoilt countryside. We joined the Ridgeway Path which meandered through a belt of beech trees alongside the Grim's Ditch. We followed it for about two miles, sensing the history of this ancient route which proved a delight with primroses strewn over the banks amongst bluebell shoots, and a view across a wide sweep of chalk downland. Eventually we left the Ridgeway to join an equally impressive ancient route – that of the Icknield Way. Out of woodland we now walked a path through the middle of extensive arable land, giving us lovely, open views. We ended our walk with lungs full of fresh air, and 'feel-good' endorphins rushing round our bodies. Fabulous!

**Springtime Special – Wild Daffodils of the Forest (March '09):-** WOW! What an excellent day we had! The weather was perfect as we drew up at the Royal George at Birdlip to start our day out with morning coffee, seated comfortably in easy chairs in the large lounge. Then a walk across the grounds of the hotel took us into Witcombe Wood where a meandering path joined the Cotswold Way which we followed to a stile. By crossing it we were placed out of the wood and onto a green area known as The Peak. WOW! Again! From this viewpoint we took in the Vale of Gloucester, Gloucester Cathedral, the Malvern Hills and the distant Brecon Beacons. To our right we had a good view of Crickley Hill and Leckhampton Hill, two high points of the Cotswolds, and to our left our view stretched over the blue water of Witcombe Reservoir down in the valley and beyond. With this breathtaking view in our memory we rejoined our coach and made our way to The Forest of Dean. Here we walked in the Vale of Leadon where the woodland was full of dainty wild daffodils – a sight so wonderful it is difficult to describe. The



nearest way I have found is to imagine you are in a bluebell wood, but instead of blue, the woodland floor is yellow with daffodils stretching as far as the eye can see! The daffodils were not confined to the woodland, but spilled out into the meadows and scrambled beneath the hedgerows. We passed 'Gwen and Vera's Nature Reserve' – two



fields just packed with wild daffodils! We ended by walking through 'Betty Dawe's Wood' where the daffodils were outstanding. On a 'high' we floated back to the coach ready for the next treat of the day. Within minutes we had arrived at the Three Choir's Vineyard and soon had a glass of wine in our hand! We were taken on an interesting and informative tour of this award-winning vineyard. We listened intently to our well-informed guide, and sampled two more wines as we made our way to the vines, the winery, the bottling plant etc. Feeling we now had a good knowledge of how the grapes from the vines ended up as bottles of wine, we headed for the shop to purchase some souvenir bottles! Clinking our way back onto the coach we were driven to Up Leadon where local ladies had decorated the village hall beautifully for us. Soon we were tucking in to the platefuls of scones and cakes, washed down with unlimited tea and coffee. A wonderful ending to a memorable day in the Forest of Dean!

**Blewbury Downs (April '09):-** After the Easter break we were delighted that the day of our first April walk dawned bright, sunny and warm. From Blewbury we climbed beneath the welcome shade of a band of trees. Various wild flowers scrambled along the banks on either side - violets, cowslips and the smiley faces of celandines. Gaps in the trees gave us the opportunity to interrupt our climb to gaze over the lovely view across green fields to the distant Wittenham Clumps. On reaching Churn Knob we were reminded of the twelve-mile annual St Birinus Pilgrimage which makes its way from here, passing the Clumps on the way to Dorchester Abbey. Walking now in the openness of the Blewbury Downs, the beautiful clear day meant we could take full advantage of the 360 degree view. We breathed in lung-fulls of clean, fresh air as we strode out with green fields rolling away on either side. We were joined by several butterflies and sweetly singing skylarks – marvellous! Eventually we joined the Ridgeway, heading for Lowbury Hill. We gathered in the shade of a hedge to have our break at the foot of this ancient burial mound, standing 615 feet high, making it one of the highest points on the Ridgeway. Our walk continued by dropping down to Chalk Hill Bottom – a fitting name as our route ran down the chalky hillside on which typical chalk grassland flora thrives. We were delighted to walk between fields full of cowslips. We watched lambs frolic in their meadow. Our view stretched across miles of green fields, with the occasional yellow of rape. Fresh, green leaves emerged on the trees and hedgerow bushes. Butterflies flitted in the sunshine, and birds sang from the deep blue sky. In these magical surroundings, as St George's Day approached, we heartily agreed with the patriotic sentiment of Robert Browning – 'Oh to be in England now that April's there'! At the

bottom of the hill we crossed into the aptly named 'Spring Lane' to walk between frothy white blossom trees into Aston Tirrold. A cockerel crowed a welcome but we left the village to walk alongside the hillfort of Blewburton Hill into Blewbury. We walked through this quintessentially English village beside some of its pretty cottages and twinkling streams, pausing in the 'living churchyard' to admire the snake's head fritillary. Passing the Almshouses set in their burgeoning spring gardens, we walked between two of the village's historic thatched Cob Walls to find the Red Lion where we enjoyed lunch in the sunny garden, reflecting on our wonderful, 'English' walk.

**Sulham (April 09):-** Soon after entering a bluebell wood we emerge into green countryside as the valley of the Pang stretched before us. We passed the Sulham Pigeon Tower, a Folly built during the courtship of Henry Wilder of Sulham House and Joan Thoyt of Sulhamstead House. The reason behind it was that it could be seen from both houses, so was a sort of love token. Most of us ladies decided we would be happy with a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers, but Joan obviously appreciated this grander gesture for reports show that they married in 1769! We wandered along Nunehide Lane for a short distance before branching off to walk alongside a springtime hedgerow at the edge of arable fields. We paused to look around us, marvelling at the beautiful, green English countryside, fresh after rainfall, with the Folly standing out clearly up on its hillside. Soon the hedgerow was replaced by the woodland of Harescopse where the ground was deep blue with bluebells – lovely. We could see the impressive Sulham House up across the fields and we branched off in its direction to emerge by the church which we entered to explore its delights. These included the wall-hanging created to celebrate 500 years of the Wilder family in Sulham. In skilful needlework it depicts the houses of Sulham and the surrounding countryside. We left the cosy interior of the church to discover that rain had begun to fall. However, we were soon back in the shelter of woodland, climbing amongst the bluebells, arriving back at our cars to end our lovely fresh Spring walk.

**Comedy & Cake:-** Over 80 people were entertained by Marjy and her amusing poems. Everyone had an enjoyable afternoon, raising £202.50 for St Mary's Church. Many thanks to Marjy and all who supported the event!!

**Bradfield & Stanford Dingley (May '09):-** On a bright, sunny day we began our first May walk from the historic Black Barn, walking through the stunning bluebell woods belonging to Rushall Farm. Not only was this a delight visually, but also the delicious scent rising from the carpet of blue was glorious. What a start to a walk! We emerged above the farmhouse, watched by a sweet donkey as we crossed the stile into a field of sheep. Across their field we spotted the buildings of Bradfield College to which we headed next. Our route enveloped us in peaceful green as we crossed fields surrounded by a necklace of trees. We paused alongside the old mill and the church to soak up the atmosphere of Bradfield Village before taking a path alongside the River Pang. This must surely be one of the prettiest stretches of the river! We spotted fish in the water and enjoyed the birdsong coming from the overhanging trees. Further on we entered a gate to take a look at the Blue Pool, a lake where a chemical reaction to minerals in the bottom gives the water a mysterious blue colour. On we went with green fields on one side and hedges and trees on the other. Horse Chestnuts looked splendid sporting huge 'candles' of flowers, and the hawthorns looked pretty with their buds bursting into the white blossom of 'May'. Just to confirm we are actually now in the month of May, a cuckoo called from across the valley. Perfect! Eventually we arrived at Stanford Dingley where a drama was unfolding! Workmen had removed a drain cover and five tiny ducklings had promptly fallen straight into the resulting hole! We watched with interest (and many an 'Aaaah!') as they were plucked from within the drain and ushered back to their Mum who was waiting anxiously nearby with their four siblings. Drama over, we could now turn our attention to the beautiful cottages and gardens which we passed as we made our way through the village to the Church of St Denys. We left the village by walking beside the white weather-boarded church, crossing fields of sheep and crops. A new grassy path inside the hedge meant we avoided any road walking, and also allowed us wonderful views over the green Pang Valley. Once back at the Black Barn we drove to Ingle Spring in Stanford Dingley where Indra and David welcomed us into their gorgeous garden. After a brief introduction by Indra we settled ourselves in the numerous seating areas to eat our picnic and refresh ourselves with Indra's welcome tea and coffee. Afterwards we wandered around the two acre garden which boasts its very own river – the River Ingle, which bubbles up from a spring on one side of the garden and flows through adding its own magic. In the past the river banks have been dug out in places to widen the river which now allows a little boat to journey up and down. We crossed the little bridges, spotting trout darting in the clear water and a coot showing off her new family. Indra had explained that there was no plan in the development of the garden – if she liked a plant in the garden centre she bought it, and decided where to put it when she got home! Plan or no plan, the overall effect is one of beauty and peace. Indra enthusiastically pointed out plants which were her 'pride and joy', of which there were several, including some fine magnolias, and showy peonies with enormous flower heads. Before leaving we planted up the orchard area with several pots of daffodils which we had brought, as invited by Indra. This area will be dedicated to Purley Pathfinders – a lovely thought with our tenth birthday only a few days away.