

Well, it has been an eventful start to the New Year to say the least!! After nearly eleven years of walking we have had two incidents within three weeks of each other. With Carol's injury in December, hopefully that's our three for the next eleven years!! To update you all, Carol's wrist is well on the mend, and hopefully will be good as new with physio. Anne Bolland is now fine, discovering that she had had a reaction to some Nurofen Extra tablets (I've heard of others not being well after taking 'Extras' versions of tablets so do read the labels for ingredients!) Myfanwy who slipped in the Holies has broken two bones either side of the ankle. She is having an operation to put a plate in. As George no longer drives I'm sure you will all want to help where you can so I'm sure she won't mind me giving you her details. 2, Primrose Close, 9421244. We all wish you a speedy recovery Myfanwy!!

On top of this the weather has tried to put a dampener on our walks too, but here we have managed to bounce back and outwit it. Firstly the Yattendon walk was postponed, but an alternative local walk was undertaken in the snow. Great fun! Secondly, the sleet kept some of you away from the walk at Sonning Common, but for those who did brave the elements, we had a lovely walk as you will see in the following.

**New Year Celebration Walk (Jan 10):-** For my first 'History' themed walk report I didn't expect to be writing about history as recent as 2009! Perhaps it's my cum-uppance for teasing Laura in my end of year poem, but on the morning of our first walk history repeated itself when snow forced us to leave our cars at home and postpone the walk planned. However, a number of you, keen to get back in your boots, met in the village and enjoyed a very pleasant walk along the Thames Path. The scene was very pretty with acres of virgin snow stretching across the meadows beside us. The river provided interest with numerous resident waterfowl entertaining us from the water, and two 'cormorant trees' full of these pre-historic looking birds. As we neared Pangbourne we came alongside a boat moored up for the winter. A lady appeared to collect logs to replenish the cosy fire within, its wood smoke rising merrily from the chimney. We passed the time of day and stood to poise by her jolly snowman on the riverbank.



On reaching Pangbourne we headed for the Swan where we sat cosily in the log-fire-warmed interior to enjoy coffee and muffins. Dragging ourselves away, we followed the snowy footpath and bridleway back to Purley feeling cheerful and elated to be back in our boots after the Christmas break.

**Sonning Common (Jan 10):-** Yet another wintry day dawned, this time with sleet. However, dressed in our waterproofs we set off to cross the open public area of Sonning Common's Millennium Green. (Was the Millennium celebrations really ten years ago!?) On we went through the middle of a large field which dipped in the middle. Down in the dip we looked around our amazing surroundings clothed in a thin layer of snow. At Chalkhouse Green we admired the herd of English White Cattle, especially the bull who stood patiently for photographs. The owner apologised for their condition, saying it was due to a lack of fresh pasture for so long, but we thought they looked very fine indeed. We admired the lovely old cottages of the hamlet as we passed on our way to join a bridleway which we followed for ¾ mile. Unfortunately the recent thaw caused the path's condition to deteriorate and we found ourselves dodging several muddy stretches along this normally delightful route. Luckily our minds were soon distracted from the winter-borne conditions as our thoughts turned to Spring as rabbits hopped before us, birds sang heartily from the hedgerows beside us, and catkins danced merrily from the trees above us.

Eventually we reached Emmer Green and from here we made our way into Clayfield Copse, an area of ancient woodland deemed Reading's first Nature Reserve in 1991. In 2006 an old oak split and, in order to save it, it underwent heavy pruning. This had two consequences – firstly the oak was saved as the trunk knitted back together and new growth appeared, and secondly, several logs were left as a by-product. These were sculpted into various birds, insects and animals to be found in the area, and placed around the wood. They now form an interesting sculpture trail and we followed some of it spotting, amongst others, a woodpecker, fox and butterfly. Across the recreation ground we came across the 'mother' oak standing beside a dragon sculpted with a chain saw from a huge branch. This was the first ever sculpture made, being unveiled in 2007 after local children had painted it green with large white teeth! – Not in keeping with the theme of local wildlife it's true, although we had passed a 'snow-dragon' built on the front lawn of a nearby house!



Continuing, we followed some clear footprints in a patch of snow, eventually startling the owner – a large pheasant which took to the air with a raucous call of indignation! At Dunsden Green we managed to avoid a flooded stretch of lane, and soon were walking through the grounds of pretty Chapman Farm. From here a lengthy stretch of track and wide fields took us, eventually, back to the Millennium Green. We headed back to the Herb Farm where the warm welcome of the fire extended to the café where the staff fussed over us whilst serving a delicious lunch. Sadly the Saxon Maze was closed, but we spent time instead browsing through the ‘feel-good’ items on sale in the shop!

**Dinton Pastures (Jan 10):-** Anglo-Saxons once farmed the land which now makes up Dinton Pastures Country Park, but the lakes which make it a haven for wildlife were a result of gravel extractions over the past 100 years. Winter is a great time to see many winter visiting waterfowl at the Park, and we made the most of this by walking beside 5 of its lakes. In the hide overlooking Lavell’s Lake, a haven for ornithologists, we were fortunate to spot an egret amongst the more common herons. We walked past the white weather-boarded Sandford Mill, built in 1772, although a mill has been recorded here since the Domesday Book. Converted to a private residence in 1994, its watery position is taken full advantage of with the use of attractive bridges. A pretty track led us past the Aviation Museum with two aeroplanes on display outside, and several more hidden away inside.



The River Loddon flows some of its 43 miles through the Park and we walked beside its banks before making our way back to the Café for lunch.

**Woodcote (Feb 10):-** Awaiting an ambulance to take Anne to hospital after being taken ill at the start of the walk, I missed the first half which, unlike 2009 when it snowed, took place in sunshine. In the safe hands of Laura the group enjoyed the scenery, passing Elvendon Priory en route. Luckily I caught up with the group just as they entered woodland at Crays Pond which proved delightful with swathes of snowdrops during this week of Candlemas. We admired a converted Chapel before heading back to Woodcote with its mix of Victorian, Edwardian, and more modern properties.

**Yattendon (Feb 10):-** Continuing our quest for historic facts, it was interesting to hear that evidence exists of people in Yattendon from 10,000BC. Henry V111 visited the Manor here with Catherine of Aragon in Tudor times, and in more recent times, several prominent people have made the village their home – Norreys, Waterhouse (designer of the Natural History Museum in London, and in 1877 the original Yattendon Court), and since 1925, the Iliffe family. The Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, also lived in Yattendon and, as we began our walk, we passed his home of 22 years. We crossed fields, admiring the near 360 degree view as we waited our turn to cross the series of stiles linking each one. As we crossed the final one to a woodland strip, the blue sky suddenly changed and we found ourselves in the middle of a blizzard of something between snow and hailstones – very strange! Thankfully it stopped as quickly as it had begun and we reached the Church of St Clements at Ashampstead under a blue sky! Inside the 12<sup>th</sup> century Church is a delight with a beautiful oak roof revealed after plasterwork was removed, and, on the walls, some of the finest Medieval wall-paintings in the country, painted by a Benedictine monk in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



We set off back to Yattendon via tracks, strips of woodland, and field paths. A pair of deer ran the length of one side of a field as we walked the other. Soon we came alongside Yattendon Court, the present one built by the Iliffes in 1925 to replace the one built by Waterhouse. On reaching St Peter and St Paul’s Church we found the large cross in the churchyard, placed there by Bridges in memory of his Mother. He took an active part in village life, and was choir master for 9 years. Inside his plaque hangs near where he would have sat, with other walls adorned with memorial tablets for family members of Norreys, Waterhouse and Iliffe.

On the way back to our cars, some of us were tempted into the shop at the front of the West Berkshire Brewery. This ‘microbrewery’ began its life in ramshackle stables at the back of the Pot Kiln in nearby Frilsham. It has won many awards and now, in the larger premises of the Old Bakery at Yattendon, it produces 80 barrels a week – That’s 2,304 pints! CHEERS!

On our way home we stopped off at the Red Lion in Upper Basildon to have our belated New Year Celebration lunch.