

## PURLEY PATHFINDERS WALK REPORTS

Distributed with June/July 2011 prog

**Hermitage (March '11):-** March is such a lovely month to walk in with the promise of spring much in evidence. Continuing our theme of 'The Arts' we headed for Hermitage, home to D. H. Lawrence between 1917 and 1919. We set out to explore the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty surrounding his home, just as Lawrence had done. A neighbour reported that he would disappear all day, walking for many miles. No doubt the beauty he would soak up during these walks would inspire him and his writings. He loved the countryside and nature, and a walking companion wrote, 'Lawrence made me feel that I had never really seen a wood before'. We crossed several fields, heading for woodland with the intention of viewing it with 'Lawrence eyes'. We were not disappointed for we found hazel catkins, tiny wild daffodils and even a few early primroses just as he described, referring to the scent of the wild flowers as 'a communication direct from the source of creation.' Wow! A powerful observation!

Our route led us to Oare, another place where Lawrence had stayed. We passed the pond, one-time used by monks for the breeding of carp. We walked through fields, and just as described by Lawrence we saw 'the wild country stretching to the round hills of the White Horse in the far distance'. Soon we stood before Chapel Farm Cottage, the home he shared with his German wife, Frieda. We continued in countryside made familiar to us by Lawrence in his novel, 'The Fox'. We reached Grimsbury Castle, a turreted house which lies on the site of an Iron Age Fort. Beyond it are the fields and site of the farmhouse of Grimsbury Farm, aka Bailey Farm where the fictional characters March and Banford raised poultry in the story. As we completed our walk in the sunshine it was lovely to feel we had been able to enjoy the countryside so loved by Lawrence, following not only in his footsteps but those of the wily fox of his novel! It seemed fitting, therefore, that we should end with lunch in The Fox public house!



Chapel Farm Cottage

**Beenham Wolves (March '11):-** It dawned a beautiful, sunny spring day for our walk from Beenham encircling Douai Abbey. With 'The Arts' in mind we learnt that the wonderful acoustics of the Abbey has led to it being used by several artists when recording their music for the production of their CD's. The clear day ensured we enjoyed far-reaching views over the Kennet Valley as we approached the village church of St Mary's. A path down through trees, the woodland floor smothered with the green shoots of bluebells, then a rising path between fields allowed us a good view across to the church from the other side of the valley. A series of squeeze-styles (a good description for some were very narrow!) took us through fields before a pretty display of daffodils tempted us along a tree-lined path to emerge at playing fields. Across the grass stood the Douai Abbey Church from where a small community of Monks continues to hold a ministry. As we neared the end of the playing field the smooth surface of the grass gave way to a rough area disturbed by the digging and scraping of an animal. We soon discovered the culprit when we spotted a newly dug badger sett nearby!

We took our break in the sunny churchyard of St Peter's Church, Upper Woolhampton with time to look inside at the stunning stain-glass windows. Back on the walk we entered more bluebell woods then on beside fields with another good view of Douai Abbey and the gatehouse and tower of the former school founded by the monks in 1903. The school closed in 1999 and all but the Grade 11 listed gatehouse and tower was demolished in 2005 to make way for the resulting housing estate.

Soon we were back in Beenham Village where we headed for The Wolf Conservation Trust. We were greeted with welcome cups of tea and coffee to have with our picnics while we watched and listened to a fascinating presentation about the work of the Trust and about its resident wolves.



Latea

Slides and talk finished, the blinds were raised leaving us blinking in the bright sunshine. Outside we were introduced to the seven wolves currently living at the Trust, including Purley Pathfinder's adopted wolf, Latea, who along with her sister, Lunca, were the first European wolves to be raised in the UK for 500 years. Most of the wolves were eager to have their fur ruffled by members of the Trust having been used to human interaction from even before their eyes opened as cubs. The latest addition, Motomo, however is still learning to trust people, having come from a Wildlife Park where he was only handled for a few weeks after birth. The aim of the Trust is to use him as a stud and, being an extremely handsome fellow, is sure to produce some attractive offspring. Duma was described to us as the perfect ambassador wolf. Being both calm and amenable, as well as beautiful and photogenic has led her to be given roles in various programmes, from Monarch of the Glen to Blue Peter! So, yet another star to celebrate during our 'Year of The

Arts' ! We were thrilled with our time spent at The Wolf Conservation Trust and there was just time to purchase a few souvenirs of our visit before heading home.

**Greenham Common (March '11):-** The expanse of Greenham Common proved a lovely place to begin our walk as, wonderfully reclaimed by nature, it provides excellent habitats for a wide variety of flora and fauna. Passing one of the Common's many ponds we were reminded of this by a notice warning us to keep to the paths in order to avoid disturbing ground nesting birds. Discarding our coats on this warm sunny morning we strode along a straight path, legacy of the one-time runway here, and enjoyed the view stretching to Watership Down on the horizon. A bridleway led us away from the Common and down into the Kennet Valley, crossing first the River Kennet and then the Kennet & Avon Canal. We joined the towpath along the sparkling canal until we reached a lock with its traditional black and white beams. A gate allowed us between glistening lakes and, after rescuing a frog from our path, we walked beneath a froth of blackthorn blossom beside the lake at

Thatcham Discovery Centre. At the Visitor Centre we took advantage of the lovely day to take our awaiting coffee outside so that we could watch all the activity on the lake. Coffee finished, we somehow managed to drag ourselves away from this pleasant spot and headed for the Thatcham Reed Beds. Walking between the swaying reeds was very special and we felt lucky to have access to this area, one of the largest stands of reeds in the country. Our varied walk ended with a climb through the largest woodland Nature Reserve in Berkshire, Bowdown Wood, where green shoots promised a good show of bluebells.

**Springtime Trip to Worcester (April '11):-** With the early morning sun already shining strongly, a happy bunch of ladies boarded the coach for the Springtime Special. It was to be spent in Worcestershire, taking in as many of the county's gems as possible in a day! Our walk was to be around the delightful village of Eckington but to set us up for the day we began in it's lovely old Inn with morning coffee and biscuits. From the village we soon reached the banks of the River Avon where it is spanned by Eckington Bridge, subject of a poem by Quiller-Couch who also wrote the preface to the first ever Oxford Book of English Verse – a good start to our '*Arts*' themed trip! Walking beside the Avon was a joy with views all around to the hills of Bredon, Malvern and the Cotswolds. Pears have long been associated with Worcester and are featured on the city's Coat of Arms. It was nice, therefore, to pass a pear tree heavy with blossom. Eventually numerous boats came into view as we approached Strensham Lock. Here we left the riverside to walk back through Eckington with its hoast of thatched and black & white cottages set in pretty spring gardens.

Back on the coach we headed for Broadheath to celebrate the *Art of Music*. Sir Edward Elgar, despite living in several houses in his lifetime, always loved best the cottage in Broadheath in which he was born. After finishing our picnics surrounded by blossom in the orchard we made our way into the Elgar Visitor Centre, opened in 2,000. Here we were shown a short video as an introduction to Elgar, accompanied by his powerful music. Our remaining time was split between the cottage and the visitor centre. As was his wish, his birthplace cottage is now a museum with each room dedicated to a different aspect of his life and achievements. All very interesting. We wandered through the pretty cottage garden, planted as depicted in old paintings. A new addition, however, caught our attention – a life-size bronze sculpture of Elgar relaxing on a bench. We took it in turns to sit beside him, sharing the wonderful view of the Malvern Hills. In the Visitor Centre we followed Elgar's achievements in chronological order, fascinated by displays of photographs, concert programmes, letters and original manuscripts. Headsets gave us the opportunity to listen to more extracts from his wonderful music.



Humming tunes reminiscent of The Last Night of the Proms, we boarded our coach and headed for the city of Worcester. Here we were welcomed into the Royal Worcester Porcelain Factory Museum. We listened spellbound to a 'Behind the Scenes' talk highlighting working conditions at the factory - pre-Health & Safety! We were told of the family atmosphere, and listened to recordings of workers talking about their life at, and love of the factory. The intricate artwork on a selection of porcelain was shown and after being told the age and importance of the items displayed we were rather nervous when they were handed to us to pass around! As we handled a dainty yet surprisingly heavy 17<sup>th</sup> century teapot we were told how the fashion for '*taking tea*' saved the factory as, at the time, Royal Worcester was the only producer of teapots able to withstand boiling water.



After the presentation we were free to explore the galleries housing the world's largest collection of Worcester Porcelain from the 17<sup>th</sup> century through to when the factory closed just two years ago. We were awed by the skill of producing individual hand made and painted items from large platters down to tiny dolls house china, beautiful figurines, contents of vanity cases, scent bottles and even porcelain teeth! Worcester Sauce was not forgotten with its own display case of decorated porcelain. All too soon it was time to leave so with some ladies clutching very special purchases from the gift shop, we walked the short distance to Worcester's magnificent Cathedral. Our route took us through Cathedral Close where stands number 6, rented by Elgar during Three Choirs Festivals, and where years earlier he was taught to play the piano. Unfortunately there was only a short time to look at the splendid interior of the Cathedral but we were drawn to the stain glass window dedicated to Elgar and the amazing west window set in the west front featured with Elgar on the back of £20 notes.

To finish our full day in true Pathfinder style we made our way into the 12<sup>th</sup> century Chapter House to sit alongside walls where art as befitting our theme was provided by ancient wall paintings. With the recent announcement that the *art of taking tea* is making a comeback our thoughts returned to the delicate teapot which had saved Royal Worcester many years ago. As platters of cakes and pots of tea were eagerly demolished it confirmed that the ladies of Purley Pathfinders have got this particular *Art* off to a fine *Tea*!