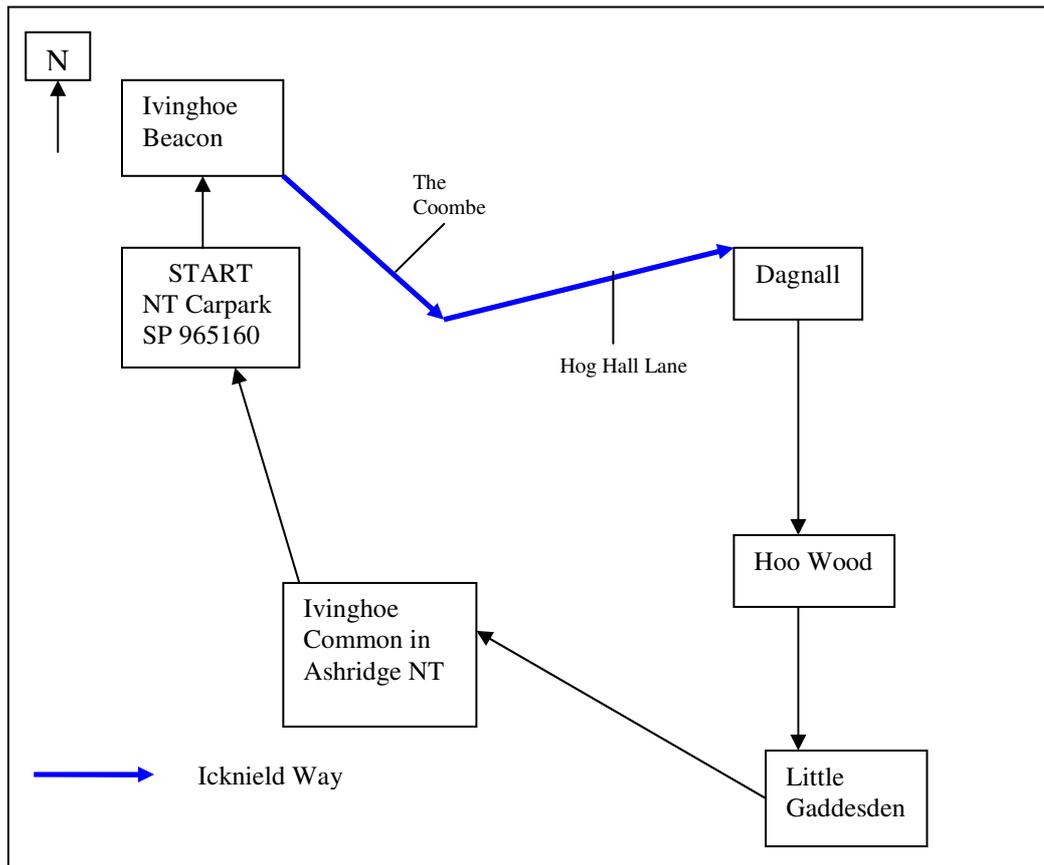


The Icknield Way. Part 1 from Ivinghoe Beacon to Dagnall. 23 January 2010

The map for this section is Explorer 181. The walk started in the National Trust (NT) Ashridge car park at SP 965160. It meets the Icknield Way at Ivinghoe Beacon before following it down to Dagnall. The return route heads South from Dagnall towards Little Gaddesden before returning through the statuesque beauty of the Ashridge beeches. Total distance: 12-14 km.



Today the approach to Ivinghoe Beacon was from the SW along the remaining metres of the Ridgeway past Iron Age fortifications (dating from 500 BC) then up the chalk slopes of the Beacon to its summit at 233 masl. The summit boasts a trig point and a route map of the Ridgeway (which ends here). It is also the start of Icknield Way which takes off towards the SE, heading towards the Coombe, Hog Hall Lane and Dagnall the route today took in this section and then circled back from Dagnall through Ashridge Forest to the Start point (SP965160).



Ivinghoe Beacon from the iron age earthworks



Ivinghoe Beacon trig point (231 masl)

The grassland of the Beacon is cropped by sheep which deter the invasion of scrub species (mainly hawthorn and blackthorn) and ensure a profusion of chalkland flowers in the spring – and butterflies like the chalkhill blue and marbled white in the summer. Not much sign of either today.

Down now on the eroded paths – past unploughed pasture characterised by the nest mounds of the yellow meadow ant (*Lasius flavus*) – towards the Coombe with its mixed woodland of mainly oak, beech and ash. This wood is gently regenerating itself as fallen trees are recycled at an imperceptible pace providing essential habitats for flora and fauna before relinquishing their nutrients for future generations. A Cypress plantation is home to fallow deer which can be seen throughout this stretch of the Way



***Lasius* spp. mounds typify unploughed pasture**



An oak is recycled in the Coombe

Few flowers are to be found at this time of year, but the old faithful gorse (*Ulex* spp.) can always be found, as, too can maidens waiting to be kissed (also not much in evidence today). Hazel catkins are fattening on the twigs awaiting the opening of the female flowers when they will shed their copious pollen and ensure next year's hazel nut crop for the (unfortunately only grey) squirrels.



Fungi are to be found in abundance in the winter and do, of course play a vital role in the woodland recycling process. Some remarkable growths can be seen in the shelter belt alongside Hog hall Lane and throughout Ashridge forest.



From left to right: Jew's ear (*Auricularia* spp.) is usually found on elder; this Honey fungus (*Armillaria* spp.) is an indication that not is well with it's tree host; and King Alfred's cakes (*Daldinia* spp.) join forces with a polypore and hairy sterium (*Stereum* spp.) to reduce this dead beech to soil organic matter.

Down towards Dagnall and its Italian style church, but before the village was the welcome sight of a red kite soaring above the patch of woodland to the left¹. Re-introduced in the early 1990s, these magnificent raptors – previously persecuted to extinction in the region by over-zealous game keepers – now reign supreme in the wooded Chilterns.

This was the end of the first stretch of the Way which from here forges ahead to Whipsnade while this circular walk turns south to pass to the E of Well Farm (SP992153) before traversing Hoo Wood and reaching the Ringshall – Little Gaddesden road (at SP992138). A couple of hundred metres South on this road will lead to a footpath on the RHS which takes a 'V' –shaped turn before heading North towards Ringshall where it meets the B4506 (SP985142). The route can now meander through Ashridge roughly parallel to Beacon road (i.e NW) which will lead you back to the car park at SP965160.

¹ <http://www.watlington.org/downloads/wheretoseekites.pdf>