The Icknield Way

What is the Icknield Way?

The Icknield Way is thought to be the oldest road in Britain. It consists of prehistoric pathways that extend from Dorset to Norfolk although it is more of a corridor than an exact path. It was probably a route for travellers and traders. It may have been named after the Iceni, a tribe who were based in East Anglia from the Iron Age onwards.

Did you know...

...up until about 9000 years ago people could walk across to Holland without crossing sea so the route may have originally extended into continental Europe?

The Icknield Way and Chalk

The route roughly follows the chalk escarpment that stretches across the south of England. The chalk was laid down 150 million years ago when this area was covered by a warm sea. The tiny algae in the sea formed microscopic plates of calcium carbonate known as Coccoliths which built up over millions of years.

Chalk soaks up water like a sponge and then delivers it up as sparkling, clear chalk streams. Prehistoric travellers and settlers followed the chalk because it was well drained and yet there was a reliable supply of clean water from the streams. Either side of the chalk were heavier soils and it was easier to walk along the chalk ridge.
Why are chalk streams important?

Our chalk streams have characteristic features that support special wildlife habitats and species. It is the quality of the water as well as the gravel of the riverbed that make chalk streams so precious for many rare species.

Did you know...

...80% of the world’s chalk streams are in England and most of these are in the south? They provide unique habitats for wildlife including many rare species and we have a special responsibility to look after them.

...the route is peppered with ancient sites associated with ceremony; where people have shared meaningful times together in these places - a bit like outdoor performance art?

Sources and Further information

www.icknieldwaypath.co.uk
www.icknieldwaytrail.org.uk
www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway/
Chalk links Factsheets: www.northwessexdowns.org.uk/publications-resources/landscape-2.html
Chalk Streams www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/habitats/chalk-streams