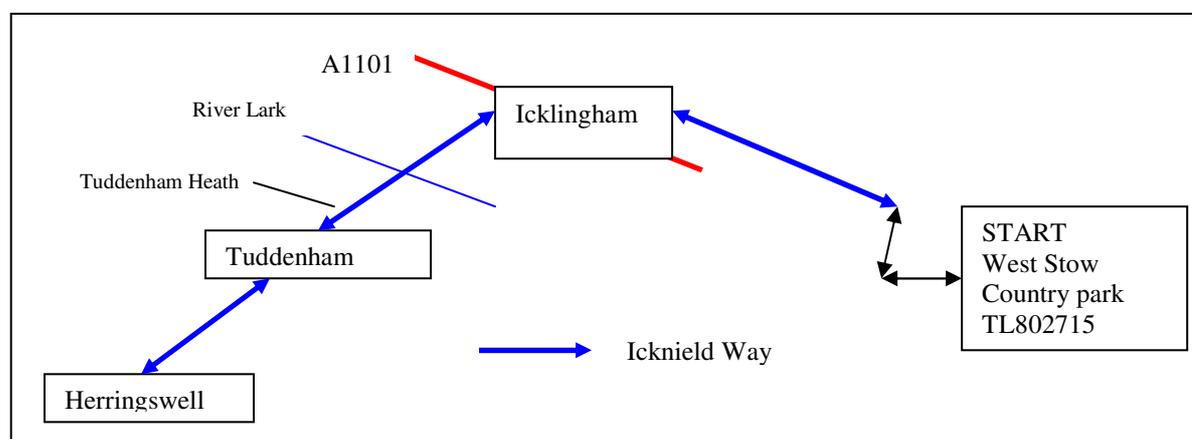


The Icknield Way. Part 22 from West Stow to Herringswell, 29 January 2011

Maps: Explorer 226 & 229. This section was taken in reverse (as we started from Thetford rather than Bedford). Because of the attractive prospect of a visit to West Stow Anglo-Saxon village (TL802715) that is where we parked and started the walk by heading generally W to TL793718 (Point C on the Icknield Way Path Guide – p59) where we joined the Way. From here the route passes by Icklingham and Tuddenham before reaching Herringswell – the arrival point of Walk 21. The Brecklands (or Brecks) generally offer open access and the meanderings back through the Cavenham Heath Nature reserve are a real treat. 20 km.

Starting at West Stow allows a visit to the Anglo-Saxon village reconstruction¹ and also to the café where the (outside) bird feeder is a riot of tits (blue, great and coal), nuthatches, numerous finches, dunnocks, squirrels and exotic jungle fowl descendants. With luck you may catch sight of a crossbill prising open the spruce cones at the visitors' centre. A stroll westwards for ½ mile through the Country Park will eventually lead to the NE-heading drove and the connecting point with the Way (at TL793718). From here the Way and Lark Valley Path join to pass through typical Breckland with pine wind breaks and flat, mean soils. As the Way passes to the N of Icklingham, watch out for the floods of birds attracted by the back-yard bird feeders (it's the café scene repeated and multiplied with addition of green and gold finches, and a linnet). Also flocks of redwings and fieldfares occupy the grass field to the S. There are useful footpath routes from the A1101 which help to avoid main-road walking (miserable at the best of times). From TL770732 take the path first NW then SW, cross the main road and join the track leading to Cavenham Heath Nature Reserve.



This track is delightful – it crosses the River Lark at Temple Staunch Gauging Station and enters a fascinating landscape of heather, birch and alder. Tarry a while to catch glimpses of nightjars and stone curlews (that would be a real plus, but they *are* said to nest here). For us there was a tree creeper. The track leads on through Breckland passing open access Tuddenham Heath Wood, to arrive at Tuddenham itself. The Way now crosses the road and continues as a farm track heading SW, passing Jacob's sheep grazing in a damp paddock where a heron kept them company. Snowdrops are emerging from their winter freeze at this time. And cow parsley leaves are also readying themselves for the Spring rush of this early umbel.

¹ <http://www.stedmundsbury.gov.uk/sebc/play/weststow-asv.cfm>



Brecklands skyline (monsters?)



Temple staunch gauging station



Nightjar and stone curlew



Breckland heath (heather and birch)



Alder catkins



Gorse



Harbingers of Spring. Snowdrops are emerging and cow parsley leaves are starting to photosynthesize. And a Jacob's sheep.



After ½ mile (TL 733709) there is a turn to the right (SW) with no Icknield Way mark (so be alert). This leads through commercial vegetable producing farmland to Herringswell. With luck you may catch sight of grazing fallow deer around here. Another point to ponder is the excessive soil manipulation which seems to be the choice of vegetable producers that inhabit this region. Soils are ploughed, harrowed and ridged before crop establishment. There is, however evidence to show that farmers are becoming increasingly aware of the value of soil organic matter as an essential ingredient of soil health. Straw bales are split and spread over the soil as a protective and ameliorative measure. But, in fact, the damage has already been done by the heavy machinery which destroys structure and compacts the soil at depth so limiting root growth and water storage capacity. So there is a need for even heavier machinery to undo the damage, and also for irrigation to compensate for the reduced water infiltration and increased surface runoff.



Damaged soil with compaction under the wheelings. Straw cover as an organic matter amendment.

There is no obvious circular route for this section – but that is amply compensated for by the marvellous trails on Cavenham Heath (wetland, woodlands and heath). Another option would be to take Sandy Drove (due N on the eastern edge of Tuddenham village at TL738716). This leads to Tuddenham Heath and its open access paths which bring you back to the Way.