

**EWELME (May 15):-** Our walk in the gorgeous village of Ewelme satisfied our 2015 theme being so full of Heritage! Cottage names along the village street revealed much of its past. We walked beside the Watercress Beds, looking forward to a tour later, to reach the ancient complex made up of the School, Almshouses, Cloisters and Parish Church, all established in 1437 by William de la Pole and his wife, Alice, the granddaughter of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer. The school claims to be the oldest school building in England while the Almshouses are the oldest brick buildings known to exist in England. Entering the Church we soaked up more Heritage with the impressive tombs of Chaucer and Alice, wall paintings, original floor tiles and the striking tiered top to the font. Leaving the village we headed out into the lovely countryside surrounding it. Cow parsley separated us from buttercup meadows then across crop fields our view stretched to Wittenham Clumps. Skylarks sang from above and hawthorn bushes broke out into white blossom to join in with celebrating 'May'. Pigs routed happily in their field as we made our way back to the village to lunch in the Shepherds Hut. Afterwards we were met by two volunteers of the Chiltern Society who led us on an interesting and informative tour of the Watercress Beds now managed as a Nature Reserve. We finished with a short film about Watercress production whilst enjoying a cup of tea and celebrating our 16th birthday with a slice of birthday cake!

**Bucklebury (May 15):-** Bucklebury is one of the oldest estates in the county and soon we were walking beside its Manor House with the 15th century dovecote. The glories of the Pang Valley lay ahead and we took a path through the middle of a field of barley which reached the top of our heads! We crossed a bridge over the River Pang, and its clear water lazily flowing over its gravel bed proved a friendly companion as it twisted and turned beside our path. Across it lay a meadow grazed by sheep with young lambs, and above the skylarks, as if in celebration of the beautiful scene, burst into song. After several more green fields



we were grateful for a shady tree-lined path with bluebells, stitchwort and yellow archangels. The strip of trees became a wood and here the bluebells formed a beautiful blue haze and, now and then, rhododendrons added more blue to the scene with their flowers. On reaching the Pot Kiln we relaxed in the sunny garden overlooking cows in a buttercup meadow which brought back memories of a childhood rhyme! The last part of the walk took us through trees flaunting fresh green leaves to emerge at the top of the most wonderful green valley. We swept down through the middle of it to become totally immersed in its beauty.

Back in Bucklebury Village we entered the churchyard where gravestones peeped out from amongst a white froth of cow parsley and oxeye daisies. Once through the Norman doorway we explored inside the Church finding kneelers embroidered to reflect the countryside and wildlife of the area, as are the stunning stain glass windows. We even managed to find the fly cleverly worked into the design of the sundial window to remind everyone that 'time flies', although here in these wonderful surroundings we were content to just stand and stare!

**Birthday Trip to Alresford (May 15):-** We continued our birthday celebrations with a trip to Alresford. After coffee in a former coaching inn we set out on a walk to explore this lovely Georgian town. Rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1689 the town remains in the basic T-shape created in the 12th century. Buildings of particular interest were duly noted along East and Broad Street before a pause beside the Old Alresford Pond. Originally designed to produce a good head of water to drive the town's many mills it is now a haven for wildfowl and otters. Along Mill Hill stand many fine older properties which survived the fire. Names such as Tanyard Barns and The Old Tannery betrayed this area's tanning Heritage. Beside the River Arle we found Town Mill with a cascade of water flowing beside this now converted corn mill while further along the river we reached Arle Mill, an active corn mill from the 13th century until its conversion in the 20th. Here we walked beside Watercress Beds thriving in the clear chalk streams which thread through the town. Its production brought much prosperity and Alresford remains to this day the Nation's Capital of Watercress.

After a break in the Memorial Gardens we continued beside the trout-filled river to reach the picturesque thatched Fulling Mill straddling the water. Alresford means 'the ford over the river where the alder tree grows' and eventually we reached the one-time position of the ford to walk beneath the riverside alder trees. A male swan anxiously guarded its partner sitting on their nest. More trout and a family of ducklings were spotted as we continued to Eel House, built in the 1820's for trapping eels as they made their migration along the river. We gained lovely views across the lakes of the Arle Valley Fishery and up to Arlebury House before heading back to town along 'probably one of the most pleasant approaches to any town in England'. After a picnic in the sunny park we walked along West Street to complete the 'T' and headed for the station, home of the Watercress Line. Soon we were being pulled on a 10 mile journey by a wonderful Heritage steam train. Comfortably seated in our carriage we could sit back and relax watching the lovely Hampshire countryside go by. All too soon we arrived in Alton where our coach was waiting to transport us to Selborne for the next part of our day - a visit to the Heritage Gem which is the former home of Gilbert White.



After an introductory talk we were free to explore. This pioneering 18th century naturalist recorded his observations in his world-famous book, *The Natural History of Selborne*, and we could see the original handwritten manuscript. It is claimed that White got us all birdwatching and we had fun with an interactive display, trying to identify birdsong.

The house is also home to the Oates Collection which commemorates the exploits of Captain Lawrence Oates and his Uncle, Frank Oates who was a remarkable Victorian explorer travelling widely in Africa and America. Collections from his travels are displayed including birds, animals and African weapons. Captain Oates accompanied Scott to the South Pole and relics of the ill-fated expedition were displayed including food rations, clothing and the expedition sledge. A short film taken at the time gave an insight into the tough conditions they faced. Scott could be seen writing his diary and poignantly this was on display recording Oates final words, 'I am just going outside and may be some time'.

The house sits in 30 acres and we enjoyed exploring this wonderful space in which White studied the wildlife. A keen gardener, his detailed drawings have helped with the recreation of the garden as it was in his day - the Six Quarters full of flowers, Herb Garden, Pond full of newts, Hot Bed growing melons, and the cutting beds. Along a cow parsley path in the orchard we spotted Raymond Burgh being filmed for Channel 4 to be televised later this year. The highlight for most of us, however, was walking along a path mown through a magnificent buttercup meadow along which we found the Wind Pipe seat designed by White to swivel so he could watch the wildlife unnoticed from any direction. After a browse in the shop our day ended in the award-winning tea room with a cream tea.

**Watlington (June 15):-** Within moments of leaving Watlington High Street we were walking through buttercup meadows and along tracks edged with cowparsley with a good view of the triangular white folly cut into the chalk escarpment - the Watlington White Mark. We looked forward to the views from there later, but even down in the valley we gained far-reaching views across fields rippled by the gentle breeze. Eventually we reached the bottom of Watlington Hill and so began the steep ascent to the top. Sheep with lambs amused us on our way, and the further we climbed the more excuse we had to pause to look back over the fabulous view. After a breather at the top we made our way along the escarpment and on into trees of Watlington Park where the last of the bluebells had hung on for us to enjoy. Soon we reached The Fox & Hounds at Christmas Common where we sat in the sunny garden to enjoy coffee. Refreshed we finished the walk by passing sweet donkeys and Highland Cattle on our way to walk along the plateau of Watlington Hill. The red kites put on a fantastic aerial display for us, dipping down the hillside so we could appreciate their lovely colours. Now all that was left was to walk down the hillside beside the White Mark to arrive back into Watlington, exhilarated by our wonderful walk.

**Dorchester (June 15):-** We set out from the 15th century George Inn, one of the oldest coaching inns in the country. We passed interesting old buildings along the High Street and the thatched cottages of Malthouse Lane, once used as a malthouse where barley was prepared for brewing. Leaving the village behind we gained our first view of Wittenham Clumps across glorious fields of barley rippled by the welcome breeze in the strengthening sunshine. Skylarks sang and red kites soared on thermals above as we reached the Dyke Hills, remains of substantial defensive ramparts, to walk beside them. Our path edged with the brash red of wild poppies contrasting with the soft pinks of wild roses, led us to a lovely meadow with a path cut through the long grasses. We reached a bridge over the Thames where since 1984 the World Pooh Stick Championships have been held, attracting 2,000 visitors. Sadly it was decided that the narrow lanes leading to the event are no longer suitable for the amount of people who wish to watch the event so this year the venue was changed. However, the ladies of Purley Pathfinders decided it was up to us to uphold the Heritage of the Championships here so we held a competition of our own!



Alongside Little Wittenham Church we entered Church Meadow, part of the 250 acres of the SSSI Little Wittenham Nature Reserve. Managed for its wild flowers it was a delight to walk through as we approached the foot of the beech-topped Clumps. Today our walk would not be taking us to the top. Instead we walked through Little Wittenham Wood, passing a pond containing an important colony of Great Crested Newts. Field edges eventually took us to Shillingford where we enjoyed coffee in the Hotel with a nice view along the Thames. We continued by crossing the attractive river bridge to join the Thames Path which twisted and turned past fine properties. On reaching the water's edge we were interested to note the flood level marks - the 1947 mark well above our heads!

Sadly the Thames Path leaves the river at this point but it took us past more lovely properties, one with a 50 foot long wisteria. A stretch of main road was endured helped by the pleasant array of wild flowers along the verge - poppies, geraniums, campion, mallow, scabious and ox-eye daisies to name a few. Soon we were crossing a lush meadow to continue back along the riverbank. Now and then a skylark shot up from within the water meadows, betraying the position of its nest perhaps? Butterflies flitted about adding to the enjoyment of this lovely stretch of the Thames Path. Eventually we followed the tributary, River Thame, joining at a point where St Birinus baptised the King of Wessex, and headed towards Dorchester Abbey as numerous pilgrims have done in the past. After lunch in The George many of us took the opportunity to look inside this magnificent building.

**Midgham Park (June 15):-** We gathered in Woolhampton which lies astride three historically significant commercial arteries, The Kennet & Avon Canal, The Great Western Railway and The Bath Road. Our walk would touch all three beginning with a very pleasant walk along the canal. Various colourful canal boats dreamily manoeuvred their way along, passing through the distinct black & white locks. Lush waterside plants grew in profusion, much appreciated by the dainty, jewel-like damselflies and the robust, dark blue dragonflies. Moorhens dabbled amongst the fallen tree blossom which floated on the still surface. Further on the surface was clear, allowing for beautiful reflections of the greenery along its banks as well as comfrey, irises and various frothy umbellifers. A family of Canadian geese floated by with their sweet offspring while across a fishing lake to the side of us we spotted a swan still patiently brooding her eggs in anticipation. Across the canal, up on its hillside, we spotted the distinct spire of Midgham Church and, after leaving the canal, we climbed to have our break in its churchyard amongst foxgloves and rhododendrons.

Next our route cut through Midgham Park on paths through glorious meadows grazed by butterflies, and in one meadow, a herd of young bullocks which came to look at us before turning tail and running away! Midgham House stands grandly across a ha ha, and we left the Park alongside the pretty East Lodge. We made our way back into Woolhampton, crossing the Bath Road and then the Railway to complete the trio. In 1723 a beer shop stood beside the canal, serving the navvies who dug the canal. Since then the Rowbarge has catered for boaters and travellers and it catered very well for us for lunch.

**Goring (June 15):-** The Chiltern Extension took us from Goring to walk above the gardens of lovely properties on our way to Battle Plantation. Here we enjoyed the shade from the trees until emerging beside a paddock containing a menagerie of hens, ducks and horses. The next relief from the sun came in Wroxhall Woods from where we gained splendid views over fields as they dipped away towards the Thames with the Berkshire Hills rising up beyond. Once out of the wood we paused to take in the



wonderful 180 degree view across golden, ripening barley towards the distant Wittenham Clumps. We could have stayed for quite a while soaking up this glorious sight but, moving on, we experienced further delights with a downward path edged with a colourful combination of poppies, thistles, chicory and scabious grazed by numerous butterflies and bees. We took our break with fields tumbling down the hillside beside us. Our eyes focused on the lovely view while our noses breathed in the scent of 'green'. Skylarks serenaded us as we made our way to South Stoke and from this ancient settlement we followed the Ridgeway Path with glimpses of the Thames nearby. We passed the important bird ringing centre at Withymead before reaching Cleeve Lock and the nearby mill, subject of a painting by Turner. Back in Goring we dispersed for lunch in the various eateries on offer.

**Wimbledon Strawberry Walk ( June 15):-** With Murray doing well so far on Centre Court we cheerfully set off, thankfully in the shade of Stanford Wood on this hot day. On reaching Rotten Row we admired its pretty rose-clad cottages before cutting down through a plantation to the Pang Valley below. Always a pleasure to walk here, on this sunny summer's day we had to literally brush the butterflies away as they teemed around us. Marvellous! Highland Cattle with calves and sheep with their lambs watched us with interest from their fields, and as if in admiration of the lovely scene, the leaves of the trees shimmered together as if in a round of applause! We wandered through the lovely village of Stanford Dingley, a delight to both eyes and noses as the roses and honeysuckle joined other scented flowers in the cottage gardens to waft us with a free treatment of aromatherapy! From the unusual Church of St Deny's we struck out through wheat fields dotted with the red of poppies, while



camomile flowered at our feet. We took our break on a bridge over the shallow, gently meandering River Pang where damselflies danced amongst the waterside plants. The River Pang was never far away as we continued through the wonderful Pang Valley to eventually cross the playing fields of Bradfield College. We walked down-wind of a sprinkler, grateful for the occasional water droplets on this hot day. Soon lovely summer meadows led us back to Merryfields PYO farm where we spread out rugs under a shady tree to picnic before heading out with punnets in hand to fill them with soft fruits ripened in the summer sun to take home - but not before we had tasted a few to release that store of sunshine from within.

**Bath Trip (July 15):-** Bath is the only city in the UK to have the whole city designated a World Heritage Site, so a perfect venue for our Heritage Summertime Special! We began with a lovely walk taking in the River Avon, the Kennet & Avon Canal, some of the city's parks and its glorious Georgian architecture crafted out of local, mellow Bath Stone. Along the canal we passed a series of locks known as Widcombe Locks, one of the most attractive series of locks on the K&A. It includes Bath Deep Lock which at 19 feet 5 inches deep is the deepest lock in Britain. From our path we caught glimpses of the city with its distinct Abbey tower and looked forward to exploring there later. When the canal was cut through Sydney Gardens, tunnels and ornamental bridges were put in place to soften the effect for the fashionable of society using the 18th century pleasure gardens. These make this stretch one of the most attractive along the canal. We left the canal to walk through Sydney Gardens where the fashionable gentry would be carried to in their sedan chairs. At the side of the Park, The Sydney Hotel, now the Holburne Museum of Art, is where they would attend various functions and dances. Jane Austen regularly attended and as we left Sydney Gardens we passed her former home in Sydney Place with its commemorative plaque.

Bath is famed for its fabulous architecture and we appreciated this as we walked along Great Pulteney Street, one of the finest Georgian streets in Britain. In Henrietta Park we noticed its Champion trees dating back to the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria for which the park was opened. We took a break in the oasis of peace which is the Sensory Garden where indeed our senses were awakened by sweetly scented flowers and tactile planting around a central pool. The second half of our walk explored more of Bath's stunning architecture as we entered the city via Pulteney Bridge, one of the finest bridges in Britain. Meandering this way and that along some of Bath's nicest thoroughfares we arrived at Queen Square, an enclosed grassy area through which we wandered to pass the obelisk commemorating a visit to Bath by Frederick, Prince of Wales in 1738. John Wood the Elder & his son the Younger are responsible for much of Bath's lovely architecture, including the grade 1 listed houses surrounding the Square. We noted number 13 where Jane Austen stayed for 6 weeks.

In Royal Victoria Park we passed more Champion trees as we headed past the decorative Bandstand to soon sprawl out on the grass below some of Bath's crowning glory of Georgian architecture, The Royal Crescent designed by John Wood the Elder to look like one big mansion in the shape of the moon. After lunch we made our way to The Circus which he designed to look like the sun. The houses of both are amongst the 5,000 listed buildings in Bath. Pedestrianised roads and cobbled streets led us back down into the city, passing the Assembly Rooms where Jane Austen would have attended grand balls



in this heart of fashionable 18th century society. Further on we passed the museum dedicated to her as Bath's most famous resident. Eventually, between columns of Bath stone, we reached the magnificent Bath Abbey.

After a short refreshment break we took a tour of what is at the heart of the World Heritage Site, The Roman Baths. Informative audio guides led us through this awesome place in which we could feel the heat of the water rising from the only hot spring in the UK which fills the ancient spa. As we passed the pool we imagined the Romans bathing here 2,000 years ago, and cabinets full of artefacts gave an insight into their everyday lives. Fabulous! and worthy of its Visitor Award of Excellence! Those who dared went into the Pump Room to sample the water from the fountain, so valued for its healing properties but, I suppose like most medicine, tastes disgusting!

During Free Time there was so much to choose to do in this wonderful city, from open top bus rides, boat trips along the River Avon, all manner of museums to visit and shops to browse. In the oldest house in Bath we ended with a Sally Lunn cream tea before wandering along the River Avon, with its marvellous Horseshoe Falls, to our coach.