

NEWSLETTER

AUTUMN 2014

ICKNIELD WAY ASSOCIATION

AGM 2014

Balsham south-east of Cambridge Saturday 11th October

Meet at Balsham Village Hall
(Church Institute), close to
parish church, for a walk along
the Icknield Way starting at
10.30am.
Re-convene at the hall at 2pm
for the meeting

In 2014, the IWA will be holding its thirtieth AGM in Balsham which represents a special place along the Icknield Way. This is where on 11th September 1992, the Icknield Way Long Distance Path was officially launched as a regional route. The installation of a stone carved with the hand-axe on the village green marks the spot where riders and walkers gathered to celebrate this event, so it is not before time that our organisation gathers at Balsham once again to walk the pleasant paths and tracks of the parish, including of course the Icknield Way!



Sir John Johnstone unveils the Icknield Way stone at Balsham

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In this issue of our newsletter, you will find plenty of interest. I am especially grateful to Samantha Gay of the Suffolk Wildlife Trust for providing her update on all the work happening to restore Knettishall Heath to its former glory as one of Brecklands most important heathlands. We wish her every success in her five-year project on this reserve at the end of our Icknield Way path.

Our AGM at Balsham gives me an excuse to find out more about two spectacular local historic earthworks linked together by our path. I am not entirely sure whether our AGM walk will take you along either of these features but if there is time at the end of your day in Icknield Way country, you could at the very least go and take a look at them and maybe walk a few yards along the Dyke before setting off home.

And living where I do in Ashwell, seeing a black squirrel has become a regular thing in recent years. They have always been easy to spot in Letchworth but it now seems that these grey squirrel variants have found a way across the arable prairies to my own locality. Like them or not, they are a feature of the Icknield Way!

Do come along to the AGM—it is always a good day, with an opportunity for fresh air and exercise in attractive countryside, time to catch up with news and developments and, perhaps, an excuse to explore new territory along the Way.

Chris James

BALSHAM—a background note

Balsham is a large parish lying 9 miles to the south-east of Cambridge and extending to 1,831 hectares. The land rises from the A11 on the north-west edge of the parish through undulating farmland to a high point of 112m close to the southern boundary.

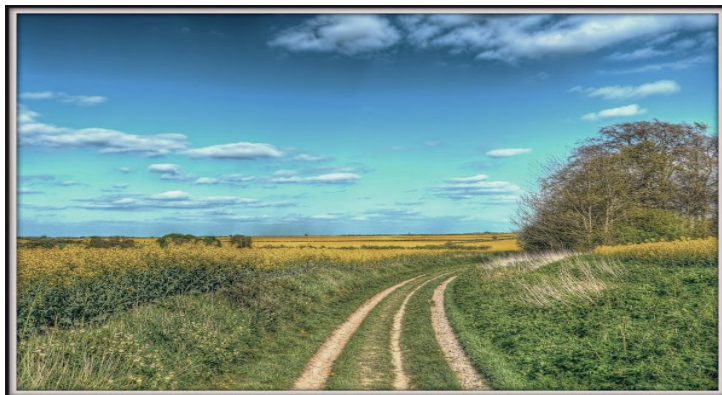
The parish boundaries have long remained unchanged, following on the north-east, north-west, and south-west respectively the Fleam Dyke, an earthwork probably dating from the 7th century (more about this elsewhere), the Icknield Way and Wool Street, also known as the Roman Road. The south-eastern boundary, between Balsham and West Wickham, by contrast is very irregular

The church, the site of the manor-house, and a small village green lie close together near the centre of the linear village, located on the higher ground at the south-eastern end of the parish. A larger open space adjacent to the small green may well be part of an originally larger green. In the Domesday Book, Balsham is called Balesham: the village of Baelli.

Chalk underlies the whole parish, but in the east, especially above the 100m contour, it is covered by boulder clay. There are no streams, but on the impervious clay are many ponds. The chalk heathland at the north-western end of the parish once provided grazing for many sheep. Most land in the parish remained unclosed until 1806. Balsham Wood near the south-east

end of the parish is the remaining part of a once more extensive woodland.

The population of the village at present is about 1600.



The Icknield Way along Fox Lane, Balsham

The village has a primary school, post office, butcher's shop and dairy, and two pubs: the Bell and the Black Bull. The local farming is mainly arable: wheat, barley, sugar beet and rape are the main crops, and sheep and cows are held on one farm.

The village is in the centre of the triangle formed by Cambridge, Newmarket and Haverhill, which provide the main centres of employment and shopping. There is also some small industry in the village, and several crafts and trades are pursued from local homes.

HAVE YOU SEEN A BLACK SQUIRREL LATELY?

If you are travelling along the Icknield Way through Ickleford, Letchworth and across to Royston, you may be in for a surprise! Such a surprise, in fact, that you may have to stop completely in your tracks, remove your specs (if you wear them), rub your eyes and re-focus! (Especially if you originate from 'foreign parts' outside the East Anglian region.)

Although there have now been sightings of black squirrels as far north as Scotland and also in Northern Ireland, for many years north Hertfordshire seemed to be the centre of a population of this melanistic form of the

North American Grey Squirrel, with which we are far more familiar. In fact, black squirrels are not a new phenomenon (although they might be new to you!). The first one spotted in the wild was on the outskirts of Letchworth Garden City in 1912. There are now believed to be 25,000.

As a melanistic variety of the normal grey squirrel, individual black squirrels can exist wherever grey squirrels live and compete with them for food. Grey mating pairs cannot produce black offspring. Grey squirrels have two copies of a normal pigment gene and black squirrels have either one or two copies of a mutant pigment gene. If a black squirrel has two copies of the mutant gene, it will be jet black. If it has one copy of a mutant gene and one normal gene it will be brown-black.

It is of course perfectly possible for squirrels to turn up as albino variants but these rarely survive. Hopefully, when North Hertfordshire District Council re-opens its museum in Hitchin after a grand refurbishment, they will still display their squirrels of many colours!

Keep your eyes open!



THE FLEAM DYKE AND ROMAN ROAD

Just to the north of Balsham, the Icknield Way Path crosses the Harcamlow Way. The latter route has continued south-eastwards to this crossing point from the end of a significant local archaeological feature known as Fleam Dyke.

This massive earthwork consists of a 7m to 8m (25 feet) high bank and ditch barrier, which runs for three miles from Balsham north-westwards to Fulbourn, close to Cambridge. It is the third of a series of barriers built in the 5th and 6th centuries, it is thought, by Anglo-Saxon immigrants in order to defend their core settlements against Romano-British attacks from the south west. The widening of the A11(T) in 1991 was an opportunity to excavate the Dyke using modern methods to help with analysis. The results show that the Fleam Dyke was built in three distinct phases, from the early 5th to the early 7th centuries. Remains of snail shells and a Roman coin found beneath the bank show that the Dyke is post-Roman.

From these very early times, the Fleam Dyke marked ancient settlement boundaries and it is still a parish boundary today. The highest point at Mutlow Hill, lying very close to the A11, is topped by a Bronze Age barrow, long since looted, which was used for meetings (moots) from Neolithic times onwards.

The Roman Road lies to the south of Balsham and is exactly parallel to the Fleam Dyke. However, the Roman Road travels much further across the Cambridgeshire countryside and was constructed to link Cambridge with the road from Great Chesterford (roughly on the line of the present A11(T)). It then continued south-eastwards towards Haverhill. The Roman Road is some ten miles long and follows a chalk ridge to avoid clay on lower ground. Although known as Woles or Wolves Street in the 13th century, it was later called Woolstreet Way which suggests that traders in worsted, probably from the wealthy county of Norfolk, used this route. Later still, in the 18th century historians called the road the 'Via Devana' assuming that the road led from Colchester to Chester!

The Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke was established in 2001 to protect and promote the two sites. They also devised a 25-mile walk incorporating both ancient monuments.



The Fleam Dyke

Our Icknield Way Path links the Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road through the village of Balsham and this section of the path can be used to divide the walk into two approximately equal circular walks.

WARDENS 'OLD'

It is with sadness but with very grateful thanks that we say 'good-bye' to two of our very long-standing warden supporters.

Roger & Janet Moreton have worked tirelessly to protect paths throughout their home county of Cambridgeshire for several decades—and in a more limited way I am sure they will continue to do so! However, although Roger has made an impressive recovery from a severe stroke, they cannot get out and about as much as they have done in the past so they have retired as wardens for the IWA, having kept an eye on several stretches at one time or another during the last thirty years.

We thank them warmly for all they have done to promote our special route from those very early days and look forward to seeing them each year at our AGMs, even if not on the morning walks.

Thank you both!

. . . AND WARDEN NEW!

We are equally delighted to say that we have a new warden on the stretch between Linton and Willingham Green. Clarissa (Issa!) Cochran says:

"I have always enjoyed walking, though I do not see myself as a 'serious' walker. I walk to enjoy trees, fields, wildflowers and the occasional wild animal. I take photographs of the particularly 'magical moments' which I may then turn into paintings, and carry a sketchbook for the occasional drawing or note. I recently had an exhibition in Saffron Walden library entitled 'Magic moments do not last'.

I am the kind of walker who, rather than wanting to cover huge distances or get from one point to another as quickly as possible, lingers and diverts to admire the view, an old church or attractive village. I was introduced to Balsham's fine church through walking the Icknield Way – it is quite stunning in size and its ancient carvings including misericords are worthy of a cathedral. It is now on 'my stretch'.

The spur to joining the IWA for me, was the occasion of last year's celebration of the connection with Edward Thomas".

KNETTISHALL HEATH—updates 2012-2014

As promised in our last Icknield Way Newsletter, we bring you a full update about all the exciting work going on at this large and important nature reserve at the end of our section of the Trail (before it turns into the Peddars Way). The IWA made a donation towards the purchase of this reserve so it seems only right and proper that we stay in touch with what is happening here! Samantha Gay, Knettishall Heath Ranger, working for the Suffolk Wildlife Trust has kindly provided this article.

Habitat Management

- **Our Volunteer Work Programme** - our first year saw us focusing on recruiting a lot of fantastic new volunteers who now enable us to run weekly work parties every Thursday on the reserve. For the past two years our winter work programme with the work parties has focused on gradual scrub clearance preventing young trees encroaching on the heath. The summer work programme involves site maintenance and removing poisonous ragwort from the livestock enclosures.
- **Restoration Grazing with Rare Livestock Breeds** - we continue to graze the heathland blocks with eleven Exmoor ponies. These are accustomed to thriving on the quite poor vegetation and are good at controlling unwanted plants.
- **River Restoration** - extra funding has allowed the Wildlife Trust to focus on the Little Ouse at Knettishall Heath for a river restoration project in partnership with the Environment Agency. Work included the re-profiling of the river channel and was completed in September 2012. It has been really great to welcome the return (or discovery!) of species such as Otter, Water Vole, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail as well as increased numbers of freshwater invertebrates.
- **Bare Ground Trial Plots** - Knettishall Heath is also pioneering a project to recreate disturbed soils to encourage the return of special plants and insects of the Brecks that have been lost or are struggling as a result of the decline in rabbit numbers. These plots can be seen dotted around the Heath.



Exmoor ponies at Knettishall Heath
(photo: Suffolk Wildlife Trust)

Wildlife

- **Increasing our species database** - for the past two years we have been inviting experts to help us survey the site and its wildlife to increase our species database. Surveys have included bats, birds, terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates, geology and flora.
- **Regular surveys** - our volunteers now carry out reptile and butterfly transects every year.
- **Citizen Science** - in 2013, we ran a successful public wildlife surveying day with the Suffolk Naturalists and are hoping to run a large scale one like a Bio Blitz next year.

Community Engagement

- **Events Programme** - we are now over two years into our lottery funding at Knettishall Heath, and our events and education programme is developing well. Since our purchase we have run over 70 events at the heath including themed family afternoons, adult learning courses, guided walks and joint events with experts and county wildlife groups such as night walks with Suffolk bat group!
- **Working with Schools** - we have had over 30 visits from different local schools and community groups helping us to get to know the reserve. This has included the launch of Forest School sessions as well as schools and youth groups helping us to create a new wild play space in the main car park.
- **'Hounds of the Heath'** - with such a fantastic local community of dog owners at the Heath we created a local dog group 'Hounds of the Heath' with the local trainer from Dog Learning Zone. This continues to grow with around 200 members and regular guided walks. The group enables the site ranger and visitors to keep each other up to date with reserve information or sightings, and the group also helped to input plans for the 'Vision for the Future' project launching this year.

A New Project - a Vision for the Future

- Funding from WREN and Defra was confirmed in 2013 for a project aimed at linking up isolated heathland blocks and gradually recreating the more open and varied landscape of the Brecks once characterised by places such as Knettishall Heath. The project will create a larger grazing enclosure for the Exmoor ponies very gradually opening up parts of the woodlands to improve biodiversity.
- Creating this new grazing enclosure will include installing cattle grids on the roads running through the site.

- The project will also include the creation of new waymarked trails and improved visitor interpretation.
- Most of the work is scheduled to start this autumn with some preparation having been undertaken during Spring 2014.

It is an exciting time to come and discover Knettishall Heath, whilst improvements are being made, projects are underway and wildlife and archaeology are being discovered all the time. Come and get involved!

For more information, contact Samantha:
Samantha.gay@suffolkwildlifetrust.org
 Mobile: 07717 156601



Knettishall Heath (Photo: Suffolk Wildlife Trust)



Samantha Gay—Knettishall Heath Ranger
 (Photo © Ipswich Star)

LOOKING BACK

Some say that it is never a good idea to look back on times past!

For a small organisation to arrive at a thirtieth AGM is no mean achievement. Being small, however, does have its advantages and small committees can often be more effective than large unwieldy ones—we like to think so anyway!

All of the people who have served (and continue to serve) on our committee have been there because they believed (and continue to believe) in the importance and inherent attractiveness of a Great Chalk Way extending from the south coast in Dorset to the coast of Norfolk at The Wash. They have all also appreciated the joys and satisfactions of walking long distances across our English landscapes away from 'the madding crowd' and, in our case, into history.

Together, we have produced guide books (six editions) and regular newsletters and in more recent years have also maintained a website. Over the years, we have kept in touch with our neighbouring Friends of the Ridgeway and Friends of the Peddars Way. Although we have not yet achieved our dream of that Great Chalk Way nationally promoted and supported, we have not given up hope. Surely, one day, someone will join us all up to make absolute sense of our individual efforts to promote this glorious, undulating lowland route!

If you have enjoyed reading this newsletter, why not email it to someone who will enjoy it too—and maybe even be inspired to get their boots on and explore along the Icknield Way?



FANCY A WALK?

SATURDAY 4TH OCTOBER 10AM **River, forest and heath in Breckland.**

A 12-mile circular walk starting at Ramparts Field CP and picnic area (southeast of Icklingham) at TL789716.



Paul
 01223 248249
 Cambridge Ramblers

SATURDAY 15TH NOVEMBER 10AM **Rolling chalk uplands on Herts / Cambs borders**

A 10-mile circular walk via Therfield starting from Royston Heath Sports Club CP at



East Herts Ramblers
Easthertsramblers@ntlworld

TUESDAY 16TH DECEMBER 10AM **Bedfordshire Chilterns**

A 12-mile circular walk starting at Barton-le-Clay Recreation Ground TL083304.



Jim
 Ivel Valley Ramblers
 01525 405344 or 07966 735318

VOLUNTARY ROUTE WARDENS

Maps 1-3	Ivinghoe Beacon to A5	Helen Fletcher-Rogers	hfrogers@dial.pipex.com
Maps 4, 33-34	A5 to Sundon Hills Country Park	Tom Chevalier	tom@chevalier.me.uk
Maps 5,6	Sundon Hills to Hexton-Lilley Rd	Carol Bond	carol.bond@hotmail.com
Map 7	Lilley Road to Pirton	Lesley Blundell	lesleyblundell@btinternet.com
Map 8-9	Pirton to Wilbury Hill	Alex Goldie	kathy_alex.goldie@mac.com
Map 10	Wilbury Hill to Baldock	Chris James	chrisjames56@btinternet.com
Maps 11-15	Baldock town centre to Heydon	David Allard	david.allard@ntlworld.com
Maps 16-19	Heydon to Linton	James Quantrill	01279 653899
Maps 20-21	Linton to Willingham Green	Clarissa Cochran	clarissa@clarissacochran.com
Maps 22-27	Willingham Green to Icklingham	Phil Prigg	phil@prigg.co.uk
Maps 28-29	Icklingham to D-house	Tom & Gill Caple	gill.caple@btinternet.com
Maps 30-32	D-house to Knettishall Heath	Edward Wortley	ewortley@tiscali.co.uk
Maps 35-36	Thetford Link	Mike Gee	ramblergees@hotmail.co.uk

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We have space for another committee member!
Could anyone help us promote the Icknield Way Trail across the six counties?
Please do get in touch before the AGM if you think you have skills to offer the IWA.