

The 2016 Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trail

Every Bluebell Walk has its own unique challenges and successes, mostly due to weather conditions and 2016 was no exception, but it ended up being the best Bluebell Walk ever in terms of the number of visitors and the amount raised by the participating charities. In January due to a mild winter with virtually no frosts, bluebell leaves started to appear and early daffodils were blooming, which I thought heralded an exceptionally early spring not realizing our winter weather would come in March! I persuaded my partners to bring the start date that had been agreed with the participating charities forward by one week, which meant asking the charities who agreed to cover the last week to kindly change their dates to five weeks earlier, no easy task when volunteers have already agreed to be available on certain dates. We should particularly like to thank The Rotary Club of Seaford who helped us out, by covering two days of that first week. It was particularly galling to those four charities that changed their dates; as if we had retained the closing date of 15 May we could still have had large number of visitors, as the bluebells remained good that week, so different to the lack of blue in that first week!

Needless to say car parking due to such a wet winter caused many problems, but our trusty road verge again came to the rescue for the beginning of April, as it did in that wet spring of 2012. We should like to thank the Hailsham Lions and Cancer Research UK as over their weekends the car park had to be opened, just to cope with the volume of cars, but they provided sufficient marshals so minimising the number of cars that had to be pulled out with a tractor! We were fortunate that from the 18th April the weather started warming up and with the drying winds we were able with help from a vibrating roller and many tons of stone soon had the car park field fit for purpose for the remainder of the season. During those first weeks of constant cold and wet weather, parts of the Blue Walk around Beatons Wood often had to have a dressing of shingle to minimize any muddy areas, so those visitors using mobility scooters could do so without any worry of getting stuck.

Sadly we noticed this year, that more unofficial paths were made into the densely populated swathes of bluebells, especially when there appeared to be a suitable fallen tree for a child or colleague sit on for 'that perfect photo'. We did put notices with limited success, explaining that once bluebells are trodden down they may take years to recover. This summer we will scatter bluebell seeds over these areas and they will then have to be roped off, if we are to maintain those blue vistas that our visitors come to enjoy. The management of the 23 acres of Beatons Wood has to be done sensitively with the aim to improve the visual impact of the bluebells and white wood anemones. It takes many forms, so the removal last year of much of the brambles and weed grasses had a beneficial effect this year, and the recent coppicing of areas, has allowed more light on to the woodland floor which will re-invigorate the bluebells and anemones for the next few years.

Last year we were delighted to receive the VisitEngland 2015 accolade 'Hidden Gem', apparently the only one awarded in the South East. Having that success under our belt, we have now put the Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trail forward to Tourism South East, to their annual 'Beautiful South Awards for Excellence' under the 'Tourism Event of the Year' category, and the winners will be announced in the autumn.

The internet plays an increasing important role in where the public look for information, so Tim Church completely re-designed our website www.bluebellwalk.co.uk to make it easy to view and navigate on whatever device is used. This season we started a weekly 'blog' and with Tim's help are making more use of Twitter and Facebook, but it is all a time consuming business!

Our thanks go to the Appleton Family and their staff for their continuing support by hosting the Farm Trail element over their land, and providing access for the six different farm walks, each unique in their own way giving added interest to our visitors. May Bank Holiday Monday they held an Open Farm Event at Parkwood and with the support of Arla Milk and Tesco there were demonstrations to explain the story of how fresh milk is produced and the work farmers have to do before it is bottled. It created much interest especially with the young families, even though the weather was not ideal also it meant a three mile walk there and back to that farm!

We should like to thank those 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 should like to thank the participating charities for welcoming our visitors, serving delicious food and keeping everything clean and tidy, also Action for Medical Research in providing the second hand book stall, Arlington Church with their Plant Stall and HOPS for selling bluebell memorabilia and of course the ice creams. All the charities this year raised a combined total of £57,385, which added to the monies raised since 1972 (in today's value) makes a grand total of £888,338.

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