

Icknield Way Walk: 28.06.2025: Ickleford to Wallington

The first thing we noticed over the fields was a purple stripe between the crops, lavender in flower. After fields, the footpath calls at Gerry's Hole, a haunted pool. The water is dark with odd things growing in it and the trees around it, rather black and stunted. A solitary duck waits at the far end. The land here was excavated to build up the railway embankment and sadly Gerry was one of the workers; a 'navvy'; he came for a dip after a session in the local. No-one would take a dip here now, we trust.

The path lifts onto the chalk of north Hertfordshire where we are back to some fields and the skylarks, which fortunately seem to pop up everywhere along the way. It turns into a kind of maze; pavements, little industrial units, houses, a tunnel, a railway, a path over the A1. Thanks to our group leader and the Icknield Way Association Walker's Guide – an excellent combination, we are invincible. Or at least we stay on track. All this built environment is surprisingly entertaining and doesn't last long at all. The pagans, Romans, Saxons and all the previous visitors probably walked here along a droveway, mingled tracks for people and animals, going in both directions. Things went at walking pace, and so we accompany them.

Letchworth itself has given people a place to live and work for well over a hundred years – but still manages to have a pleasant 'new town' air about it; it is the first 'Garden City', that is, with trees and green spaces, unlike the industrial towns that grew factories faster than grass and didn't really consider sunlight, what was in the air, the water and all around. We especially enjoyed the Spirella Corset Factory, built in the Arts and Crafts style in 1912, and proudly producing girdles and the like until 1989 (having never worn such things we count ourselves lucky) - with a sidestep into making parachutes, during which time the factory had its own fire brigade and Home Guard. It is now commercial offices and well looked after.

Laurence Olivier's father was Rector of Letchworth Parish in 1918. Suffragette Annie Kenney, often imprisoned and unwell through hunger strikes, having helped achieve votes for women over 30, moved here after WWI; and James Lovelock, author of the Gaia theory, was born here in 1919. The Gaia theory is to do with how habitable Earth is and proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings, to form a complex, self-regulating (and potentially sustainable) system. Maybe living in a Garden City influenced James's thinking. It seems obvious that life is supported by not eroding its very foundations, but maybe Victorian inner cities didn't make that apparent; it seems sometimes that contemporary cities generate the same blindness.

It was time for lunch and luckily we, or the path, chance across Avenue Park Baldock. This has evolved with the town from playing fields for the Knight's Templar school, allotments during the war, to proudly displaying its green spaces, its cricket pitch and children's play area, with lots of happy children in and out of the 'splash pad'. And at one o'clock, quite miraculously, and like a mirage of summers past, the fielders in white come on to do their warm-up stretches, then the batters and the umpire, and the game is on. So, after a refreshing hour, and at 15 for 2, it was hard to get up and leave, but the path was going on without us.

Baldock achieved universal approval in our walking group, with its wide High Street and attractive buildings; we stopped in the charming Cock pub garden for a while amongst its flowers. Then on along and over the A505 which is the Baldock bypass, its little tunnels keeping the cars out of the town whilst rather sensitively also keeping the chalk ridge line intact; we were delighted when we drove along it later. Some roads do seem rather sensible.

The Way here is a tree-lined field path, with shocking pink everlasting sweet peas, turning to head north-east, and becoming four strands, broad white wavy lines rising through wheat fields, which were ochre when we were there, and looking like they needed rain. The field margins have some very special plants, identified by my phone app as yellow sweet clover (tall bright spires), lacy phacelia (what a pretty name! Exuberant mauve clusters with tiny stamens in all directions, reminiscent of mini pin cushions), holy clover (beautiful, only one plant, a delicate pink); the plants visited by marbled white butterflies and very large bumble bees. There were long views, pleasant distances and calm vistas to the horizon – splendid views but difficult to photograph, wide skies and fields with ripening crops, a range of subtle shades of green and yellow.

On the path near Wallington was an actual cloud of Large White butterflies. I had thought such things no longer existed (the cloud, not the butterfly). But there you are you never know. The field margin here was designated for wild flowers, chamomile being most apparent – possibly this was something to do with it. (I grow nasturtiums in my garden and have a very good caterpillar nursery going on this year.)

'A walk of two halves' we thought, from Ickleford to Letchworth seemed rather built up, then on to Wallington where we were out in the countryside. It was a good walk, despite the high temperature and the strange scirocco-type warm wind. On balance, if it's possible, both halves seemed best.