

The 2015 Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trail

Each Bluebell Walk season brings its own challenges and 2015 was no exception! Deciding the dates to open in December is important, so assisting the charities involved to ensure that their volunteers do not make holiday commitments over their chosen duty days, but what a gamble in not knowing whether we are to expect an early or late spring. This year spring was very late, which meant for the first time ever our ewes and lambs were turned out from the lambing pens into the fields after the Bluebell Walk had started, as the grass was so slow in growing! The large water main burst on the A22 over the 9/10 May and subsequent closure of the A22 caused access problems for visitors, plus lack of water pressure here caused many difficulties especially with the toilets!

Every Friday we update www.bluebellwalk.co.uk to inform the public as to the state of the bluebells, and for the opening one we could only report that 16 bluebells were seen in Beatons Wood over the first week of being open! This meant the charities covering the first 10 days had limited visitors, even though it was sunny but not at all warm. The weather conditions suited all spring flowers, so the white wood anemones gave us such a long lasting spectacular display before the bluebells dominated the wood floor and they too flourished, so much so we extended the closing date, the opposite to last year when we had to bring the opening date forward, so by the closing date bluebells had virtually disappeared.

Every year we have difficulty in ensuring our visitors do not get lost on the Farm Walks in spite of being given a detailed map, so we thought that by providing large black and white numbers at every one of the 32 gates available would suffice, but again we had complaints!

There is much added interest with the many descriptive notices along these 6 Farm Walks over Parkwood and Primrose Farms, so are grateful to the Appleton Family and their staff for making it all possible, especially the ability to view the milking process every afternoon.

We had been pleased with the reviews (well most of them!) we were receiving for TripAdvisor, and were diligently replying to them, so delighted to find we were awarded a Certificate of Excellence. This was short lived, as without any notification found our page had been removed. It is not easy to get an answer from a multinational company based in the USA, but eventually spoke to a person who said we did not qualify to be listed as an Attraction on their site, as we are not open for 6 months or more each year, and there is no appeals procedure!

This May Bank Holiday Monday was a warm sunny day, but not hot enough to go on the beach, yet too hot to stay indoors, meant we had a record of over 3000 visitors on that one day! The routine that the Arlington Village organizers had evolved did not buckle as they and all their helpers working both in and out of the Bluebell Barn rose to the challenge, so by sheer hard work and enthusiasm coped with all those visitors. We thank everyone for that extraordinary effort. Incidentally when walking round Beatons Wood later that evening, I only found 3 small pieces of litter, which reflects on how our visitors appreciate our lovely countryside.

We had a visit from the assessor of VisitEngland who was supportive of what we offer, but still after 43 years there are more small improvements needed ready for 2016, but as our rating was high enough, we have been nominated for a VisitEngland 'Hidden Gem' accolade, and the winners will be announced later in the year.

We are slowly increasing the number of mobility scooters to help our visitors with walking problems so they can see the bluebells independently. This year we had eleven of them available, which we supply free of charge, with over 350 visitors taking advantage of this facility. We would like to offer more mobility scooters, so if anyone knows of one that is surplus to requirements, we are sure more visitors would make use of it over the years to come.

Nearly £42,000 was raised by the 17 charities involved this year, which makes the total raised since 1972 by 67 local charities to over half a million pounds, bearing in mind that we did not open in 2001 due to the foot & mouth epidemic that closed footpaths throughout the countryside. When converted to present day values this total is over £800,000!

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