

The 2017 Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trail

A very successful year, due to virtually perfect weather conditions, in that the very warm weather as we opened encouraged the first bluebells into flower, then it turned cold at night, so as the bluebells emerged they retained their colour and stayed upright, as there was no heavy rain or strong winds. This lack of rain meant no muddy paths and no parking difficulties, so different from last year! All spring flowers fared well, with many visitors commenting on the vibrant blue of the bluebells and the spectacular vistas of firstly the white wood anemones, then the bluebells.

The various improvements were well received, especially the extension to the White Walk, now accessible from the Upper Pond as well as the Lower Pond, plus the surface dressing with road stone of this new path and the River Walk round the Appleton's maize field, made it so much easier for families with push chairs. Enlarging the kitchen in the Bluebell Barn was welcomed by the participating charities, giving them more room in which to work and a separate door to bring in the crockery for the dishwasher. An enlarged image to eight feet by two feet taken by Pete Goldsmith of the sun rising as seen from the Lower Pond last year, created much interest and we have used that iconic image on the stationary items that were sold on the HOPS stand.

Our report of last year mentioned the damage being done to the bluebells by those visitors who made unofficial paths amongst the bluebells to take photographs, not realizing that in the process the bluebell leaves were trodden down, and therefore could not create the reserves they need to flower next year. This year we made metal hoops based on the design we saw in use at Sheffield Park, and used them as soon as we saw new paths being made amongst the bluebells. They had limited success, but often some inconsiderate visitors walked round or over them, which means next year we will try a more effective deterrent!

The internet and social media play an increasingly important role in publicising our event, and we would like to thank Steve Jenkinson for designing our new website www.bluebellwalk.co.uk and to Tim Church for carefully monitoring the various postings that appears on social media and responding when appropriate. In 2015 TripAdvisor awarded us their Certificate of Excellence, then without notice our page was removed as we are not open for at least six months each year. Delighted that we are now again listed due to the persistence of four visitors last year, and to date have now received 45 reviews giving us a five star rating, but one has only given us a three star, saying they could not see why they had to pay to look at bluebells, also it was not relaxing if they had to keep their dog on a lead! We posted an appropriate response!

We had our bi-annual inspection from Visit England under their Visitor Attraction Quality Scheme, which helps to keep us on our toes! Some recommendations will be added to what is a growing list ready for next year!

We work closely with the Appleton Family and their staff and thank them for their continuing support in suggesting improvements to add interest each year, for those visitors who use the six Farm Walks. We were pleased that they again held their Open Farm Event at Parkwood Farm on the May Bank Holiday Monday, so that many of our visitors were able to see demonstrations about the procedures involved and attention to detail, to produce fresh milk every day of the year. Attendance was high with about 600 visitors, many having walked the three miles there and back, even though it was held on one of the few wet days we had!

We should like to thank those special people who work quietly behind the scenes in their various ways, to ensure it runs smoothly and if problems arise they are dealt with quietly and efficiently. We would also like to thank the twenty one participating charities for welcoming our visitors, serving delicious food and keeping everything clean and tidy. Those other charities involved who give much added interest to our visitors were Action for Medical Research providing their second hand book stall, which this year raised a record sum of £2787, Arlington Church with their Plant Stall, Hailsham Old Pavilion Society (HOPS) selling bluebell memorabilia and other items, the RSPB with their usual stand at weekends, plus for the first time the Sussex Wildlife Trust had a presence. All the charities this year raised the total sum of £62,275. When this is added to the monies raised since 1972, then factoring in inflation rates makes a grand total of £966,855, which is now getting that much closer to £1,000,000!

The Bluebell Walk Partnership of John & Carolyn McCutchan and Philippa & Michael Vine