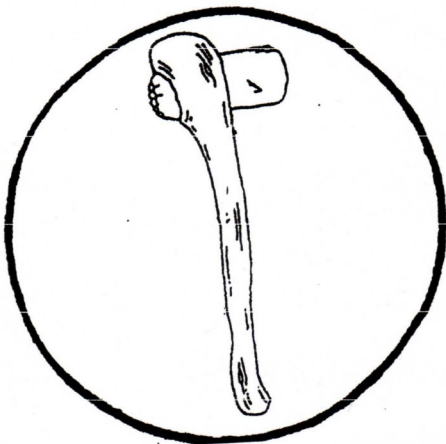


THE ICKNIELD WAY ASSOCIATION



NEWSLETTER

Autumn 2011

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**THE AGM IN 2011 WILL BE HELD ON
SATURDAY 8TH OCTOBER
AT WALLINGTON, NEAR BALDOCK, HERTFORDSHIRE**

**Meet at the Village Hall at 10.15am ready for a walk
along the Icknield Way commencing at 10.30am.**

Wallington is a hamlet east of Baldock accessible from the north end of the new(ish) Baldock by-pass. It is located where the boulder-clay meets the chalk on high ground with superb views to the north and good links with both the Icknield Way and the Hertfordshire Way. Sadly, there is no longer a village pub. Either bring your own picnic or drive into Baldock for a variety of hostelrys or to the 'Moon & Stars' at Rushden after the morning walk.

The afternoon meeting will commence at 2.30pm

New Trail Guide for Buckinghamshire Chilterns

Bucks County Council has produced an attractive fold-out guide to the Icknield Way Trail which is available as a download

[http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway/uploads/The Icknield Way.pdf](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway/uploads/The_Icknield_Way.pdf)

Starting at Bledlow Cross, the 23-mile ride passes around the southern edge of Princes Risborough, over Whiteleaf Hill, around the southern edge of Wendover, across Tring Park and through Wigginton before going through Ashridge Forest and ending at Ivinghoe Beacon.

The guide uses OS extracts and the route is marked with a clear dotted red line. Ten numbered points give interesting snippets of information.

Unfortunately, this guide fails to mention that the Buckinghamshire trail links to the Bedfordshire trail at Ivinghoe which of course links with the riders' trail into East Anglia.

Places to Visit - Lakenheath Fen Nature Reserve

Lakenheath Fen Reserve is a mixture of wetland and woodland lying south of the Little Ouse River near Brandon in Suffolk. It is a year-round bird-watching spectacle and a wetland filled with life.

Almost twenty years ago, the land that is now the nature reserve was carrot fields with little wildlife interest. But in 1995, the RSPB circulated estate agents in East Anglia with a description of the kind of land it wished to acquire to create a landscape-scale wetland in the Fens. The project aimed to provide habitat for the Bittern, a kind of heron whose coastal territories are under threat from sea-level rise and whose numbers had declined steeply to less than 20 probably pairs by the mid 1990s. The creation of a large wetland would also help to redress the historic loss of natural fen following major drainage schemes dating back to the 17th century!

By 1997, over 300 hectares of arable land, poplar plantation and uncultivated 'washland' along the river had been acquired. After a massive amount of technical and hydrological survey and research, work began on breathing new life – and lots of water – into the area.



Lakenheath Fen Reserve not long after it was created

From 1996 until 2004, about 187 hectares of arable land were converted to wetland habitats, most of which was reed-bed and the remainder damp pastures with reed-fringed pools and channels.

Four major items of infrastructure had to be installed including a Reservoir Act safety bund, large water circulation pumps and a river-water extraction pipe.

There are 8 kilometers of internal bunds through which 21 pipes with sluices allow the transfer of water between management compartments. 300,000 reed seedlings were planted by hand!

The reserve has achieved its targets for increasing the number of breeding pairs of rare birds such as Marsh Harrier, Bearded Tit and the Bittern and is especially noted for attracting the Common Crane back to breed here – the first time this charismatic species has bred in the Fens since the 1600s. And it's not just birds that have done well at this exciting reserve – water voles and otters have benefitted from new habitat as have dragonflies and over 80 species of wetland and fen plant have germinated from long-dormant seed.

Open from dawn to dusk, the reserve has a visitor centre with toilets and several trails and it is now accessible by train (weekends only) at Lakenheath Station. An annual events programme offers a wide variety of activities for all ages.

Non-members of the RSPB have to pay a small entry charge.

www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/l/lakenheathfen/about.aspx



Common Cranes at Lakenheath

LETCWORTH STRIKES BACK !

Sometimes when walkers write in with comments regarding their Impressions of the Icknield Way, remarks are made about the short stretches through industrial areas, one such is the road Icknield Way, East, in which the text actually refers to it as one of the less attractive stretches of the route.

In defence of Letchworth, during World War II this very road made a significant contribution in two particular instances.

1 IRVIN AIR CHUTES

In 1922 an American named Henry Irving founded the Irvin Parachute Company in Baltimore, Massachusetts, The start was very modest, in fact the typist writing out the original launch missed the 'g' from Irving, so the company name became Irvin Parachutes /Air Chutes.

In 1926 opened a branch in Britain at Icknield Way East in Letchworth to produce parachutes for the Royal Air Force. The demand was such that a second factory was opened just before the war, its timing influenced no doubt by the increasingly serious international tensions of the times.

The factory in Letchworth still exists with the name above it at the time of writing and is situated a couple of hundred yards, or so, on the right hand side of the start of Icknield Way, East, although it is no longer owned by Irvin.

A feature of this company in the early days was the creation of the Caterpillar Club, membership of which was restricted to people whose lives had actually been saved by escaping parachute exit from a crippled aircraft, and it was proposed that this would be marked by the award of a tiny golden caterpillar based on that of the silk moth. It was not restricted exclusively to Irvin Air Chutes so other manufacturers' products were eligible if they produced the same result.

When Henry Irvine took over sponsorship of the Club he said 'I had little idea for what I was letting myself in, there were at the start only two members and I paid 3 Dollars each for two golden caterpillars to be made up'. In 1960 membership had reached 80,000, with 23,000 in Europe.

Many applications carried accounts of the event and all required verification.

One such read 'I wish to apply for badges for F/sgt. Middleton and F/sgt. Brady who were shot down on 29 May 1943 and arrived in Germany via the Irvin Express'. 'Bless you brother Irvin, we love you!'

In 1942 canopy production was moved to the Spirella factory for increased floor space. (The Spirella factory façade still exists just over the railway bridge near the station) In 1942 Henry Irvine and two employees went to India for one year to set up a parachute manufacturing production facility to provide air drops to the Burma campaign.

Whilst the above Company was well known, and its products familiar to all in the aviation industry and many more beside, there was another company at the other end of the same road, though well known, and listed on the stock exchange, that in wartime had a product that was shrouded in secrecy until about thirty years after World War II.

2 THE LETCHWORTH BOMBE

This was made at the No.1 factory of 'The British Tabulating Company', locally known as the 'Tab' who were makers of the 'Hollerith punch card system for processing data such as stock checking, accounts etc., and was then one of the largest employers in the area. 'Tab No. 1', has now like much of industry in Britain been replaced by housing, and stood beyond the Cromwell road junction on Icknield Way.

Most people will have heard of the highly secret Bletchley Park code-breakers, their story is well documented elsewhere. The cracking of the German 'Enigma' coding system for transmitting messages has even been turned into a film.

Whilst one of the biggest problems in code-breaking would have been the enormous amount of time required to attempt to do this manually, this would be multiplied many times by the need to read the information quickly enough to take action, and achieve a military advantage.

Bletchley had an average of 3000 Morse transmissions to handle a day.

The messages consisted of 'words' of four/five digits which were produced by the three rotor German Enigma machine to a secret setting, each rotor containing 26 letters, to add further difficulty, these rotors were changed daily, and the orientation of these three rotors added a further complication.

A brilliant mathematician named Alan Turing, conceived a system to scan all the permutations of these Morse transmissions until a recognisable German word, or part word was found. This probably sketchy information was then passed to cryptographers to interpret the import.

The machines that he developed to achieve this were quite large, measuring 6ft.high x 7ft. long x 3 ft. deep. It consisted of over one hundred rotating drums or rotors each of which had 26 contacts on the rear of it. These moving contacts which were programmable, contained the coded Morse readings and as they rotated these were compared with each of 26 fixed contacts of the German alphabet

The rotors were made in the basement of the Government Training Centre in Letchworth and wiring of them was done at the Spirella factory just over the railway bridge near the B.R. Station, employing several hundred people mostly women, working day and night.

Four of these Bombes were connected together in one instance to crack the German Naval Code, thus enabling checking on U Boats reporting their position, a fact of the utmost interest to the Lords of the Admiralty and vital in the North Atlantic and is a good example of an instance requiring a high speed result.

The Bombes were assembled at the 'Tab No.1' factory above under conditions of extreme secrecy, it was referred to by the few people as the Cantab contract and it is probable that none involved in it at Letchworth knew its actual purpose. At Bletchley they were known as Bombes and a total of 210 in all were delivered to Bletchley in plain unmarked lorry's.

Most of the above was gleaned from the Letchworth Heritage Museum, which was running a very interesting exhibition of 'Letchworth in Wartime', and I picked the above two out as they are both in Icknield Way East, clearly are different, and are an example of what lies behind its somewhat austere manufacturing face, which is now a pale shadow of the past.

Peter Baker (Ed)

Editors note. I must confess an interest in the Letchworth of those days, as I was introduced to the world of work as a sixteen year old in the summer of 1941, in an instrument factory 'Learning the trade'. To get there, I had to cycle three and a half miles, then catch the 7.23 am train to Letchworth, arriving at about 7.50 followed by a very fast walk of half a mile to arrive at work and clock in by 8.00 am. At that time of the day the roads were busy with crowded buses and a virtual sea of bicycles. The train fare was then 7 old pence for a workers return, (Train had to arrive before 8 am,) and my pay was 5p/hr. (14 year olds got 3p/hr).

All the machinery was belt driven from overhead shafting which made it very noisy and hot in the summer, as there was little air circulation. It was really quite memorable, with the turbaned girls on the drills and others, singing to 'Workers Playtime' twice a day. In 1942 morale was (hopefully) boosted by huge placards in the rafters like 'REMEMBER HONG KONG etc. After a some months I was transferred to the night shift, 8.pm to 8 am., four nights per week. The factory at night was of course blacked out, with a spotter on the roof so that production was not unduly disturbed by air raid warnings

As regards the secrecy of the Bletchley Bombe project, I worked at British Tab. No1 factory from 1952 to 1960 most of the time as a draughtsman. It appears it was still secret, as indeed then was Bletchley Park, and no mention was ever made of any wartime product, other than the casual reference that a pass was required for access to the tool-room during the war.

P.B

THE WEB-SITE

A reminder of the address: www.icknieldwaypath.co.uk.

Sue Prigg has spent some useful time on the Association's behalf sorting out some anomalies on the web-site and bringing it under the full control of the committee. It is now possible for her to directly add material including 'hot off the press' items.

However the site is still short of attractive photographs promoting the route. So if you have taken any good (preferably digital) shots of landscapes, special features or interesting places to visit along the IW, please send them to Sue at sue@prigg.co.uk who will find a good home for them on the relevant page of the web site.

Voluntary Wardens

Here is a list of all our wardens. If you find a problem on the Icknield Way when out walking during the year, please phone either the relevant warden or one of the committee.

Helen Fletcher-Rogers	Beds	01582 472300	Maps 1,2,3
Tom Chevalier	Beds	01525 873986	Maps 4,33,34
Tony Northwood	Beds	01582 883155	Maps 5,6

Liz Hunter	Herts	01462 433859	Maps 7,8,9,10
David Allard	Herts	01763 242677	Maps 11,12,13
Jane Benson	Cambs/Essex	01799 527407	Maps 4,15,16,17
John Quantrill	Essex/ Cambs	01279 653899	Maps 18,19
Geof Gardiner	Cambs	01638 730880	Maps 20,21,22,23
Phil Prigg	Cambs/Suffolk	01638 751289	Maps 24,25,26,27
Roger Amey	Suffolk	01263 713476	Maps 8,29,30 (part)
Ken & Di Barrell	Suffolk	01379 642125	Maps 30(part),31,32

Your Committee for 2011

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