

Icknield Way 17th & 18th October 2025: Royston to Linton

Day 1. Royston to Elmdon

No chance to look round Royston, which is a good reason to come back some day. The Icknield Way sets off along the busy Newmarket Road, crossing the Greenwich Meridian (we had a short ceremony of taking photos) – and then into a pleasant woodland and onto the wide track of the bridleway. It's easy walking with lots of autumn colour in the hedgerows; we are prompted to discuss if it's worth making sloe gin, and the joys of childhood encounters with Rose Hip Syrup. Millions of acorns and wayside fruits are now down on the ground. It does not feel good to tread on acorns, when you think they could live 600 years if encouraged to grow. But it does feel good to swish through coloured leaves, drying and fading beneath their tree, little scruffy patches used to being held on high, now a jumble of yellow, red, maroon and terracotta, laid beneath our feet. We nearly miss the way with talking...but not too late - we turn sharp right and walk up Heydon Ditch. Literally, up; this is one of the highest villages in Cambridgeshire with expansive views; but still, not a climb, it's just a gentle slope.

Heydon has polished houses, a pretty green with an amazing crab apple tree, a dinky bus shelter with its own geraniums, and a fascinating church. This is Holy Trinity, which suffered great damage when in 1940 a raiding plane jettisoned its bombs before setting off across the North Sea. Rebuilt with a red brick tower, the church is smart and distinctive, and today with its harvest flowers, hops and leaves, it's charming to look around. We are made very welcome by a church warden, who switches on the altar lights to burnish the gold cross, highlight the wood carving and bring up the red of the carpet. It's covered in what seem to be bits of silver sequins but turn out to be insect wings, scattered from the roof by bats.

We stroll on through Chrishall to Elmdon, through open fields and alongside a patch of woodland with a sign that reads:

PRIVATE. Woodland for Wildlife. KEEP OUT.

A good idea! We have enough space. Elmdon are having an Apple Day outside the Village Hall, with wheelbarrows chock full of apples. If you are used to seeing apples in fours, matched, flawless, in a card tray with plastic film...well. You can see the difference. There is a good bustle as folk press the apples, look out for their children, play music, cook things, and generally entertain one another. We taste the juice, which is as good as you'd imagine, fresh and bright in flavour. Thank you!

Day 2. Elmdon to Linton

Rain is forecast for later, but it's a fine start. Leaving Elmdon, the path encounters a field full of yellow flowers, mainly fennel and sunflowers, encouraging touches of gold matching the field maple leaves in the hedge. Then we walk through a farm which has a series of bull pens, now disused, that must have been very lively in their day. It's quiet here at the moment, and indeed, the path is usually quiet; to pass anyone is unusual; sometimes there are people with dogs or children, near the villages. The Icknield Way path turns into another of those welcome green lanes, which today is coloured yellow and orange, with some red touches and a fair amount of khaki. It's charming and we could be anywhere, for a while, and the sun comes out and mottles the leaves that have fallen with shadows of those still hanging on.

We emerge to a view over arable fields, spring green where the new wheat is just showing, and further away, like somewhere to aim for, calm acres of chalky pastel beige. Pastel beige is not a good description. The soil is a beautiful colour. The nearest match is possibly, Bailey's Irish Cream; or on a paint samples card, the shade called 'China Clay'; or in a coffee shop, iced latte. The underlying chalk dilutes the earth to a milky fawn that reflects the sunlight on the distant slopes away near the horizon, so that the fields shine like a seascape, smooth waves of the land the shade of unwashed fleece, edged in the old green of the hawthorn hedgerows.

We come across some big old apple trees, pouring apples onto the path. How can we resist. I collect six apples, whole and big as two-cup teapots. Afterwards I remember my physics, that an apple pulls downwards with the force of 1 Newton or 10 grams. The extra half kilo or so in my backpack has a definite impact on the rest of the walk, but the apple crumble later was amazing. Then there is a long trek across a sugar beet field, sugar beet in all directions, acres of it – what a successful crop. Where will all these full globes go? Feed for local livestock, or to that huge British Sugar factory in Newark? The factory produces over 230,000 tonnes of sugar from local beet, every year, and though nowhere near the age of the path, has been going for over a hundred years. We hope we have walked through some of the sugar we will buy to put in our Christmas cakes!

Once again, the path joins a local bridleway. All along the Icknield way we have joined and left other paths, other directions for other times. This path was a Roman way, leading to the encampment and fort at Great Chesterford. Millions of people have walked this way over hundreds of years, for a huge variety of purposes and no doubt in lots of sorts of weather and circumstances. About the fort, 'The location of the site certainly would have made it an excellent rearward base in the aftermath of the 60/61AD Boudiccan rebellion' says the Roman Britain website.

Boudicca! A legend. Her defeat encouraged the Romans to stay, and in the long scheme of things, maybe the only lesson to be learnt is that people don't change.

Heading towards Great Chesterford, we cross the M11, then wait for a train to dash by, at the level crossing. It's hard not to feel a bit pleased (even smug) that we are the ones on foot today while so many others are having to rush up and down. The name Chesterford is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086; the village has been inhabited and the fertile land farmed, for centuries. Going into the village, and out the other side, quite a feature of the place, sadly, is the evidence that people have not accepted the idea that you pick up after your dog. It was like being back in the sixties and not in a good way. But we come across a charming village green with weeping willows and benches for a lunchtime break, bordered by a slim section of the River Cam on its way to Cambridge.

The afternoon walk to Linford is quite long, pleasant, and the rain doesn't materialise. It is very good to arrive in the village and find the Crown welcoming and warm, offering tea and a rest. We have come quite a way east over the last two days, crossed into Essex, and enjoyed the way this part of the path feels historical, and both well-trodden and remote.