## Walking the Icknield Way (1979)

Last year (1979), I fulfilled an ambition: I walked the Icknield Way. The fascination of prehistoric archaeology gripped me over fifty years ago when, still at school, I learnt about the open chalk strip which crosses south-eastern England from north-east to south-west and which carries the prehistoric trackway known as the Icknield Way. This track strides across the countryside more dramatically than any Roman road and I felt a keen desire in those far off days to walk along this ancient route, following in the footsteps of the ancient traders whom it served.

But not until last summer did I have the opportunity to fulfil this ambition when I spent sixteen consecutive days walking from the north Norfolk coast to Avebury in Wiltshire. It is impossible to convey how rewarding it was. As I can no longer carry a tent on my back (the best way to do this sort of thing), I booked in advance bed-and-breakfast at convenient intervals along the route. I never walked more than twenty-one miles in a day: I was not out to prove anything, to myself or to anyone else, merely to enjoy myself and enjoy myself I did.

The open chalk strip which I first read about more than half a century ago was then described as a grassy corridor between more heavily vegetated areas occurring naturally on account of the underlying chalk. Research in recent years has modified that picture. It seems that when the climate became warmer after the last retreat of the ice, forests gradually spread over many areas of southern England. Some areas were less densely forested and less swampy than others and the Mesolithic hunters and gatherers of the time doubtless had their own bush paths along which they traversed most frequently. When the Neolithic farmers began to arrive some six thousand years ago, they discovered that chalk land was more easily cleared of the light tree cover to make little plots on which to sow wheat and barley. After a few years, the fertility of these plots declined and a new area had to be cleared for cultivation but it was discovered that the abandoned ground was still good for pasturing sheep and cattle. The grazing livestock inhibited the regeneration of trees but encouraged the growth of grasses. Two or three thousand years of this process created the chalk downlands that we know today so that, by Bronze Age times, there must have been a strip of open land along the chalk ridges of southern England.

The line of the Icknield Way from Norfolk to the Thames is not a ridgeway, unlike its continuation into Berkshire and Wiltshire. The Way keeps to the north and west of the highest ground, usually running between it and the spring line lower down the slope to the west. The crests were avoided because, in this eastern part of England, the chalk is often capped with clay-with-flints which would have then supported heavier vegetation. Thus, the track took the lines of least resistance.

The name of the Icknield Way is lost in obscurity and there is no agreement among the place-name experts. However, the name is encountered all along the route from Norfolk to the Thames and it seems hard to resist the simple explanation that in Iron Age times it was known as the route which led to the territory of the East Anglian tribe known as the Iceni. We are probably incorrect in thinking of the Way as a ‘through route’ in prehistoric times, on which traders moved from one end to the other. Rather, it was the easiest way to move to the next bit of territory in a north-easterly or south-westerly direction. Nevertheless, it is likely that objects were exchanged along its length as early as Neolithic times, even if not carried all the way by a trader. Axes made of stone from Cornwall or the Lake District certainly reached Norfolk along the Icknield Way, at any rate for the last part of their journey.

The establishment of Roman London and the Roman road network broke up the unity and usefulness of the old Icknield Way. Henceforward, London became the heart of the communication system of south-eastern England, the centre of a wheel whose spokes radiated out in all directions. The spokes leading north-west transected the old Icknield Way at a number of points and tended to chop it into bits. As I walked from Norfolk, I was very conscious of crossing railway and roads radiating out of London. At Tring station I spent the night where the main line from Euston to the Midlands and Glasgow crosses the Icknield Way. Before the arrival of the railway, the Way had been crossed at this point by the Grand Union Canal as it cuts through the Chiltern Hills. After a glorious windswept day in the open air, I was able to watch the commuters returning from London – and to feel sorry for them!

After the gradual breakdown of the Roman system during the 'Dark Ages', the Icknield Way again became important. For raiders, or more organised military bands, moving against the kingdom of East Anglia from further west it was a natural line of advance. I saw plenty of evidence for this on my walk: a succession of linear earthworks lies athwart the Icknield Way between the Suffolk/Cambridge border and Dunstable, perhaps as many as seven in all, with their defensive ditches on the south-western side. The largest and most dramatic is the Devil's Dyke located close to Newmarket Race Course which extends from swampy fenland at its north-west end to a higher clay-capped and wooded ridge at Woodditton ('wood ditch town'). The next defensive dyke (proceeding in a south-westerly direction) also rests its north-west end in the Fens – at Fenditton ('fen ditch town'). Each time I crossed one of these earthworks, I felt I was passing through a gateway.

After the mediaeval and post-mediaeval road systems became established, again with roads radiating out of London, the Icknield Way remained useful as a drove way for those moving their flocks and herds to markets. Norfolk geese were walked to the London market and turkeys were shod with special boots to enable them to do the same. They would have travelled along the Way as afar as Royston before turning south to London. Thus, in spite of the land enclosures and the coming of modern roads and railways, many stretches of the Way survive as little-used green lanes of a most charming character.

I started my walk at Holme-next-the-Sea where the Romans established a ferry station, now probably lying under the waters of the Wash, for the crossing to Lincolnshire. This was most likely done as a military precaution after the rising of the Iceni tribe. The Romans laid a surface along the first part of the Way and this road survives as the Peddars Way. However, this soon diverges from the older Icknield Way which heads due south on a parallel but more westerly alignment, while the Peddars Way goes east-southeast to the Roman settlement at Castle Acre. I wished to keep as close as I could to the historic Icknield Way but to avoid towns and tarmac as much as possible. With the help of Ordnance Survey maps, I was able to devise a route following public footpaths and bridleways, drove ways and green lanes. If I had to go a mile or two along a road it was usually a minor one, little frequented and not unpleasant to walk along.

The track through the splendid 'broad acres' of Norfolk traversed a low tableland dissected by the shallow valleys draining towards the Wash. Only occasionally did the underlying chalk show itself, for here it is mostly covered by glacial deposits. Then the Way crossed the sandy soils of Breckland and the plantations of the Forestry Commission passing close to the pits of Grimes Graves, where prehistoric miners had extracted high-grade flints from the underlying chalk. Beyond Breckland on the Cambridgeshire border, the chalk became more clearly visible. There was more elevation and, for some miles, the route, although not following the highest ground, had wide views to the northwest across the Fens. The low hills of Cambridgeshire and north Hertfordshire merge into the beginning of the Chilterns and the downs at Dunstable. Here the route consistently shows itself as a lowland one, with the Chiltern ridge away to the left and the Oxfordshire plain on the right. Oddly enough, the marvellous beech woods of the Chilterns are not

a survival of the prehistoric mixed-oak forests. However, woodland has existed for hundreds of years on the wetter clay-with-flints soils capping the chalk and, in more recent times, beech trees have been deliberately planted to provide timber for the local furniture and other craft industries. Improving technology during Roman-British times allowed farming activity to focus on the richer lowland soils.

Ivinghoe Beacon marks the beginning of the long-distance trail known as 'The Ridgeway' which follows the general south-westerly trend of the Icknield Way but sometimes keeps more to the crests, for scenic effect. After crossing the River Thames at Goring, it joins up with the Berkshire-Wiltshire Ridgeway. I thought it would be easy to find my way along this officially sanctioned route, with guide-maps and waymarks, but this was not always so. At the end of the Chilterns, my track swung southward to cross the Thames where the chalk comes close to each bank and the river cuts dramatically through the Goring Gap. This is the only major river crossing in the entire two hundred and fifty miles of this natural route across southern England. On the west bank above Streatley, the track climbs up onto the Berkshire Downs to follow the Ridgeway to Avebury, providing some of the finest walking in Britain. In early Mediaeval times, there was an alternative fording place of the Thames - at Wallingford. It was here that William the Conqueror crossed the river on his march to London after the Battle of Hastings. From here, a lowland route continued westwards below the crest of the chalk escarpment.

It was impossible to avoid noticing the prehistoric burial mounds along the line of the Icknield Way. This started on the first day with a large, mostly ploughed-out round barrow near Gayton Thorpe, probably of Bronze Age date. Elsewhere there are Neolithic long barrows: a rather isolated one on Royston Heath and two or three more in the Chilterns. However, as soon as one reaches the Berkshire Ridgeway, both round and long barrows abound and, around Avebury, the prehistoric monuments are so arresting they move the imagination to vivid pictures of prehistoric life. I finished my walk at the end of the Ridgeway path, by the group of round barrows on Overton Hill. Nearby lies the excavated monument known as The Sanctuary, from where I followed the line of the West Kennet Avenue, walking between its rows of megalithic standing stones to the great circle of Avebury itself. The Wiltshire Downs with Avebury and Stonehenge were the central focus of Neolithic and Bronze Age England: other important trackways from Dorset, Somerset, Devon, the Cotswolds and south Wales all led to this strategic location.

On that last day I passed the memorial on Burderop Down to Richard Jefferies, the naturalist, and to Alfred Williams, the 'hammerman poet'. I had stayed the night before not far from the farm where Richard Jefferies grew up and, from Burderop Down, I could look across to Swindon and the nearby village where Alfred Williams lived. The inscriptions on the memorial were appropriate:

For Richard Jefferies: 'It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine.'

For Alfred Williams: 'Still to find and still to follow, joy in every hill and hollow, company in solitude.'

I could identify myself with those sentiments along the whole length of the Icknield Way.

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