**Downe South, Tuesday 11th June 2016**

13 walkers, 19 miles – leader Peter Aylmer

With National Trust woodlands, any number of nature reserves, a bijou village at lunch time and the haunts of Charles Darwin as a centre piece, there was always going to be plenty of interest as we explored London's south-eastern outer reaches, but it just so happened that a very 21st century display totally stole the show.

From Chislehurst station (reached alas by rail replacement bus service), we headed up into Petts Wood, the ancient woodland rather than the commuter suburb of the same name. We passed a memorial to Francis Edlmann who in 1927 purchased the wood in order to stop it being turned into yet more housing. From here the London Loop took us through Farnborough and its pretty churchyard to the High Elms country park – alas no high elms these days. Leaving the Loop, we reached the giddy height of over 550ft before dropping into a downland hanger. On the hanger's upslope we crossed Downe Bank, where Darwin carried out much of the research which led to his theory of evolution.

Over lunch at the Queen's Head in Downe, a rumble of thunder showed how unstable the weather was, but though we had an hour of two of afternoon rain, it never reached torrential proportions. We passed Darwin's home Down House and even had a quick peep into his back garden plus a spin on his 'thinking walk' before contouring round above the West Kent golf club, perhaps the only golf club whose rough is a London Wildlife Trust reserve. It was here we saw Spitfires and a B17 performing above the nearby Biggin Hill airfield. But better was to come.

As we crossed a dripping wet cornfield, the Red Arrows team set off for their part in Biggin Hill's air show. We soon realised the cornfield was set aside as their crash space - warning signs and tape were in place beside the right-of-way we were following. For half an hour the Arrows wheeled, soared and gyrated in the skies immediately above us – fair to say we didn't rush this stretch! We certainly had a better view than those on the airfield itself, and it was quite the most remarkable half-hour for any LDWA walk.

Beyond Leaves Green and a down-and-up through another downland jewel, it was clear just how much time we'd lost while admiring the aeronautics. We saved a mile at the end by diverting north through Frylands Wood instead of the planned route through Frith Wood, though both are equally delightful, before one last rise (2,000ft of ascent over the day) up Hutchinson's Bank, a hotspot for rare orchids. That left one last wildlife sighting to be made, the New Addington gorilla. It's a wood carving near the tram stop, but one or two might have been worried just for a moment.

Photographs by Peter Aylmer, Dalbir and Steve Lannon