

## **The 2013 Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trail**

We thought after coping with the challenges of last year we would be rewarded this year with a relatively easy season to manage, never expecting we would have to contend with the coldest and latest spring for 50 years! The only benefit was that the primroses, wood anemones and bluebells, when they eventually emerged, were the best displays we have seen for many years.

2013 is a significant year in the history of the Bluebell Walk, as Carolyn and I created a partnership with our daughter Philippa and her husband Michael Vine to ensure the continuation of the Arlington Bluebell Walk for the future. It is an exciting development, as can be seen with how they have transformed the Bluebell Barn into a congenial place for our visitors to sit and have their refreshments. The new entrance means that the very large sliding door stays shut, reducing the congestion in the corner where people used to come in and exit, whilst negotiating that awkward step, plus it eliminates the wind and rain that used to create havoc in inclement weather. The charities welcomed the many improvements to assist their catering function and to have the use of a dishwasher with ample room to make sandwiches was a great bonus.

The new Gate House at the start of the Millennium Walk was appreciated by our visitors, as this meant they could have their cup of coffee and cake, look around the Church Plant Stall, peruse the small shop managed by Hailsham Old Pavilion volunteers or visit the Action for Medical Research Book Stall, without first having had to buy a ticket to visit the Bluebell Walk. The attractive Gate House designed for two persons to operate the tills in comfort, worked out very well as it gave good visibility to the Information Kiosk. This was the base for the new post that we called a 'Meeter and Greeter', as their role was to welcome our visitors, answer their innumerable queries and also to sign out the 10 mobility scooters, which this year were used over 300 times.

Last year John Watson a member of the Hailsham Photographic Society made a 5 minute video of the Bluebell Walk and with Carolyn giving the commentary, won two first prizes at the Society's 2013 Colour Show. John then produced it in a format, so that in the Animal Barn it was shown continuously on a screen, plus the winning photos of last year's Photographic Competition, making yet another innovation for our visitors.

The 17 charities involved this year made £30715 from their involvement, whilst Action for Medical Research took £1995 in donations for the splendid supply of secondhand books, Arlington Church £2088 on their Plant Stall and HOPS £1700 running the Shop, making a grand total of £36453.

Looking back it was difficult for the first two weeks, as even the wood anemones were not in flower, and we experienced so many days of cold winds. We extended the published finishing date by one additional week, as the bluebells still looked great, allowing us to finish on a high with a sunny Spring Bank Holiday, even so total visitor numbers were low, but thank goodness not as bad as last year!

Thanks go to the Appleton family for allowing access to their land for many of the walks, especially the one that allows visitors to view the milking at Parkwood Farm, which is always very popular. The fields and woodland that the Johnston family owned, is being split up and sold again, and it is this land over which The River and Wilbees Wood walks traverse. This means that we will have to plan a different route for at least one of these walks, ready for next year.

Planning now starts for 2014, but no matter how much thought goes into this, nothing changes the fact that success relies so much on the weather, especially at weekends!

John & Carolyn McCutchan, Philippa & Michael Vine.