

A Report on the 2019 Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trails

What a great season it has been, due to the warmest February on record, meant that there were plenty of bluebells when we opened, then we had quite a cold spell midway, which was sufficient to hold the bluebells at the bottom of Beatons Wood where it faces north, so visitors could still see a good show of bluebells on our last weekend. We were open for two days longer, so we were able to add two new charities to our list, namely the Cancer Fund for Children based in Polegate and Eastbourne Salvation Army. This year there were no problems with the car park getting too wet, as virtually every day we were open was dry and often sunny, except for one day when it rained for most of the day! We were fortunate that not only the Easter Weekend came whilst we were open, but it was also one of the hottest on record, so our total attendance must have exceeded 25,000 visitors. This year we encouraged visitors to come and support their charity, without feeling obliged to pay to go on the Bluebell Walk & Farm Trails through the Gate House, where numbers can be recorded.

This year we celebrated having raised £1,000,000 for local charities. BBC One interviewed Philippa & myself for the South East Regional News, Philippa spoke to both Radio Uckfield and Radio Sussex, then David Dimbleby spent a morning here, which was picked up by The Mail Online and we have a link to their article on the Home Page of www.bluebellwalk.co.uk. This added publicity with the good weather, must have been major factors to boost visitor numbers, plus importantly having an ever growing online presence via Facebook, Instagram, Google and Twitter, which with our website is so efficiently managed by Tim Church. TripAdvisor have just told us that we have again received their Certificate of Excellence, due to the large number of 5* reviews from this year's visitors.

It is remarkable that what started as a gentle walk one weekend in 1972 to raise funds for Park Mead School, by viewing that bluebells in Beatons Wood, has developed. This year 26 local charities involved benefited by £74,821, so our small village of Arlington is now well known for its Bluebells, not just the Speedway! The format of incorporating the Farm Walks with the Bluebell Walk thanks to the Appleton Family, coupled with the delicious food and drink supplied by the different charities plus their interesting stands, gives our visitors a great and unique day out.

Our aim is to run the Arlington Bluebell Walk & Farm Trails at ever-improving high standards, which is essential as we are in competition with all the other attractions in the South East, so for this to be recognized we keep entering various competitions with varying degrees of success. This year we are waiting to hear what outcome, if any from the following competitions entered: South East England 2019 Small and Farm Woodland Award sponsored by the Forest Stewardship Council, Small Visitor Attraction of the Year – Beautiful South run by Tourism South East, and Best Rural Diversification Project run by The Rural Business Awards. This year we had our bi-annual visit from Visit England in which they carry out an in depth assessment of what we offer the public, and as we scored 81% we can retain our accreditation of VisitEngland Quality Assured Visitor Attraction.

Planning for 2020 has started and we are going to make major changes to the signage of the Farm Walks, as we still have reports that some visitors are confused when traversing those six Walks! We want to make improvements to the Bluebell Barn for both our visitors and charities, in addition to the myriad of small changes we have listed, which will all be revealed when you visit us next year!

John McCutchan on behalf of the Bluebell Walk Partnership