

How old is the Ickniel Way?

Some aspects of local heritage are well known to most people: historic churches, Roman roads and castles are the sorts of places that we are all familiar with, even if only vaguely. A good example in North Hertfordshire is the Ickniel Way, which is the name of local roads and paths and which is followed by the A505 from Baldock to Royston.



Ickniel Way at Ickleford, North Hertfordshire

It [has been described](#) as “*the oldest road in Britain*”, consisting of “*prehistoric pathways, old when the Romans came*” and it “*survives as splendid tracks and green lanes along the chalk “spine” of England*”. This would make it one of the most important ancient monuments in Britain, if all this were true. But how much of what we think we know is based on actual fact? If we want to understand the past, we need to question every bit of received wisdom that is passed on from generation to generation.

The conventional view

The Ickniel Way is usually thought of as prehistoric trackway of great antiquity, in use from perhaps as early as the Mesolithic (before 4000 BC) but more certainly from the Neolithic (4000-2000 BC). It runs from East Anglia to the Thames Valley. Although according to some, it starts at Grimes Graves near Thetford, others extend it north to Holme-next-the-Sea or east to Lowestoft; it ends near Wallingford on the Thames, although

it is sometimes extended west along the Berkshire Ridgeway to Marlborough.

It was one of the “four royal roads” (*quatuor chimini regales*) mentioned by the Anglo-Norman historian [Henry of Huntingdon](#). According to him, an ancient king of Britain “constructed four great highways in it, from one end of the island to the other”, of which “the first is from west to east and is called the Icknield Way”. Henry did not say exactly where Icknield Way ran.

In the 1320s, another historian, [Ranulf Higden](#), named the four royal roads as Foss Way, Watling Street, Ermine Street and Rikeneldes (or Hikenhild) Strete. According to him, it *bygynneþ in Meneuia in West Wales (“starts in St Davids, in West Wales”), streccheþ forþ by Worcester... by Birmingham... by Derby... by 3ork... (“stretches on by Worcester... by Birmingham... by Derby... by York...”)* and *so forþ anon to Tynemouþe (“so forward on to Tynemouth”)*. This is clearly not “our” Icknield Way and today, Ryknild Street is a name given to a Roman road through the West Midlands. The name Ryknild derives from Middle English *atter Ikenild* (“at Icknield”), so there was apparently some confusion in the High Middle Ages about which road was Icknield Way.

Early archaeologists knew that three of Higden’s roads were built in the Roman period but suspected that the Icknield Way might be much more ancient. O G S Crawford, who worked for the Ordnance Survey, came up with the idea of four prehistoric routes across Britain: according to him, the Icknield Way was used to distribute flint from Grimes Graves across the south of Britain. He added the Jurassic Thoroughfare, from Lincolnshire down to the Thames Valley, the North Downs Way and South Downs Way, both south of the Thames. These were the main routes in the south (actually, just in England) through a landscape that, by the Neolithic, was densely forested and largely impassable.

In Crawford’s day, knowledge of prehistoric settlement in Britain suggested that it was restricted to the ridges above the clay soils of the Midlands, where ridgeways gave access through the woodland. Icknield Way and the two Downs Ways followed chalk ridges, while the Jurassic Way followed a limestone belt. The soils that had developed around these soils were thin, supported thinner woodland and were more easily worked by pioneering Neolithic farmers.

The idea of prehistoric trackways was complicated by [Alfred Watkins’s](#) “discovery” of what he called [ley lines](#). He believed that all ancient sites were largely of Neolithic origin, linked by “old straight tracks”, and could be discovered by seeking alignments of sites on Ordnance Survey maps. He “discovered” them in 1921, when he realised that the routes were marked by present day and ancient landscape features. The archaeological community could not accept such a dense network of Neolithic tracks, which went over the tops of high hills, crossed rivers at points too deep to ford and were as common in places where no Neolithic settlements were known. Ley lines do not exist, as shown by Tom Williamson and Liz Bellamy’s study, [Ley Lines in Question](#), published in 1983.

Nevertheless, the way that ley lines were taken up by enthusiastic amateurs who, from the 1960s, started to link them with [mystical sources of an unspecified spiritual energy](#) made archaeologists wary of even thinking about prehistoric travel. Although people clearly did

move around and objects were traded, Crawford's principal paths were accepted as the only major pre-Roman routes.

Of course, people had never forgotten that roads were built during the Roman occupation, even if their exact routes were often forgotten and many had fallen out of use. [Thomas Codrington](#) (1829-1918) was an engineer who published the first serious study of [Roman roads in Britain](#) in 1903, which eventually ran to three editions, the last of which was reprinted in 1928. According to him, "*Icknild Street... bears but little likeness to a Roman road... except between Newmarket and Chesterford*". His work was expanded by Ivan Margary in the 1950s; he worked with a group of amateurs, collectively known as the Viatores, who published an enthusiastically dense network in the south-east midlands. According to their research, Icknield Way as a Roman road. In contrast, Margary vacillated about its use in the Roman period, but included it in the third edition of his book, in 1973, partly on the basis of excavated evidence.

This included the site at Blackhorse Road in Letchworth Garden City, where John Moss-Eccardt's excavations from 1957 to 1973 revealed the ditches of a road on the traditional line. They dated from the late first century BC on, while the road itself had worn itself into a hollow. Nearby, cropmarks show a road running on more-or-less the right line across the northern edge of Roman Baldock. Gil Burleigh's excavations in the 1980s revealed one of the ditches on Clothall Common, where they proved to be of the same date as at Blackhorse Road, although a line of earlier Iron Age postholes, apparently a fence, ran across the road, showing that it was not on this line before about 100 BC.



The Icknield Way was also thought to have played a role in the Saxon invasions of the fifth century. One of the puzzles of archaeology was evidence for very early Saxon settlement in the Upper Thames valley, well away from the coast where these sea-borne invaders were believed to have landed. These early fifth-century remains cluster in the area where the Icknield Way crosses the river. Because there was equally early settlement in East Anglia, at the other end of the Icknield Way, the archaeologist E T Leeds hypothesised in 1925 that the West Saxons had invaded along the route, starting out in East Anglia and moving south-west to settle around Dorchester-on-Thames. This idea was always controversial and few other specialists in the period accepted it. It is also wrong, partly because the Icknield Way passes through a large area with no early Saxon settlement, which includes all of North Hertfordshire.

Locally, the Icknield Way is mentioned in an early medieval charter, as *þa stræt* to the south of Norton. Old English *stræt*, from Latin *strata*, was generally used to designate a road of Roman origin; the word became street in modern English. Elsewhere in North Hertfordshire, the road was recorded in a document of 1638 as *Edeway* in Lilley and in 1686 as *Ede Way* in Hexton. These names derive from the Old English term *þēod-weg*, meaning “national road”, which suggests that its long distance character was known when people spoke Old English (600-1150). It forms the boundary between Lilley and Hexton. It’s important to note that the early documents don’t call it Icknield Way, which first happens during the reign of Henry II (1154-1189).

Critique from historians

Early in the present century, the apparently well established idea of the Icknield Way as an ancient track began to fall apart. It was realised that the “four royal roads” were a twelfth-century invention, never mentioned before the 1120s. Their origin had been set in prehistory by [Geoffrey of Monmouth](#), whose *Gesta Britonum* (*‘Deeds of the Britons’*, better known as *‘The History of the Kings of Britain’*) was a work of historical fiction that pretended to be real history and was taken seriously by some of his contemporaries. The idea of these was adopted by other writers who foisted them on the pre-Norman English kings, including in the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris* (*‘The Laws of Edward the Confessor’*), a hoax from the reign of Stephen (1125-1154).

The name occurs in charters from the tenth century onwards, as *Ic(c)enhilde weg*, *Icenhylte*, *Icenilde weg*, *Ycenilde weg* and *Icenhilde weg*. Only one of these (the last) is on the route today accepted as the Icknield Way: they apply to a ridgeway running between Wanborough (Wiltshire), Hardwell in Uffington, Harwell, Blewbury and Princes Risborough. This forty-mile stretch from Wiltshire to Buckinghamshire is our earliest evidence for the use of the name Icknield to apply to a road or track. It does not occur anywhere in Hertfordshire or eastwards, and placenames such as Ickleford, Ickleton or Icklingham are not related to it. The problem is that although these early charters date from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, they exist only in thirteenth-century copies, so we cannot be sure if the

name was genuinely included in the original or if it was added by a scribe who knew about the “Four Royal Roads”.

Critique from prehistorians

Archaeologists’ understanding of prehistoric Britain has changed a great deal since Crawford’s time. We now know, thanks to more extensive pollen analysis, that the landscape was never densely forested and that in many places there was only scrubby grassland. We have found that even the heavy clay lands, once thought deserted until the Iron Age, were cleared and farmed from the Neolithic on. This means that the population of Britain, while small, was still larger than once thought.

Prehistorians now also believe that early trade did not depend on long-distance routes. Instead, items travelled through what is known as down-the-line exchange, in which they are passed between people time after time and eventually end up a long way from where they were made. This happened particularly with unusual or valuable objects. It almost certainly did not involve professional merchants engaging in a free trade system, which is something that has developed only in the last few centuries.

As our knowledge of prehistory has increased thanks to more aerial photography, geophysics, fieldwalking and excavation, we have discovered that the supposed concentration of sites around Ickniel Way does not exist. Instead, we can see that this was the zone where pioneers of aerial photography were best able to document crop marks and earthworks. Since the 1980s especially, the distribution of sites has expanded away from what has been termed the “Ickniel Belt” so that, at any period, we find people living and working across all the habitable parts of the British Isles.

Ancient travel seems to have involved both tracks and rivers. Water-borne transport was both efficient and easy, so it was perhaps the preferred method and we know that the bluestones at Stonehenge were transported from Dyfed to Wiltshire by sea and river, with only minimal overland transport. Movement along the coast was commonplace from the Neolithic onwards, when polished stone tools from places like Mounts Bay in Cornwall or Penmaenmawr in Gwynedd were exchanged across the whole of Britain.

Sarah Harrison’s research

This critique of the concept of the Ickniel Way as a long-distance trading route derives from research carried out by Sarah Harrison, published in [The Archaeological Journal](#) in 2003. As well as looking at the documentary record, she examined the archaeological evidence for the route along its entire claimed length. She sought out sites along it where there ought to have been traces of a track and discovered that there is no evidence for its existence in prehistory and that the route is blocked in many places by large sites of different dates. These include long linear ditches that extend right across the supposed belt of land used for travel.

This was true of the accepted route apart from in one single stretch, the part between Royston and Dunstable that passes through north Hertfordshire and South Bedfordshire.

Even so, the earliest evidence for a track on this line belongs to the end of the first century BC. Elsewhere, she found that places where the line seemed well established and had been accepted by the Viatores as a road improved in the Roman period, as at Aston Clinton, was not a route at all until much more recently. There, the “Lower Icknield Way” proved to be completely blocked by Iron Age and Roman features, including enclosures and fields. In south-east Cambridgeshire, it also seemed well established but is cut across by co-axial features, including tracks and boundaries that are continuous.

The Cambridgeshire Dykes, which cross the route, have long been known about. They include massive earthworks that survive as impressive landscape monuments, such as Devil’s Ditch and Fleam Dyke. They were long suspected to date from the fifth and sixth centuries AD and this has now been confirmed by archaeological excavation. They make no provision for a major route through them as all the gaps followed by modern roads have been cut more recently.

Ultimately, it seems that the Icknield Way was an invention of the High Middle Ages, connected with early twelfth-century writers. Sarah Harrison found that some of the “missing” sections were “filled in” during the 18th century because antiquaries “knew” that the road existed, so where they were unable to find it, they built it. She suggests that the “Upper” and “Lower” Icknield Way in Buckinghamshire were created at this time, while unrelated “branches” such as Ashwell Street and Hambridge Way were brought into the system. These were real but probably medieval trackways.

The idea of the Icknield Way as a long distance trading made a good story and convinced early prehistorians and before that, the pioneering antiquaries of the early modern world. They built their hypotheses around what they thought was established “fact”.

Ickleford and the Icknield Way

Ickleford is first recorded in the twelfth century as *Ikelineford* (it is not mentioned in Domesday Book as it was part of the manor of Pirton at that time). The name probably derives from Old English **Iclingaford*, ‘the ford of Icel’s people’. Icel was the name of an ancestor of the kings of Mercia, who were known as the [Iclingas](#). The name has nothing to do with Icknield Way, despite a superficial similarity, which only involves the first three letters of the modern form of the name.



St Katherine's Church, Ickleford

However, the meaning of Icknield (*Ikenild* in the twelfth century) is obscure. The idea that the Ickn- element derives from the British tribal name Icenī is fanciful (despite what Wikipedia claims!). The -c- would have become a -tch- sound: the name of the River Itchen in Hampshire probably derives from the same word as the tribal name, being Brittonic **Icēnā*. Icknield is more likely to be an Old or Middle English word; the *ican-* element may mean 'increase'.

Icknield Way in North Hertfordshire

In North Hertfordshire, the track that we now call Icknield Way was known as *þa stræt* ("the street", meaning a Roman road) on the south side of Norton in 1007 and as *Edeway* in Hexton and Lilley during the seventeenth century. In other words, it was not being called Icknield Way in the medieval and early modern periods, yet this is the one section of the road we can show to be genuinely ancient. How do we resolve the apparent contradiction? The answer is another ancient track, known as Avenell Way, rediscovered by Valory Hurst. It runs through southern Cambridgeshire, through Bassingbourn and Litlington, joining the A505 at Odsey. A section was [excavated across it](#) at Steeple Morden Quarry, close to Ashwell Station, where it was found to have originated at the end of the first century BC. At

Odsey, its alignment south-west from Litlington continues as the line of the A505, gradually turning to a more west-south-westerly line as it approaches Baldock. This is what we know now as the “Ickniel Way”.

East of Odsey, no archaeological evidence has been found for the Ickniel Way. The line of the A505 turns to a more easterly alignment as it leaves Odsey, heading towards Royston. Here, the Roman Ermine Street crosses the Ickniel Way at the town centre, and it has always been a puzzle that there is not the slightest trace of a Roman settlement at this point. As a supposedly major road junction, we might expect a trading post to have grown up, yet Roman activity in the town lay some distance to the south-west of the junction. Should we perhaps think of the road between Odsey and Dunstable as the Avenell Way? If this blog post has seemed a bit negative, that’s because it has involved debunking a familiar and well loved concept that has turned out to be a misconception. The idea of the Ickniel Way is firmly ingrained in local consciousness, with a long history of almost 900 years. The origins of the idea are an interesting story in their own right, but they involve medieval writers inventing a past that they thought ought to have existed but for which they had no evidence at all. In many ways, exploring a “wrong” idea can often be more informative than repeating a “correct” one, while the way this particular idea was used by early archaeologists helps to tell the history of the discipline.

The last words are best left to Sarah Harrison. *“Ickniel Way is one of the last bastions of the traditional archaeology”,* which saw *“prehistoric activity... confined to light land”* and *“‘trade’ meant much the same as it does now”*. *“It appears to have been at most a medium-range Saxon trackway”* between Wantage in Wiltshire and Princes Risborough in Buckinghamshire. *“But for the creative minds of... medieval chroniclers it... would have been... forgotten”* and *“it is... curious that something for which there is so little evidence should be so secure a feature of British archaeology”*.

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