

## ROAD SAFETY

The Riders Route inevitably involves crossing and riding along short stretches of busy road, as well as country lanes. You should not contemplate riding the entire length unless you are a fully competent rider and have a traffic-proof horse. Please make sure that you are familiar with the Highway Code and the safety guidelines outlined in the RoSPA leaflet *Riding on the Roads*. There are two key points to remember:

1. Firstly, when you cross major roads, you should remain mounted (you have far more control this way), and not cross until the road is clear in both directions.
2. Secondly, it is essential to be seen. Wear a fluorescent jacket/cap and, ideally, have fluorescent leg bands on your horse.

## OTHER RIDERS INFORMATION

**The Ridgeway:** The Ridgeway Officer, Countryside Section, Library Headquarters, Holton, Oxford, OX9 1QQ.

**The Swan's Way:** County Engineer's Department, Buckinghamshire County Council, County Hall, Aylesbury, Bucks. HP20 1UY (please send an S.A.E.). Free leaflet.

**Peddars Way Route:** Planning Department, Norfolk County Council, County Hall, Martineau Lane, Norwich NR1 2DH. Leaflet price 30p plus postage and packing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Icknield Way Path Riders Route has been developed by Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk County Councils; assisted by the Countryside Commission, the Federation of Suffolk Byway and Bridleway Groups and Herts Countryside Management Service.

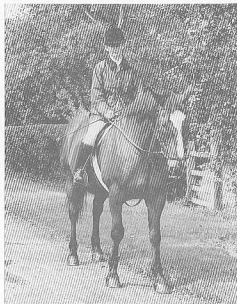
Leaflets have been produced by the Marketing and Publicity Unit, Leisure Services, Bedfordshire County Council.

Any comments about the route and requests for additional leaflets should be sent to: The Countryside Commission, Ortona House, 110 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 1LQ, who will forward comments on to the relevant organisation.

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## THE ICKNIELD WAY PATH



The Icknield Way can claim to be the oldest road in Britain. Today it is once again possible to ride the full length of the chalk ridge which crosses southern England. Three long-distance paths follow the full length of the prehistoric Icknield Way: the Ridgeway National Trail, the Icknield Way Path Riders Route and the Peddars Way Horseriders Route.



# THE ICKNIELD WAY PATH

Telegraph Hill, Hertfordshire - Great  
Chesterford/Cow Lang, Essex  
46 miles



PEDDARS WAY

ICKNIELD WAY  
PATH

RIDGWAY

No. 2



## INTRODUCTION

The Icknield Way can claim to be the oldest road in Britain, with a history dating back to Neolithic times (4000-2000 BC). It was originally the easiest route for communications and trade, running along the chalk ridge that linked the Norfolk coast and the downlands of south-central England. The Icknield Way's parallel trackways followed the open ground on the side of the chalk ridge, between the heavily-forested clay on top and the swampy lowlands below. During the Bronze Age (2000-700 BC) the route became used more frequently and, by the arrival of the Romans, the route was already rich in prehistoric sites.

Today, three linked long-distance paths follow the full length of the prehistoric Icknield Way route. The second of these, the central Icknield Way Path, shadows the Icknield Way as closely as possible for 120 miles. The route offers splendid views over the surrounding countryside, and is dotted with archaeological remains, historic villages and towns, nature reserves and miles of beautiful green lanes.

This leaflet, the middle one in a series of three, describes the central section of the Icknield Way Path Riders Route and its attractions. The Riders Route begins at Bledlow in Buckinghamshire. It joins the Ridgeway National Trail here, which can be followed all the way to Avebury in Wiltshire.

At Roudham Heath in Norfolk, where the route ends, it links with the Peddars Way Horseriders Route, which runs to the Norfolk coast.

In addition to the Riders Route, the Icknield Way Path Walkers Route, described also in three separate leaflets, has been developed. It runs from the start of the Ridgeway National Trail at Ivinghoe Beacon, to Knettishall Heath Country Park in Suffolk. In general, the footpath runs close to, or follows, the Riders Route, but in some instances the two paths are completely separate.

The Riders Route can be used by horseriders, off-road cyclists and walkers.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

The Icknield Way is a complex treasure trove of archaeological remains, waiting to be explored. The relics and sites of man's occupation span several thousands of years, beginning from the earliest Neolithic times, (New Stone Age), continuing into the Iron and Bronze Ages, to the Romans and Saxons, and then more familiarly, through the medieval period to the industrial archaeology of the recent past.

Amongst the most common features of the Icknield Way are the Iron Age barrows or burial mounds which flank its length. Crossing the Icknield Way at right-angles is a series of very distinctive Anglo-Saxon long dykes, or bank and ditch earthworks, which may have once separated the path into territories.

Many finds date from the Bronze Age, such as bronze axes, particularly near the eastern end of the route. The Romans left their mark in the form of buildings and straightened roads.



## THE CHALK GRASSLAND

Throughout its length the Icknield Way runs over chalk, and crosses much of the country's chalk grassland area. Although few unaltered grassland sites now exist, they remain one of the most precious elements in the English countryside. Throughout this century, the application of fertilisers, the cessation of grazing and the ploughing-up of sites has greatly reduced their numbers. Often all that remains of the original grassland, amongst the intensively farmed arable fields, is the verges of the green lanes of the Icknield Way.

Chalk grassland contains a highly intricate mixture of plants, and up to forty different species may be found in a square metre. Some plants are so well suited to the thin infertile soils and grazing practices of traditionally managed downland, that they quickly die out if forced to compete with more vigorous species, which flourish following the addition of fertilisers or cessation of grazing.

In contrast to the plant life, there are no birds unique to the chalk grassland, but the birdwatcher can usually see plenty of interest, including kestrels, barn owls, stone curlews and skylarks. However, it is probably the butterflies which provide the greatest visual attraction for naturalists. Suitably-managed chalk grassland may support many species, and very large populations, of these beautiful creatures.

## WAYMARKING

The route is waymarked and signposted throughout with a distinctive Neolithic flint axe emblem, and is easy to follow with the aid of the leaflets. Wherever the Riders Route is separate from the Walkers Route, the waymarks and signposts are marked 'Riders Route'. The colour of the waymark arrows indicates the status of the right of way: red for byways, blue for bridleways, yellow for footpaths and white for permissive paths. The route can be ridden in either direction, but is described from west to east.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

A detailed guide to the Icknield Way Riders Route is being produced by Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett of the Federation of Suffolk Byway and Bridleway Groups. This will be available in spring 1993, price approximately £8.00, from bookshops or direct from Wimpole Books, Pip's Peace, Kenton, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 6JS.

## ACCOMMODATION

A free accommodation guide, for both walkers and riders routes, is also available from the above address. To receive a copy, please send an S.A.E.

## ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPS

The route can be traced on Ordnance Survey Landranger Sheets 144, 153, 154, 155, 165 and 166, and also on Pathfinder maps in modern lettering (not Old English lettering which indicates the prehistoric trackway). However, riders should note that the 'Icknield Way' route shown on current editions of these maps refers to the Walkers Route originally promoted by the Icknield Way Association. There are plans to add the Riders Route in future editions of the map. If in doubt, follow the way-marked route.

# THE ROUTE

**Telegraph Hill (1)**, named after the wooden telegraph station built here in 1808 to link the Admiralty in London to Great Yarmouth, contains the remains of a Bronze Age round barrow (tumulus) dating from around 2500-1500 BC. The hill is an important chalk grassland nature reserve, carefully-managed to sustain its mosaic of habitats: chalk grassland, scrub and woodland. The deep ruts that climb the ridge here are not prehistoric, but were largely made by the carriages of the gentry attending the racecourse that once stood on the adjoining plateau.

Toot (lookout) Hill in the medieval village of **Pirton (2)**, is a scrub covered mound surrounded by a moat, still containing water in some parts. The mound is the remains of a 12th century motte and bailey earthwork castle. The ditches and scattered ponds nearby may have formed the perimeter defences of a medieval village. The ancient Hambridge Way to the east of the village was probably one of the original alternative Icknield Way routes.

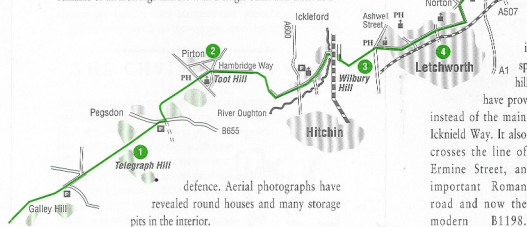
In the village of Ickleford are some fine old buildings and parts of the church date from the twelfth century. In the churchyard is buried the 'gypsy king' Henry Boswell who lived through the reigns of all three of the first Georges, and in his ninety years was said to have travelled every road in England.

Astride the Icknield Way at **Wilbury Hill (3)**, lies what is left of an Iron Age hillfort. Archaeological excavations have revealed evidence of a gateway, buildings and storage pits, though there is little to see today. The north-east corner of the site represents the beginning of Ashwell Street, which runs east past Royston to Melbourn.

**Letchworth (4)**, first of the Garden Cities, and based on the three ancient parishes of Letchworth, Norton and Willian, was

planned by Ebenezer Howard in 1903. With its wide boulevards it is a good example of early town planning and some of its older houses have their own historical interest. The Garden City Heritage Museum is in Norton Way South. Excavations at the eastern end of the town have uncovered remains of Neolithic, Iron Age and Roman settlement as well as a pagan Saxon cemetery. Sections cut across the line of the Icknield Way revealed a deep ditch and a driveway of tracks which was traced as far as the A1(M) at Baldock.

From Letchworth the ride continues to **Arbury Banks (5)**, the remains of an Iron Age hillfort with a single bank and ditch as a



defence. Aerial photographs have revealed round houses and many storage pits in the interior.

**Ashwell (6)** is an ancient settlement around the source of the River Rhee set among huge fields and low hills. It owes its name to the springs that bubble in a dell surrounded by ash trees at the eastern end of the main street. There is a museum in the Town House that shows Ashwell's fascinating links with the past, from prehistoric times onwards. The village has an impressive medieval church with graffiti dating from the time of the Black Death. Dominating the landscape is the church's magnificent spire, crowned by an octagonal lantern and topped by a leaded spike.

For over six miles, between the Cambridgeshire county boundary near Ashwell, and Melbourn to the

east, the route follows **Ashwell Street (7)**. This green lane, up to 40 feet wide in places, is one of the few remnants of unimproved chalk grassland in the area. Ashwell Street runs close to the spring heads on the lower slopes of the chalk hills and is thought, by the early Iron Age, to have provided travellers with a summer alternative

instead of the main Icknield Way. It also crosses the line of Ermine Street, an important Roman road and now the modern B1198. However, the straight route of Ashwell Street itself is not due, as some believe, to Roman realignment but because it is the route that was fixed at the time of the 19th century Enclosure Acts.

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The rectangular layout of **Litlington (8)**, together with evidence of a Roman villa, suggests that the village originated as a Roman settlement. Near to Ashwell Street, a Roman cemetery has been found, surrounded by four walls and yielding Roman coins.

The two villages of **Bassingbourn-cum-Kneesworth (9)** were amalgamated to form one parish in 1966 and are connected by a mile stretch of Causeway. Ashwell Street passes through the village and the parish is bounded by Ermine Street. The large limocene springs to the south-west of Bassingbourn, known locally as Wellhead, consist of a main pool with numerous springs. The site is considered to be a Site of Natural History Interest.

Several old houses, steeply-pitched thatched roofs and old moated residences contribute to the picturesque appearance of **Melbourn (10)**, which has been an important place for centuries due to its location on the main London to Cambridge Road. Its history can be traced through every era: prehistoric burial sites are nearby and Bronze Age implements have been unearthed; there is evidence of a

East of Melbourn the route is linked, by a quiet road and permissive path, to another long length of green lane which continues beyond the **Heydon Ditch (11)** towards Crishall Grange. The Heydon Ditch is the most westerly of four Anglo-Saxon 'ditches' or 'dykes' which lie across the chalklands in Cambridgeshire. These

earthworks have the ditch on the south-western side of the bank, and were presumably used to protect Anglo-Saxon territory to the north-east from cattle rustling or cavalry raids from Mercians or the British. They attacked from the west, moving along the Icknield Way between the fens on one side and dense woodland on the other.

The **chalk hills (12)** in the north-west corner of Essex offer extensive views of the surrounding countryside - and the M11! Originally the hills were unenclosed sheep walks, but have now been ploughed and converted to arable land. Modern herbicides are causing a decline in the chalk arable flowers and, as a

result, the typical chalk flora is now largely confined to road verges and banks.

At **Strethall Field (13)**, the old green lane follows the line of a Roman road which originally led to Braughing. Surrounded by arable fields, it is a haven for wildlife, so please look out for animal holes.

In the distance a tree-covered barrow - a bronze-age burial mound typically built on local high points - can be seen on the hilltop at Valance Farm, near Great Chesterford. On the side of Coploe Hill, well-preserved strip lynchets, used for medieval terrace farming on steep slopes with thin soils, are also visible.

Take great care crossing the M11 (14) by the brideway bridge and be prepared for trains on the railway line next to it.

Today **Great Chesterford (15)** may seem like a sleepy English village, but back in the 4th century it was a hub of Roman activity, housing a walled town with an important military fort. Along with Colchester, it was one of only two walled Roman towns in Essex. The stout, defensive wall, however, still visible in the 18th century, has since been pulled down and used for building materials. Many of the finds from the Roman town are in the Saffron Walden museum. Great Chesterford

also once possessed a short-lived railway, which the Jockey Club supported as a private venture so that MPs could go racing and

then return in time to take part in the evening debate.

Traditionally, the chief occupation of Great Chesterford was agriculture. A system of open field farming with common pasture and woodland was practised until the passing of the Enclosure Act. **Cow Lane (16)** was used by the villagers to take their cattle up to the common on Burton Hill where they had a right to graze.

