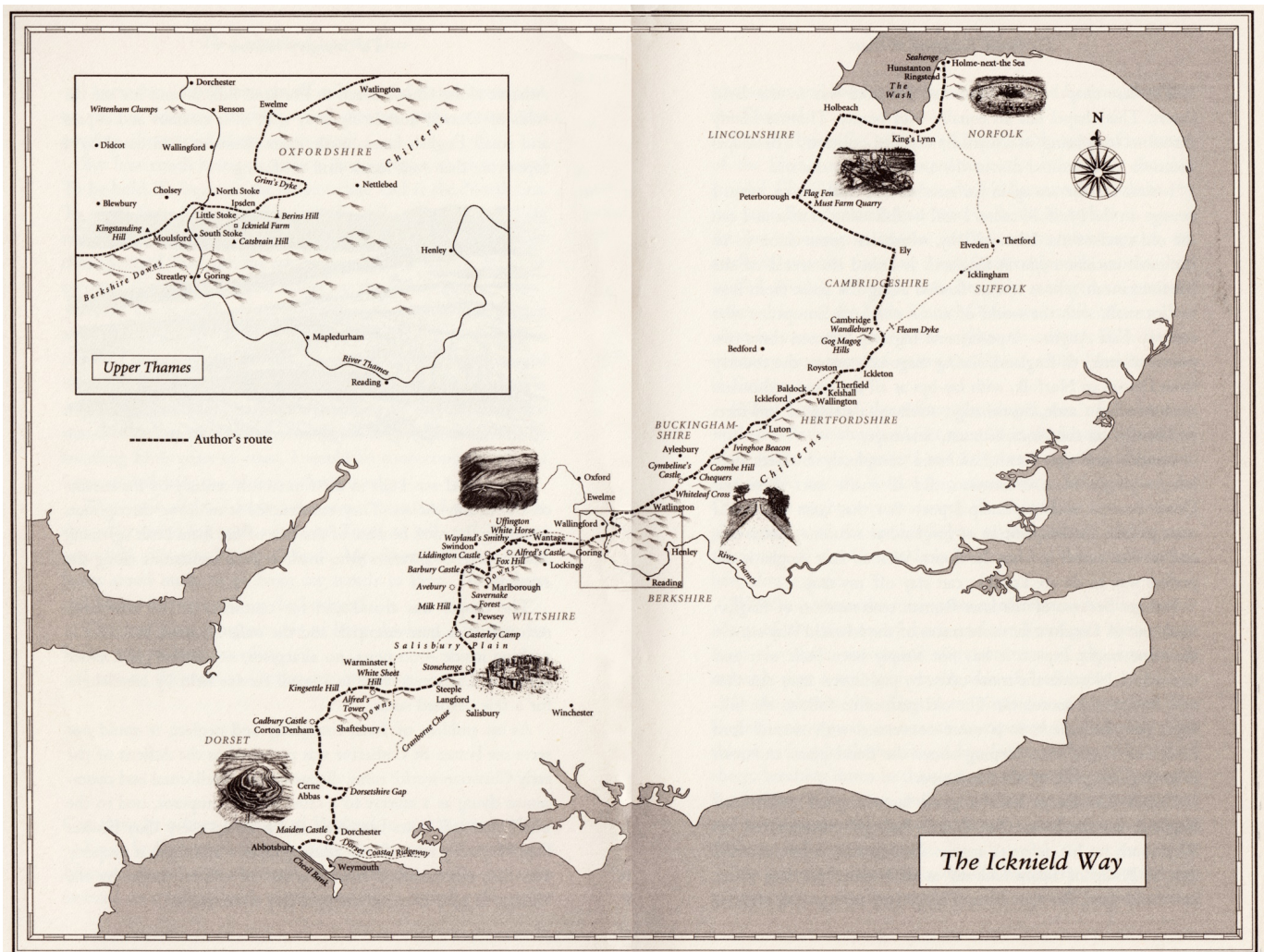


## The Icknield Way

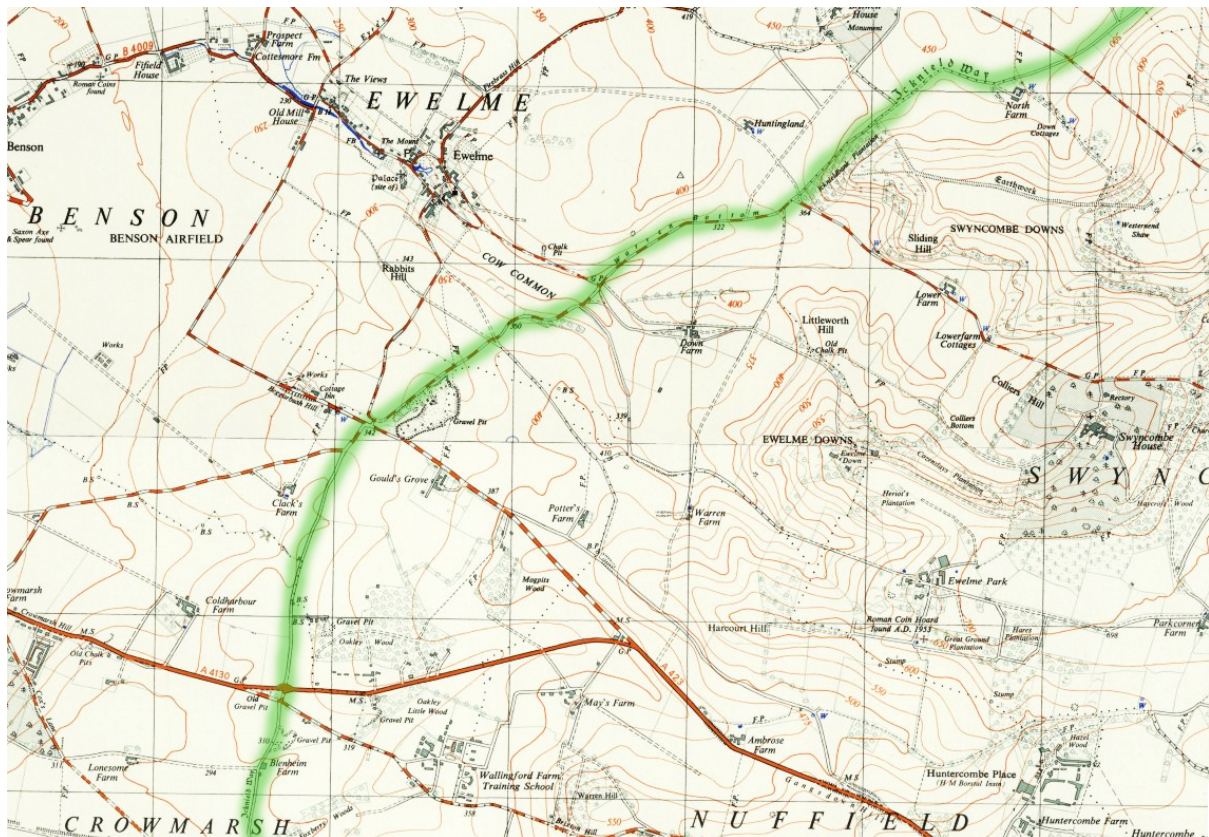
### Ewelme News, June-July 2016

Half a mile south of Ewelme runs the Icknield Way, part of a trade route, reputedly Iron Age, and more than 3,000 years old. Was it the proximity of the major highway of its day, plus the supply of spring water in a sheltered fold of the hills that attracted the first homesteads here – it's probable? Ewelme's portion is metalled until it skirts Swyncombe Woods when it becomes a bridleway heading east towards Watlington.

The complete route crosses England diagonally, and it is still possible to traverse it from the coast of Dorset (Abbotsbury), to the Norfolk Wash (Holme-next-the-Sea), a distance of some 400 miles. From Wiltshire to Norfolk it is known as the Icknield Way, but in places it merges with, or runs parallel to, other ancient routes – where it has alternative names. An example of a nearby parallel track is The Ridgeway, which for 87 miles follows the chalk escarpments of the Berkshire Downs and Chiltern Hills, the preferred winter route when the [Lower] Icknield Way would be unsuitable for cattle droving. Between Lewknor and Ivinghoe there are two parallel tracks known as Upper and Lower Icknield Way.



The route avoids crossing water, except for the Thames at Goring. This may explain why it does not pass through settlements, as it generally kept to the higher ground and existed before our ancestors built their homes lower down, to take advantage of the springs.



**Map showing Icknield Way in the vicinity of Ewelme**

The trackway has many mysteries surrounding it regarding its age and name, but all do agree it is certainly pre-Roman, perhaps Celto-British or even earlier. It veers by the prehistoric sites of Maiden Castle, Stonehenge, Avebury, and Seahenge on the Norfolk coast. (Our 1998 fund-raising metal detecting day unearthed a 14<sup>th</sup> Century priest's seal belonging to Richard of Avebury, who unfortunately lost his seal near Ewelme while travelling to or from Avebury on the Icknield Way).

The Icknield Way was considered so important that in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century it was included among the four major roadways known as Royal highways, maintained by order of the King, and his protection covered travellers using them. The other three were the Roman roads of Watling Street, Ermine Street and the Fosse Way.

Some theorise it is named after the Icenii tribe of Norfolk (Boudicca's people), or from Ichen, meaning cattle. Anglo-Saxon charters from 903AD onwards refer to the Icenhylte or [Y]Icenhilde Weg; and from Cambridgeshire to Berkshire Icknield or Ikenildes Way is used. Ikeniledes occurs in documents from the reign of Henry III (1216-1272) relating to lands in Beds, Bucks and Cambs. Locally, on a map of Shirburn dated 1716, it was the Hackney Way, and in Norfolk, Peddars Way to its meeting with the Wash.

It is claimed to be the route that linked the traders of the Mediterranean world sailing to the Dorset coast with the Northern Europeans who landed in East Anglia, so varied cargo from foreign parts would have been conveyed inland. It is surprising to learn of the assortment of precious items that Neolithic and Bronze Age peoples prized. Gold jewellery, finely wrought flint axes and arrowheads, glass bead necklaces, jadeite quarried in northern Italy and the Aegean, amber from the Baltic, pommels of daggers made from walrus ivory and blue faience beads from Egypt. Home produced

items could include jet from Yorkshire, and incredibly, Norfolk flint has been discovered on Salisbury Plain.

The human skeleton discovered in 2002 at Amesbury near Stonehenge dating to circa 2,300 BC is called the ‘Amesbury Archer’. Analysis of the bones showed he originally came from the Alps! He was buried with arrowheads that gave him his name, and also with artefacts that came from France and Spain, including the earliest dateable copper and gold objects in Britain. He may well have walked past Ewelme on the Icknield Way to get to Stonehenge, having crossed the North Sea from Europe to East Anglia.



**View along the Icknield Way near Ewelme**

Next time we travel on the Kings Highway, now an insignificant narrow road that by-passes Ewelme below the Common, it's worth a moment to ponder its ancient distinction, and the countless folk that have trekked along it.

*Ewelme Village Archive*