



## The Icknield Way Dykes

Although it is considered by some that the builders of the dykes and their date of origin remains largely a mystery, it is possible to be a little more informative about the earthworks that lie across the Icknield Way.

There are two groups of dykes to be considered, one of which is Iron Age and the other, Saxon. Both employ the same strategy of running from what was once un-drained fen in the north to forest in the south across the more open belt of country occupied by the Icknield Way, the northern ends often beginning from marshy ground or springs and streams.

The Iron Age dykes are in the west between Luton and Royston and their age has been proved by excavation. Some six earthworks have been identified aligned north-south along the east-west carriageway. These dykes seem to divide the land into territories, often with hillforts apparently controlling the area. Only three are now clearly visible:

### **Dray's Ditches, below Warden Hill, Luton (TL 086264)**

Excavation has shown that three ditches 10 feet (3m) deep and 20 feet (6m) wide, with massive stockade posts in between, formed a barrier over one mile (1.6Km). The earthworks have been severely destroyed and only a single bank and ditch remains beside Turnpike Drive and on the golf course. It is likely that the construction of a bypass in the near future will destroy more of this dyke.

### **Telegraph Hill, north of Lilley (TL 116291)**

A single bank and ditch remains on the Hertfordshire-Bedfordshire county boundary, running down a dry valley.

### **Mile Ditches, Royston (TL 333402)**

Three ditches descend the hill from a barrow on Therfield Heath and are visible as darker, more luxuriant grass growth as they approach and cross the dual carriageway. They are visible at all times of the year. These ditches extend for at least half a mile (0.8Km) north of the A505.

In Cambridgeshire are four large defensive dykes of Saxon date, built by early Germanic invaders to protect the area to the north-east from a south-westerly attack by British tribes. Various dates have been suggested for their construction and it is clear that they have been added to from time to time. The most probable date is soon after the battle of Mount Badon in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Bran or Heydon Ditch (TL 421419)**

This monument extends from Black Peak (26m) at Fowlmere in a straight line for just over 3 miles (5Km) south-east to Heydon village, crossing the A505. Along much of its length, especially at the north end, the dyke has been much eroded but a low bank remains on the section followed by the Icknield Way Path north of Heydon.

### **Brent Ditch, Pampisford (TL 515474)**

This dyke extends from the grounds of Pampisford Hall, close to the A505, in a south-easterly direction for 1.5 miles (2.4Km) crossing the A11. A good section lies under the trees beside the lay-by on the A11. Unlike its neighbours, it faces east.

### **Fleam Dyke, Fulbourn (TL 548540)**

This is a massive bank with a ditch on the south-west side extending for 3.5 miles (5.6Km) from fenland at Shardelowes Well, east of Fulbourn, across the A11 towards Balsham. The dyke is overgrown close to the A11 but open stretches exist after short walks north and south.

### **Devil's Ditch (Good sections at TL 580648, TL 600630 & TL 620614)**

This great barrier runs for 7 miles (11.26Km) from the fens at Reach to Woodditton. The busy A11 and A45 make parking difficult so it is best explored from the B1102. Walk south for ¼ mile to the crest of the first hill and see the massive earthwork plunging north and south.

*James Dyer, Icknield Way News Autumn 1988*