

PULEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORT

Distributed with April/May 2012

BELLE:- It is with great sadness that I have to inform you that Belle died recently. Biopsy results meant months of treatment which she wouldn't have liked, and with little chance of recovery we decided it was the best thing to let her go. When I started Pathfinders Belle was just 8 months old and she joined me on virtually all the Pathfinder walks and pre-walks for the first nine years of her life. In her tenth year she walked the Cotswold Way over several months with myself and my husband, so was 'rested' on Pathfinder walk days. Until then she was as much a Pathfinder lady as the rest of us, even to the point of being mentioned as such in one of Marjy's poems! The family miss her terribly but have many happy memories and photographs of our lovely Beardie to treasure.



BELLE enjoying a pre-walk
May2011

New Year Walk (Jan 12):- With Pathfinder walks in 2012 following the theme of Best of British, what better way to start than by walking around one of the many Nature Reserves with which Britain is blessed. It was good to catch up with everyone after the Christmas break as we entered Dinton Pastures alongside the boating club. The water of the Black Swan Lake looked very blue, reflecting the lovely January sky. Our walk took us around the many lakes of the Park, formed as a result of gravel extraction. We found each has its own character and points of interest with varied use such as water sports and fishing, but with most left for wildlife. We crept into a hide to gaze over Lavell's Lake, now a nature reserve due to its importance to overwintering birds, especially waders. Our walk continued in its watery theme as we made our way beside the River Loddon and finally back beside Black Swan Lake. From here we made our way eagerly to The Jolly Farmer for our New Year Celebration Lunch. Afterwards we took time to wander around the pubs mini farm where we were particularly taken with the pot-bellied piglets!

Moulsford (Jan 12):- Our second *Best of British* walk found us climbing towards the Berkshire Downs. A gateway allowed us a breather and a lovely clear view over the Oxfordshire countryside. The breeze had banished any mist so the distant Wittenham Clumps stood out clearly on the horizon. A *Best of British* view! Once inside the Wellbarn Estate, pools of yellow ahead drew us closer to banks of winter aconites at the entrance to a new, grand country house. As we walked beside its grounds we enjoyed views over the lake, tennis court etc. We were pleased to see large areas of recently planted trees, as, no doubt, were the numerous birds around us. While small birds flitted amongst the hedgerows, birds of prey patrolled the sky, and various game birds ran at our feet. We were grateful that the undulations of the Downs protected us from the breeze, but the air moved enough to rustle the remaining bronzed leaves of sweetcorn, now stripped of kernels, no doubt by the pheasants which are bred in this area. Our path took us alongside an enclosure containing several feeders for them. Our rollercoaster route continued as we rose and fell with the contours of the land. A final downhill stretch allowed us a wide view of the glories of the Berkshire and Oxfordshire countryside. An exhilarating end to our lovely walk.

Aldworth (Jan 12):- Despite a damp start it is always a pleasure to walk in Aldworth. We passed the village well, one of the deepest in England. The 14th century Bell pub fitted well into our *Best of British* theme with reviews rating it highly – even to the extent of naming it *One of the best places on the planet!* A regular of the pub was Brian Calvert who piloted the first commercial flight of the amazing Concorde supersonic aeroplane.

Clumps of snowdrops lit our route as we headed for the former home of Poet Laureate, Laurence Binyon. From here our figure of eight walk took us into woodland which protected us from the drizzle, allowing us a very pleasant walk. In several places we even spotted the green shoots of bluebells, unexpected on this early January day. We took our break in Aldworth Church with its wealth of interest including the Aldworth Giants and the Millennium Wall Hanging.

Leaving the Church to walk the second part of our figure of eight, we were delighted to find that the rain had stopped, especially as the second half would be taking us out onto the Downs. Pheasants strutted around the fields beside us while large numbers of rooks circled the sky. Returning to the village it was good to see catkins in the hedgerows and crocuses flowering along the grass verges – welcome signs of spring! However, winter has its advantages as we discovered whilst cosily eating our lunch around the warm fireside in the Four Points!

Hardwick (Jan 12):- With the temperature having plummeted overnight the sun still bravely showed itself in a clear sky and, within minutes of leaving Whitchurch, we felt warm and elated on our winter's day walk. With this being a Jubilee year we were interested to see the bench with its Queen's Silver Jubilee plaque positioned

thoughtfully along the Jubilee Walk. Lovely meadow views stretched away on our right, grazed by the alpaca of



Bozedown Farm, whilst on our left a long line of alpaca ran as they were herded along towards the farm buildings.

After our leisurely walk we now faced a climb up a steep wooded path. At the top we caught our breath whilst hearing the story associated with the house beside us, The Baulk. With its turrets we could easily see how it could be mistaken for a Church from down in the valley, just as rumoured a young, eloping couple had done. Despite the climb, the next part of our walk was through woodland called *Bottom Wood* where bluebell shoots smothered the woodland floor. We passed the bench

placed in memory of Lady Rose of Hardwick House. As we neared the woodland edge we caught glimpses of the Thames far below and we didn't have long to wait before the full glory of *our* part of the Thames was revealed as we passed through a gate out on to the hilltop. Our view stretched from the wind turbine on junction 11 round to Tilehurst water tower on the skyline and Mapledurham Lock in the valley with Purley village between, and on round to the toll bridge at Whitchurch. Scattered between these landmarks we tried to spot our own houses.

After this stunning interlude we descended the hillside to join the bridleway which would lead us back to the start, passing Hardwick House with its Ice Houses on the way. Amongst the trees on the hill we spotted the thatched cottage, once the summer house where visitors to Hardwick House would be taken for grand picnics. It is not known if Queen Elizabeth 1 partook in one of these jaunts, but she did spend a night in Hardwick House!



Local Walk in lieu of Ecchinswell (Feb 12):- With snow covered roads it was felt unsafe to travel to Ecchinswell for our next walk, but several Pathfinders gathered hopefully so the decision was made to walk beside the river to Pangbourne. This proved a lovely way to enjoy the snowy wonderland around us! Before making our way back to Purley via the bridleway we enjoyed a break in the Elephant for coffees and hot chocolates. Well- we deserved it!

Swyncombe (Feb 12):- Our walk began with a long climb which rewarded us with lovely views back down over the green fields around Swyncombe Church and House, and to our side over yet more fields towards the distinctive Witenham Clumps and towers of Didcot. Our route dropped downhill, now in woodland, and once at the bottom we made our way along the valley floor with the glories of *England's green and pleasant land*' all around – surely some of the *Best of British*! We took our break on conveniently fallen tree-trunks before heading back through more stunning scenery to reach Swyncombe Church. Here we soaked up the beauty of the churchyard buried in snowdrops and aconites. No wonder people travel distances to witness this glorious *British* sight!

Woodcote (Feb 12): Walking from Crays Pond into woodland we found the snowdrops within were better than we have seen them before, lighting up the woodland floor with their brave little bells. We emerged opposite a former Chapel from where we joined a bridleway which led us to Woodcote. We walked between the houses with their gardens showing signs of spring. Soon, however, we were back into the countryside as field paths and woodland tracks took us to Elvendon Priory. Elvendon means 'fairy hill' but there were no fairies in sight to help us up the hill beside the Priory, so this was taken slowly instead! Our walk continued into the wonderful woodland of The Great Chalk Wood and eventually we re-emerged at Crays Pond where we found the welcoming White Lion in which to enjoy lunch.

Holies & Lardon Chase (March 12):- Beginning in Goring we walked beneath blossom as we made our way to the bridge which would enable us to cross the Thames from Oxfordshire into Berkshire. We gazed down at the powerful weirs beside us and then enjoyed the pretty cottages of Streatley as we made our way towards the woodland of The Holies. The National Trust own much of the *Best of British*, and these woods are no exception. Primroses lined our paths and bluebell shoots smothered the woodland floor – a promising sight of glories to come! On reaching an area of open grassland we walked beside the yellow of gorse bushes to find the three stone mazes. No one seems to know how they arrived here many, many years ago, but they kept us amused during our break! The second part of our walk was through more National Trust land, Lardon Chase. Here in contrast we were faced with a green hillside with the most wonderful views along the Thames, over the Berkshire Downs and across to the Chilterns. We popped briefly through a gate into Lough Down to extend our view further, so taking in the fabulous Oxfordshire landscape too. To increase our pleasure the reluctant sun decided to come out and shine its warmth upon us. So, it was with a spring in our step that we made our way down the hill and back into Goring where a sign announced it had gained the accolade of *Best of British Village of the Year* in 09/10!