

PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with June/July 2015 Programme

Whitchurch Hill (March):- Beneath a misty sun we left Whitchurch Hill along pleasant country lanes. Red Kites flew overhead with beaks loaded with sticks for nest building while small birds chirped from within hedgerows bordering fields of cows with young calves. Then, when a rabbit popped out into our primrose-dotted path we really felt that spring was truly on its way! We passed through the hamlet of Cold Harbour, and continuing our *Heritage* theme we were interested to learn that its name derives from Cold Comfort, being a stop-off point for weary coach travellers in days gone by. Pastoral fields gave way to arable with a lovely field of swaying reeds, we believe grown for local thatching. The fluffy seed heads glowed in the light and birds enjoyed the bounty they offered. We entered woodland to walk down a sunken track, noting the profusion of bluebell shoots beneath leafless trees. On reaching Cray's Pond we paused to hear some of the heritage of the area known as *the land of the lions* - referring to the White, Red and Black Lion pubs! We continued on to Woodcote where we took our break beside the Greenmore Ponds. We learnt that they were part of Woodcote Common and an important source of water for, not only grazing animals, but also for humans for washing and drinking. Even until the 1920's people still had to collect their water from here! The nearby Pot Kiln Lane betrayed more Heritage, the area having been important for brick producing.

In the next area of woodland we looked out for concrete platforms, remains of a large RAF maintenance complex which after the war until the 1950's employed 100's of people including relatives of a couple of our walkers! Nature has reclaimed the area with beech trees decoratively hanging on to their spent leaves like golden jewels, and bright green moss draping itself over banks and fallen tree trunks. Bluebell shoots added to the pleasant scene. We finished our interesting walk with lunch in The Sun.

Aston & Remenham (March):- Joyfully we walked beside trees full of blossom as we made our way to Hambleden Lock,



reached via a long walkway spectacularly crossing the powerful Hambleden weirs. Across the foaming water we admired the attractive Hambleden Mill. A mill is mentioned here in the Domesday Book but the present one dates from 1338, now converted into luxury apartments. As we gazed across the idyllic scene we reflected on the words of Alison Uttley, author of the Little Grey Rabbit series, who described this area as '*The most beautiful place in the whole length of the long Thames Valley*'. We stayed beside the Thames with its various waterfowl to walk through a meadow grazed by geese and patrolled by a heron. Leaving the river at the point where the Aston ferry once ran, we paused to look across to a line of trees full of Red Kites! Every now and then one or two took off to gracefully circle the pasture below with its flock of hens.

On reaching the hamlet of Aston we climbed through fields in which a variety of small birds flitted out from the hedgerows. Next a track took us for some distance, cutting between huge fields on the Greenlands Estate. Eventually we reached the Victorian Gothic Church at Remenham where the churchyard looked pretty with its profusion of blossom trees - a peaceful final resting place for the eccentric 92 year old Caleb Gould, keeper of Hambleden Lock for 59 years in the 1770's.

We took our break upon reaching the banks of the Thames with a lovely view up and down the river along the stretch famed for being the course of the Henley Royal Regatta. In one direction we saw the folly on Temple Island, the start of the 1 mile 550 yard course, and in the other the atmospheric Henley Church which stands not far from Henley Bridge, the end of the course. As if to give us a flavour of the regatta, a few canoes were being put through their paces on the water. Our walk continued beside the picturesque Thames for nearly 2 miles, firstly passing Temple Island then the sumptuous Italianate Mansion of Greenlands. A house on this site was home to Thomas Chaucer, son of the poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. The present house was bought in 1871 by the son of the founder of W.H.Smiths. Now it is the Henley Management College with beautifully tended grounds running down to the water's edge. On reaching Hambleden Lock we retraced our steps over the breathtaking weirs to end our picturesque walk.

Aldermaston (March):- Aldermaston High Street has changed little over the years with some of the buildings dating back to Tudor times. 28 of the 46 listed buildings of Aldermaston are set along the High Street but we began our walk near what is probably the smallest building listed by English Heritage, the 18th century village lock-up! Aldermaston is famous for being the origin of the Williams Pear and also for cricket bats. As we began walking along Fisherman's Lane we heard the distinct whine of the sawmill as locally grown willows were being sawn into approximate bat-shapes before being shipped off to India for finishing off. As we continued we enjoyed the peacefulness of the countryside as our track cut between fields, some grazed by geese. A rabbit popped out onto our path before delving back into the cover of a froth of blackthorn. Eventually we veered off to cross a stream into a field which led us to the calmness of a mill pool. However, round a bend we crossed a bridge over contrasting rushing water which once powered Padworth Mill. A mill is mentioned in the Domesday Book. The present-day mill, looking quite picturesque, lies at the head of the water. We could imagine how the powerful water would have once driven the mill wheel of this one-time flour mill.

Leaving the torrent of water behind we found ourselves once more in the peaceful surroundings of an avenue of majestic horse-chestnut trees, their large leaf-buds beginning to open. We passed two pairs of cottages dated 1876 and 1864. Despite a lapse of 12 years they were built in the same design and we mused over this fact as we



walked behind the new estate of houses built opposite them. We reached Aldermaston Wharf, one of 11 wharfing points along the Kennet & Avon Canal. We filled the sunny garden of the Visitor Centre to drink our coffee, efficiently served by Gary who, with his wife, has made great improvements to the tea shop. It was lovely sitting there in the sunshine but we eventually dragged ourselves away to continue our walk along the canal towpath with its cheerfully painted canal boats. The still water reflected the trees and a cacophony of bird song filled the air. All too soon we had to leave the canal as we headed for the 18th century Old Mill, another former flour mill. We crossed fields and water-filled ditches, some sporting wonderful bulrushes with puffy seed heads, as we headed back to Aldermaston for lunch at the Hinds Head.

Waltham St Lawrence (April):- The name Waltham derives from the Anglo-Saxon for dilapidated homes but as we walked through the village we passed beautiful timber-framed cottages and period houses which were anything but! At the aptly named



Paradise Cottage standing beside a froth of cherry blossom, we left the village to head across wide grassy areas. Catkins dangled merrily from the hedges, new leaves showed themselves on trees, and cheery celandines scrambled over banks - all very spring-like. Eventually along an avenue of large sycamore trees bordering more expanses of green, we spotted some of the buildings of Shottesbrooke Park. Our path delved into a tunnel which brought us out beside the 14th century Church of St John the Baptist, its spire piercing the blue sky. Now in the hands of the Landmark Trust, the key was collected from the nearby office to allow us to look inside this rare example of medieval architecture. Resuming our walk we admired the primroses in the churchyard and the attractive herring-bone brick patterns on the nearby Landmark Trust buildings. Soon we were greeted with the picturesque scene of a large pond with ducks, set within the parkland. We left Shottesbrooke Park beneath an avenue of huge horse-chestnut trees, their leaves bursting out from fat

buds, and followed a pleasant route to reach Shurlock Row. Here we were greeted with the spring scene of swathes of daffodils surrounding the green. We walked past smart houses with gardens full of spring flowers set beyond banks smothered in primroses, then along a bridleway where, beneath fluffy pussy willows, the banks on either side were full of bluebells ready to fill the area with a profusion of blue and scent. The fresh green fronds of a weeping willow provided a canopy for our break then we continued through more delightful countryside along field paths and woodland edges to return to Waltham St Lawrence beside its Church where John Newbury, author of the first book specially for children, is buried.

Nuffield (April):- On the Queen's birthday, and the week in which St George's Day falls, we couldn't have chosen a better day or venue to celebrate all things English! On this glorious sunny day clear views were enjoyed over Oxfordshire countryside towards Wittenham Clumps and beyond as we set off by crossing Huntercombe Golf Course. The 'greens' were contrasted beautifully by areas lit up with gorse bushes and, over the hedge, a field of oil seed rape, the bright yellows of each reflecting our cheerful mood. Soon we were walking through the rape crop to reach a woodland strip where we walked between English bluebells stunningly in bloom. We enjoyed this path for about half a mile then, as we came out into the open, we looked across an expanse of green and pleasant land towards English Farm. Struck by the beauty of it all we broke out into a verse of Jerusalem! Soon we came alongside the lovely Georgian farmhouse in its gorgeous setting with far reaching views. We found a bluebell copse in which to take our break and breath in the distinct sweet smell of the blooms.

We continued in woodland managed by the Woodland Trust, again a picture with bluebells in bloom. Next, fields with panoramic views took us to join a wooded part of the Ridgeway where wood anemones, celandines and violets joined the bluebells to provide a magical tapestry of colour to the woodland floor. Back into a field, butterflies danced amongst the white blossom of a blackthorn hedge as we made our way to Nuffield Church to find the modest grave of



English gent, William Morris, Lord Nuffield. We looked forward to exploring his house later. For now we continued along the Ridgeway, ducking under cherry blossom, to finish beside Nuffield Place through the most stunning English bluebell wood where the sight and scent stopped us in our tracks. Some of us chose to picnic while others headed for the tea room of this former home of Lord Nuffield, now in the hands of the National Trust. Afterwards we were given an informative introduction to this founder of the Morris Motor car. Although a very rich man, he chose to live modestly, giving most of his money away, and once inside the arts & craft house in which Morris lived with his wife for 30 years until his death in 1963, we were greeted with a 1930's time capsule. The garden which Lady Nuffield loved is being restored beautifully by the National Trust with a rose walk, flower borders, cherry walk etc. Beside an area of greenhouses we found an outbuilding housing an Iron Lung of which Morris bought 700 to distribute to hospitals that didn't have one. We were reminded of where his wealth came from as we made our way back to our cars, passing a garage housing a Wolseley motor car. We left feeling we had really seen England at its best!

Springtime Special, Kintbury/Hungerford/Littlecote (April):- We gathered excitedly at Kintbury Wharf in the sunshine ready



for our trip along the Kennet & Avon canal aboard a horse-drawn boat. Freddie, the cross-shire horse that would be our 'engine' for the morning, waited patiently, enjoying the attention from us all. Soon our boat decorated in the traditional Rose & Castle design was ready and we climbed aboard. During our leisurely two and a half hour trip we could sit back and watch the world go by - ducks with several ducklings, the former home of Jane Austen, moored colourful house-boats, and beautiful scenery. We passed through four locks adorned with traditional black & white gates. At each of these we could leave



the boat if we wished, enabling us to watch our boat rise up on the gushing water. The sunny day allowed wonderful reflections of the passing scenery onto the still surface of the canal, and as we approached each attractive stone arched bridge, the reflection completed a perfect circle. We ordered coffee, and later tucked into our picnics, all the while appreciating the beauty of our surroundings along this feat of engineering.

Eventually we arrived at Hungerford Wharf which would have been a busy place, loading and unloading goods from canal barges - so important to Hungerford's development. We left Freddie and our crew to have a well-earned rest while we began our heritage-filled walk. Hungerford has a timeless quality that is essentially very English and we set off to explore not only its streetscape containing some of Hungerford's 125 listed buildings, but also some of its hidden gems. Passing through The Croft, a pleasant quiet green away from the bustle of the High Street, we found the Grade 11 listed St Lawrence Church, accessed via a Tumble Stile, one of very few left in the country. This route took us past the gravestone of James Dean, a coachman who worked the Bath Road through Hungerford during the important coaching period. However, the importance of the canal to Hungerford's further development was highlighted when we noted that the Church was built of Bath Stone which would have been shipped down the nearby canal all the way from Bath. We took a brief look inside the Church with its 15th century font, fine stain-glass, and memorials to those who died in the wars and at the hands of Michael Ryan during the 'Hungerford Massacre'.

We crossed the canal via a swing bridge to enter Hungerford Marsh, then crossed the River Dun to find Freemans Marsh. This Nature Reserve has recorded the presence of 120 bird species, some quite rare in the South of England. Indeed, it was full of bird song as we cut between rushes to find a grassy expanse beside the clear river where clumps of marsh marigolds grow. Back beside the canal we walked along the towpath to soon pass Hungerford Lock. Looking across we could see the stone house which would have been used as a storage house for the wharf. We continued under Hungerford Bridge, noting the wide grooves in its sides made by years of rubbing by the barge-horses' ropes.

We made our way out of town to Eddington, now an extension of Hungerford but once a village in its own right. We walked with the wide River Kennet on our left and a stream on our right. In both we spotted many trout in the clear shallow water. Soon, ahead of us we saw the fine Georgian Eddington Mill, now a private house in an idyllic setting. On through the village we acknowledged more of its heritage - the door set into the corner of a house, once the 'corner shop', the VR postbox on the wall of the former post office, and the building which housed the former bakery. In the past the village also had its own foundry, blacksmiths, and several inns, now converted to pretty housing.

After our interesting walk of discovery we found our coach and soon were sweeping down the long drive towards the impressive Littlecote House. This beautiful Grade 1 listed mansion is set in 113 acres of rolling parkland and landscape gardens. Met from our coach, we were guided through the magnificent 17th century walled garden into the Orangery where we were served with either orange juice or a glass of bubbly. Then our knowledgeable guide led us back outside to walk to the hidden treasure in the grounds - the extensive remains of a Roman Villa and a wonderfully preserved Orpheus Mosaic. Fabulous!



Next we were treated to a tour inside the mansion where Henry V111 courted Jane Seymour. When the Great Hall was added this event was recorded in a stain glass window. Also in the Great hall our gaze was directed towards the Cromwellian armoury hanging on the walls. In contrast, the Chinese Drawing Room showed a very feminine touch with beautiful original hand-painted Chinese wallpaper. We all squashed into the Dutch Parlour completely



Painted to show events and attitudes of the time. Originally used as a men's smoking room it featured the inevitable pornography! In the Brick Hall, wall-lined with original Tudor panelling, and having Roman floor tiles, we were told one of many stories of the ghosts said to haunt Littlecote House! We entered the Cromwellian Chapel, originally the Medieval hall where Henry V111 would meet Jane Seymour on one of her visits to her grandparents who owned Littlecote at the time. Much later Parliamentarians needed a chapel so the hall was converted to what we saw today, including the uncomfortable pews! Climbing up to access the balcony we could see the chapel from above. We continued into the haunted landing and bedroom with its gruesome tale of baby murder at the hands of the then owner, wild William Darrel. Darrel built the Long Gallery from

where we had a good view across agricultural land. We were told that this view was once of woodland, planted with Windsor Forest oaks. Ann Boleyn granted ten of these to build the Jerusalem Staircase and when we walked down these stairs we realised the wood itself was at least 1,000 years old. After our heritage-fuelled tour we ended our lovely day with a sumptuous cream tea.