

Icknield Way Walk: 18.08.25: Wallington to Royston

Weather matters – as we set off from Wallington, flat cloud means that we have to carry just-in-case coats, and the fields going way over the landscape have no brightness or shade. We leave the car with a group of curious black and white cattle that let you pat their curly forelocks – though we only did this because of the sturdy fence. They have to put up with the flies in their eyes, helping by whisking each other occasionally.

Going on the path towards Sandon, we cross a field full of flowers; radish, chamomile, sunflowers, scarlet pimpernel, and look up on the 'Picture This' app the big plants with large diamond shaped leaves and a tall, bobbly sort of top. This turns out to be Goose Foot (the leaves!) or 'fat hen'. It's grown because it will enrich the soil. It has been used as a food crop for animals since Roman times, still appearing where it can as a wayfaring weed. You can use the leaves like spinach, and the seeds like quinoa. 'The seeds of fat hen were discovered to be Tollund Man's last meal; he was found in a Danish bog and dated 400BC' the Wild Food site says. The leaves contain a mild toxin and shouldn't be taken in large quantities. It's good the way that plants persist. Even without being sown as a crop, this plant and lots of others have sorted themselves out some continuity over a couple of thousand years.

The corn has been harvested, and much of the straw baled. Some is still drying in lines. The path is easy walking on the light chalky soil. A little way from Wallington is a finger post with our Icknield Way axe sign; it needs a little spruce up with some water; a 'spit and a promise'. It's not far to Buntingford where there is a wooden lych gate, an attractive ochre sexton's house, and the flint-walled All Saints church which has relatively huge buttresses, as if the builders didn't really trust their tower to stand up for long. We enjoy its beautiful interior spaces and woodwork, the ancient pews, the tapestry kneelers, the circular decal on the altar cloth, and the brass plates of medieval people and their rows of children.

After that, the path sets off for Sandon and is almost like a picture-book path, pale grey between lacy trees, fringed with green, inviting you on. The thing about paths is that they move along like rivers, whereas the things you pass whilst walking keep to their places and only have any link because you encounter them in sequence on the way. The big oak trees are landmarks for the path, and the path is a connection for the trees. Things that change, like the sunflowers and the ponies we pass in a field, are there by chance and not to be relied on; whereas the church, these particular large trees, the signposts, are what defines the path, though it only glances past them and goes on. Or back. Paths being to do with distance have an element of time built into them. Time here goes along the path, with us, and vertically down into its history. It's so good that this path has survived intact,

resisting ‘development’, tarmac, tree felling, ploughing, off-roaders and simple neglect. It’s kept in good order. Long may it last.

On the way we pass oak trees fully laden with acorns, blackthorn full of sloes, and blackberry, rose and elderberry bushes, all full of fruit. 2025 is evidently a ‘mast year’. The trees are producing an unusually large crop of fruit, nuts and seeds, all of which fall to the ground and historically, fed the wildlife and the local pigs. This year’s long dry growing season has had an impact on trees especially, and the path is showing how dry everything is with its faded leaves and the pale stems of the annual plants, and the dusty appearance of the tree leaves. No growing is going on any more, but lots of energy is going in to fruits. We walk along a green lane that could be filmed just as it is for any novel set in England before the industrial revolution. Beautiful.

Therfield appears but sadly, it being Monday, the pub is shut. We take a break on the benches anyway and enjoy being part of the scenery in this attractive village. Carrying on refreshed we head for Therfield Heath, passing an interesting green area with trees and seats. But we have used up our resting time. We carry on – the Heath is spacious with its charming white paths; it is ‘one of the largest remaining areas of calcareous grassland in East Anglia’ the Icknield Way Path Walkers Guide says. It’s a nature reserve and SSSI; somewhere, sometime, there are Pasque Flowers and Chalk Fragrant Orchids. It seems a popular place, with a golf course, sports centre, car park and café, none of which take up too much room; lots of people are out walking, enjoying the space. Must come back and stay longer.

Very few birds are apparent. We see red kites and martins, and we hear linnets and crows. This is dreadful. Over an eight mile walk, we see no woodland birds, no hedgerow birds, no farmyard birds, no water birds or heathland birds. No doubt (we trust) some are around here somewhere and appear in the early morning or at dusk. But birds are indicators. They are not here because they are no longer anywhere. Younger walkers won’t be aware of what has been lost, never having known the busy quantities of sparrows, goldfinches, jays, yellowhammers, - all the little songbirds of the countryside and woods. The curators of Therfield Heath are doing what they can, no doubt, and birds are like wildflowers – they’ll come back, if we encourage them.

Over time the heath has been used for burials, pathways, agriculture, racing, housing Italian prisoners of war, boxing matches and celebrations (www.friendsoftherfieldheath.org.uk – great website which includes a YouTube clip of Murder in the Cathedral, filmed here in 1950). King James, I came to Therfield Heath for its ‘excellent hunting’. Sadly, Kings (and others) still do such

barbaric things, but much more secretly, which somehow makes it worse. We are more civilised now and should not pretend that historical pursuits are either useful or necessary. Moving on - 20 000 Roundhead soldiers camped here during the Civil War! We hope it didn't rain.

It doesn't rain today. The rather ordinary weather continues. No sunshine, shadow, bright patches of colour, no breeze. 18 degrees. It is ideal weather for walking, mustn't grumble, but there is a lack of contrast and bright colour, no blue in the sky, and no cumulus clouds going over. We do need it to rain.

We wander on to Royston, a charming town which obviously cherishes its own past. More on Royston later. But in the very welcoming Weatherspoons for a cup of tea, we notice King James again, on the wall outside the loos. Such is fame and glory. Maybe Royston, and this Manor House, merit a whole blog of their own. Meanwhile, we note that the Michael and Mary Ley Lines cross here, and feel the force – we are happy, and have lots of energy to drive home. What an excellent walk along a straightforward path, itself surrounded by stories.