

April 2015 Walk - A walk through ancient woodland - where we saw pools of Bluebells, and by the lakes of Harrold-Odell Country Park.

A yellow bird flew over us as we followed the bridleway out of Harrold-Odell Country Park. From shimmering lakes came the throaty calls of geese, glimpsed through alder, ash and coppiced willow. Beneath these lakes on clay beds, sleep the fossil bones of Jurassic creatures, whose coarse gravel blankets had been roughly stripped and later replaced with these cold silk waters.



Along Horsefair Lane, we trotted merrily into Odell. In 1086, this village was once known as 'Wadehelle' not because it was necessary to wade through floodwaters here (though that was often the case) but because of the woad that grew on the nearby prominence. A plant highly treasured for its blue dye. As well as for dyeing textiles, our ancestors painted their bodies with it; and also in those strange times, dissolved some in pure alcohol, when it then became 'magicians' ink'; much favoured by necromancers whenever they wrote out their spells.



We did not hear any incantations from blue-painted Odellians as we passed their lichen-covered cottages. Any murmurings we may have heard being simply a correction; because of course 'O-dell', should be pronounced, 'OH-dl', to rhyme with 'yodel'. A remnant left in intonation as to the origin of its name

At 'The Bell', a curious dog was friendly. Which was just as well, for according to the parish records, a shoemaker by the name of Tom Bailey, died here, "occasion'd by ye bite of a mad dog".

Avoiding the dog, we passed a triangular shaped green, once alive with the bustle of a market, and at Whitsun, its horse fair. At this fair, until the nineteenth century, any cottager could sell their homemade beer without a licence, alongside leatherwork and pillow lace.



On the High Street, we passed 'Old Mrs Ashton's' home who once recounted working as a servant at the 'big house' at a time when there were 'oil-lamps and candles', and 'a whole sheep hanging in the cellar'. A black, 'smoky apparition' on several occasions also terrified her.

Soon we stood outside the site of her former employment. It had cost £5 to build the castle here in 1086, right on top of the woad plants! We can imagine how the locals felt, from the buttressed walls that dominate this corner of the road. These barons, also stole the name of the village as their own, before sinking an eighty-foot well through the rock. King John once drank from its sparkling waters and thereafter, the well bore his name.

By the 16th century, 'Great Woodhull Castle', was nothing more than 'straunge Ruins', and a 'big house' was built in its place. This later burnt down in 1931. Before its lost to the flames, its owner discovered subterranean passageways; and after placing pressure on one of the oak panels, a secret door, which led to a 'small, sparsely furnished room'. Although, he never fully explored the cellars because of their 'foul air'. Perhaps that was the stench of rotting woad.

Back in the castle's heyday, King John's retinue, with all the pageantry of the day streamed out through its gates. The horses champing and foaming at the bit as their 'prancing shook the ground'. The king's dark red hair making him notable amongst them, as he rode on his white horse. The plumes, worn by the knights dancing in the wind; or so the ballad says; as they rode their 'fiery chargers as swift as the deer they followed'.

Our own pageantry was just as colourful as we crossed the road. Our Robin stuck a feather in his hat; whilst the 'mounts' that awaited us could not have been more splendid.



H.E. Bates, when asked, "What makes a good wood?" replied, "There must be all kinds of trees, all kinds of flowers anda harmonious pooling of life".

Odell's Great Wood is such a place, having once being part of a dense forest stretching all the way to the Fens. What remains is in the shape of a wheel, which we entered along one of its spokes. Shy violets and pale primroses, lay beneath bewitching blackthorn blossom adding to the magic. In the depths, lay a chaos of wind-strewn branches, but beneath this untidiness, ready to spill like ink, were pools of bluebells. We were hushed, as if we had entered a church, until bangs from Santa Pod unsettled us.

After negotiating a very high stile, we then crossed open fields, to reach Church Lane. Here a 17th century cottage caught our eye, and how we yodelled when we saw the, 'For Sale' board tucked within the hedge. Somebody joked we could club together to buy it. Perhaps so, it is only £250,000 shy of a million.

Then the fifteen century, All Saints Church, distracted us with its Gothic crocketed pinnacles. Eileen told us its western doorway had been marked by the Devil when he shook the tower in a paroxysm of rage. Perhaps he too, like us, had found the church door locked.

The last Squire Alston (of the 'big house') told his daughter Temperance, the family's version of the tale. Recounting how his ancestor the wicked Sir Rowland Alston had once bricked up a woman and child within the walls of the 'big house'. When the officials came to arrest him there had been a chase into the woods, during which Sir Rowland fell into a pond and there drowned. His body was removed to the church, but then the devil arrived to claim his own and in the ensuing struggle, the marks were left on the wall. Sadly, they have since vanished, having been repaired during maintenance work.



Odell was still "half asleep," as H.E. Bates described it, as we re-entered the park and passed beautiful wooden carvings. A dark cormorant flapped towards the river in search of food; but for many of us, there was a hot dinner awaiting our presence at 'The Oakley Arms'.



With many thanks to Eileen, and our backmarker Ruth, for a fascinating walk.