

The 2009 Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trail

2009 will be remembered as the year in which everything went as well as we could have wished. Starting with judging the correct opening date, then having fine dry weather on most days, but staying cool enough to extend the flowering period of the bluebells. This year they looked spectacular, as did most other spring flowers, notably the white wood anemones which precede the bluebells in Beatons Wood.

The major refurbishment of the catering area was welcomed by all the charities, as it enabled them to deal easily with surges of visitors on busy days, and to have constant hot water for washing up was a facility long overdue.

Visitors came in great numbers, so many coming for the first time on the recommendation of their friends and relations. This means that next year we will be able to reduce the advertising and allow it to grow with its own momentum. At the end of the day our visitor numbers are greatly influenced by the weather, especially at weekends - 'not hot enough to go on the beach, but too hot to stay inside'!

I am particularly delighted at the increasing numbers of visitors many elderly, being brought by friends or relatives who have difficulty in walking. Several for the first time make use of the four easy to use battery powered mobility scooters we have available at no extra charge. This gives the user complete independence and freedom to view the bluebells close up on the Blue Walk. Next year we want to double the number of mobility scooters available and increase the disabled parking spaces by the entrance, to encourage more to come out and enjoy our lovely countryside.

The many comment cards that visitors complete, give us a snapshot of what they have enjoyed and alert us to possible changes to enhance their visit next year. We received many expressions of gratitude for the extra seating erected on the farm walks, so we want to erect additional seats alongside, as that most agree the vantage points chosen most agree are excellent.

The redesigned web site www.bluebellwalk.co.uk proved popular with over 10,000 hits of which nearly 8,000 were unique new visitors, so thank you Tim Church for its design and upkeep. We also completely redesigned both the publicity and walks leaflet which have proved successful, so that is one job less for next year!

The National Farmers Union arranged for their travelling NFU Food & Farming Roadshow to visit us one busy weekend. It's artificial 'cow' that children could 'milk', all part of the stand, was an innovative way to explain the importance of farming to the younger generation.

The comprehensive display with photographs that Vicky Tester arranged in the viewing gallery at Parkwood Farm, outlining the farming history of the Appleton family since moving to Arlington from Nottinghamshire in 1947 was fascinating. I am indebted to Peter Appleton and Andrew Johnston for so willingly offering parts of their farms to be walked over, thus giving many of our visitors a interesting choice of where and what they want to see.

We were delighted to hear that the fourteen charities involved this year, in their various ways raised a record £32,500 over this five week period. Next year one of the charities involved will be the Friends of Park Mead School, which is great news, as in 1972 the first Bluebell Walk was held, solely to raise funds to help Park Mead School install an outside swimming pool.

Anne, Carolyn and I are planning how the 2010 event can be tweaked here and there, from comments gleaned from our visitors and the annual Visit England Quality Assessment Report (VAQAS), to further enhance the experience for next years visitors. No matter how much we plan, it is the weather conditions over that crucial period that finally decides our overall success!

John McCutchan