

Walking the Icknield Way

Day 1: Ivinghoe Beacon to Chalk Hill, 10 miles; August 1st 2024

White paths mark the popular walks up, along and down Ivinghoe Beacon, which as an inland headland offers its visitors panoramas, a photogenic trig point, an escarpment which catches the wind, and the sense of achievement that a slight uphill stroll brings. Wavy tractor lines pattern the corn, which is at its blonde stage, and looking across it at the long view, there is a classic blue haze at the very far distance. The little gate at the start of our walk has sentinels of a tall, frail plant, with grey-green aromatic leaves and strange insignificant flowers. This is Mugwort, ‘Sailors Tobacco’, its roots (‘worts’) used for tea, its pollen responsible for hayfever, its foliage used by Roman soldiers as insoles for their sandals. An admirable plant.

We set off through a meadow with low-growing flowers clearly at home on chalk, carefully stewarded by the National Trust – now in early August a tapestry of cream, yellow and purple, including scabious, plantain, bristly ox-tongue, mini-thistles and burnet. Shortly the path ducks between deciduous trees, the first of many wooded patches which offer us shade and their own variety of plant, insect and bird life. In contrast to the prosaically named Mugwort, the standout wildflower at the moment here is Enchanter’s Nightshade, looking charmingly delicate but based on a ferocious root system that takes it everywhere. It’s one of those plants that are both medicinal and toxic, holding its own where the wild garlic stops. The beech trees are enormous. Some of the ash trees are split vertically down their trunks as if unzipped but despite their difficulties, still going strong. It’s a sunny day with that restless spangled effect of light tipped through the leaves onto the path, lemon and white droplets sprinkled all around. Trees offer a big welcome and generally act as if they have been waiting just for you, for ever, almost like dogs but much, much more dignified.

Out in the open field, all the shade and all the sheep are under a single oak. It is nearly noon. The path runs alongside the field with the wood to the left, trees hanging over, standing ahead and creating bottle green patches over the whole landscape. It would be good one day to count, identify, label and hug each individual tree but it’s not necessary. They watch you go and carry on with what they are doing. We collect up two anomalous plastic bottles which must have been dropped by accident, and strap them to a backpack to put in the recycling later. Over the length of this walk, which is about 10 miles, we collect five bottles. The most disheartening are the empties of children’s drinks; if we leave them, the plastic will still be there when they return having eventually achieved the ages we’ve got to. And longer.

We trail fingers in the wheat ears, their straw stems a yard high, their roots two yards down into the soil, the grain pale ochre, seeming to need maybe two days of warm rain then a week of sun and it will be done. What whiskery stuff it is, spiky for no apparent reason, awns flung out with exuberance on those stiff stalks. Monoculture is both a terrible thing, and very impressive indeed. Surviving somehow along the field margin are a riot of pink candy striped bindweed, vetch, ragwort and other resilient individuals, the strongest of their kind.

Walking on we arrive in Dagnall which, Wikipedia tells us, has a population of 511 souls. As well as hosting the Icknield way, Dagnall is at the meeting point (or starting point, or end point) of four roads; it adjoins Ashridge Forest and Whipsnade Zoo, is just missed by the Grand Union Canal, has Tring and Berkhamsted railway stations nearby, and is visited by herds of wild deer. It's a neat, orderly village. We carry on through to a gate into the Golf Course. This is bounded on two sides by Whipsnade Zoo, meaning that the path runs alongside a high chain mesh fence keeping the creatures on one side, and us lesser mortals on the other. Before that, the path wanders through the Golf Course where we and the Golfers avoid getting too close to one another, trespassers in each other's worlds. The Golfers' habitat seems like stage sets carpeted with various grassy looking fabrics, some velvet, some tweed and some rough goatskin, with careful slopes of clean sand, cute coppices and stretches of tame water. The buggies occasionally turf out a Golfer to hit their shot. Lesser Golfers go with a trolley to slope along the fairways, whilst the most humble just load themselves up with big bags. I know little of Golfers and no doubt Golf Clubs have their environmental policies and so on. The sterility of the landscape and the pursuit of the aim of hitting the ball less often than your companion whilst toggged out in stiff designer costumes may well be engrossing. I will never know. We keep our heads down and trek across as free as birds to meet the path along the Zoo fence.

There were sightings of wild life in there; firstly, three small humanoids with wings and gauzy frocks, running up and down a little grassy hill; and then a court of wallabies taking their ease in the shade. They moved off in a resigned way as we disturbed them, but we wished they'd stayed. Studham Lane comes next, a green lane that could be used to film historic dramas, with its lack of anything put there by people recently (other than footprints). It's satisfying to walk along such lanes after hundreds of our predecessors. In comparison with the majority of them, we have been raised with much better nutrition, we have time and leisure, we are not driving oxen or marching to war or carrying children or goods, and we have carefully chosen boots and nice picnics and backpacks. We are lucky! It's still quite a demanding walk – Studham Lane is the sort of experience that makes it worthwhile. How has it escaped tarmac, housing, dualling, 'development'? This is the magic of long-distance footpaths. They get from A to B in well trodden ways and remain the province of those on foot.

Arriving at the magnificent Tree Cathedral, we leave it for a different day. ‘Turn R onto track and follow to end where it emerges with fine views,’ says the Walker’s Guide and it’s impossible to improve on that description, fine here meaning we arrive onto the chalk ridge looking down and across miles of a green patchwork of fields that is archetypally English countryside, with spires, cottages, coppices, farms, and the Gliding Club. We are looking across five counties that are part of the Vale of Aylesbury; this is the highest point in the East of England. The pleasure in the view is enhanced by reflecting on it from the panoramic windows of the spacious National Trust café. The achievement of tea and scones makes it feel a little like the end of our walk but actually there’s still a little more to do.

The path runs pleasantly along the chalk ridge, past Five Knolls which are ancient burial mounds maybe 6000 years old. To be immortalised by your community and then spend eternity in a museum in Luton seems slightly unfair. Planes to and from the airport go over sky high, keeping some sort of a link. We proceed to the outskirts of Dunstable. A brilliant thing about Dunstable is that here the Icknield Way crosses Watling Street – it must have been quite a moment, when that junction was opened. Watling Street ran from near Dover to Wroxeter in Shropshire, and was paved by the Romans, eventually turning into the A5 London to Holyhead road which grew really famous for the traffic jams along its (straight!) length before the motorways relieved the pressure.

Interestingly as our path meets the outskirts of Dunstable, we cross the road at an unusual ‘Pegasus’ crossing. This was so intriguing when mentioned on Page 22 of The Icknield Way Path Walkers’ Guide, that it became quite a feature of the walk, something to look forward to – what was it? At the crossing, the push button is at the correct height for a horse rider so that no dismounting is necessary; instead of a green man, there’s a green horse with a rider, which if you try, you can see as wings. Fascinating. Such devices seem to have spread from the original in Hyde Park, though they are rare, and other than the UK are only to be seen in Peru. You do wonder whether the horses know red from green, or if they like to see the little image of themselves.

Crossing safely, the path runs alongside paddocks behind the houses. There is a sadly disused railway line, the closure of which left Dunstable struggling because cut off from the rail network. We know why these things happened (in the early 1960’s the Conservative Chairman of British Railways Board Baron Beeching, who had strong ties to the road lobby, identified 55% of existing stations for closure)(most of them got closed) but the sense of loss lingers, and the impact will last forever. We go along Sewell Lane to reach Chalk Hill, which is what it says on the tin; if the Atlantic or even the Channel broke at its feet it would be justly famous for being impressive, but here it is a bit anomalous, a strange white cliff, sensibly slightly averting itself from the new link between the A5 and the M1, a

road evidently designed late on Friday afternoon the week before the holidays. Its USP is that it's impossible to approach any of the roundabouts in a correct lane.

Day 1 is done and is, we think, a classic path, varied, entertaining, individual, and full of wildlife, views, and its own distinctive set of surprises.