

From a Wild Frontier to the Promised Land?

– discovering Suffolk paths

John Andrews



Lavenham

How it all began

In December 1970 I left my teaching job in the Yorkshire Pennines to take up a new post in a quiet corner of West Suffolk. I had always been an enthusiastic walker, learning at an early age to enjoy strolling through peaceful glades in the New Forest or across the glorious sunny freshness of the Hampshire Downs. As a resident of Yorkshire for some 10 years I had also profited from the proximity of the Moors and Dales to wander through very different kinds of scenery.

Arriving in much less populated West Suffolk very quickly proved a shock to the system. In many ways, things moved more slowly and casually here.

As spring arrived – and that at least came sooner than I had been used to in the previous 10 years, I started to try to explore the footpaths that I could see marked by little red dots on my newly acquired Ordnance Survey maps. There weren't many to be found, but, on the face of it, enough to allow me to get off the local roads for an hour or two.

What optimism! I looked in vain for signposts to help me locate the paths on the OS one-inch maps. The advent of the much more helpful green 'Pathfinders' was still some years ahead. It was a largely vain pursuit. Now and then I could find a few yards of track heading in what appeared to be the right direction – but not for long. It was then that I recollected reading about the Ramblers Association and found an address in London, to which I wrote for advice. Back came some useful literature and an application form. Thus it was that, in October 1971, I joined the Association.

Almost immediately my membership card arrived, accompanied by a letter inviting me to become a local footpaths secretary and baiting the trap with a promise of lots of maps showing the rights of way network marked on them, if I felt able to take up the invitation. Why not? So, I was hooked!

Starting to discover the reality

My newly acquired advice notes spoke of something called a 'definitive map' and promised me that I would find a copy of this important item in the offices of the county council and of the local district council. Since the office of the Mildenhall Rural District Council was in the town of that name, where I was now teaching, that seemed the obvious place to start.

I approached the lady behind the desk and carefully explained my mission. She looked dumbfounded and went off in search of the Clerk of the Council, a pleasant and thoughtful man whom I had already met, as his daughter was in one of my classes. He was no better informed, but made a few notes and promised to investigate the matter.



A typical Suffolk view from the footpath - near Denston

About a week later he called me *"You are quite right"*, he said, *"I've found it – in a cardboard box in the attic! I've been having a good look at it and it's produced at least one embarrassing surprise. We've just built our new planning office on top of a public footpath!"*

The maps that I had been sent by Ramblers' Southern Area office were copies of OS 1: 25,000 sheets onto which some unknown (to me) saint had evidently spent many hours patiently marking by purple and green ink lines the positions of the rather sparse rights of way network in that part of the world.

It was armed with these that I set forth with greater confidence to explore the countryside of West Suffolk. Cambridgeshire and Norfolk were on my doorstep, but they would have to wait. Was ever confidence more misplaced? Lines on maps are all very well, but they can't be ploughed up, blocked by crops or dense natural vegetation, intersected by deep ditches or impassably blocked by more formidable man-made obstacles. I can't say that I found none of this supposed network of public paths to be free of obstacles, but that was probably true of no more than a quarter of it.

I wasn't expecting this

Quite apart from that aspect, there were the people in my way or, to be fair, the men – farmers and gamekeepers in particular.

One of my first experiences was to prove sadly typical. An attempt to take my two small children on a quiet Sunday afternoon stroll along a lovely green lane footpath near Barrow was brought to an abrupt and disturbing halt by a gamekeeper, armed with a gun, who assured me that on no account were we going to be allowed to pass that way and disturb his master's pheasants. On my own, I might have argued, but discretion suggested otherwise.

I don't think that, as I walked through the countryside I normally gave the appearance of being in need of help. How strange then that I was so often 'greeted' with the question "Can I help you?". This kind offer tended to come with a facial expression suggesting anything but a desire to be of assistance. On being assured that I was doing fine thanks and not in need of help, my interrogator usually went on to inform me that I was trespassing, there was no right of way, I was damaging his crops or with some similar justification for haranguing me.



Ramblers near Gazeley in 1988. Searching for your path through standing crops was very much the norm.

Verbal onslaughts were unpleasant, but one got used to them and they did no lasting damage. During the following couple of decades, however, I became involved in several incidents which I now recall with astonishment in view of the brazen hostility to myself and to others who had the temerity to try to explore the countryside on foot.

On a path near Wickhambrook I was confronted by a man who was clearly incensed by the fact that I was walking straight through his crop of wheat. When I pointed out that if his crop had not been obstructing the path, I would not have had to tread down any of his plants, he seized me by the shoulders and tried to push me back the way I had come. Another saw me trying to climb a fence that was blocking a path, whereupon he ran towards me and punched me in the chest.

The most bizarre of these encounters once again involved my pursuit of a path through a standing crop. On this occasion my assailant told me that he had just joined the Ramblers Association – so as to be certain of his rights when meeting up with folk like me, who "*think they know everything*"! My error, he explained, was to believe I was allowed to walk through his crop, but the law actually required me to go around the side of the field. My reward for politely suggesting that he was wrong was a slap across my face – after which, curiously, he turned round and ran off!

By far the most unpleasant incident, however, took place when I called at a farmhouse in Mid Suffolk to enquire whether it might be possible for somebody to remove a vast heap of manure that was blocking a bridleway a few yards away. The response from the surly woman who came to the door was that her husband had better things to do, so would I please ***** off.

I went thoughtfully on my way, only to hear running footsteps behind me and find myself seized violently by the neck and lifted off the ground. Having, after receiving a few choice comments about my character and parentage, managed to free myself and return home, I called the police. In an illuminating discussion with a police officer the following day, I learned that I was not the first to suffer at this man's hands. He had reportedly taken a horse whip to a rider only a few months previously, but, as with my experience, there were no witnesses, so giving him a warning was all that could be done.

A couple of years later he backed his tractor into a young couple on horseback and knocked the woman into a tank of slurry, but even that outrage brought no more than a conditional discharge from the Crown Court. However, we possibly had the last laugh when, supported by the redoubtable Jerry Pearlman, Ramblers' Honorary Solicitor, we launched a prosecution for obstruction in the form of the aforementioned heap of manure and he received a fine and bill for costs amounting to over £3000 pounds.

Another farmer in the Suffolk heartland blocked a footpath by locking a gate and erecting a fence across it. The County Council eventually served notice on him and sent officers to open up the path.

Very sensibly, knowing something of his character, they took the precaution of arranging for two policemen to accompany them. To their astonishment, the farmer came out to confront them wielding a piece of timber studded with nails and hurling rotten eggs. The Court told him, in effect, not to be a naughty boy and never to do it again.

These events and the large numbers of obstruction reports with which Ramblers in Suffolk were bombarding the Council, brought me – now in my role of Area Footpaths Secretary – into close and cordial contact with the Council's Rights of Way Officer, a conscientious and diligent man struggling to deal with an overwhelming workload.

I have a vivid memory of the occasion when, after receiving reports of threats to people trying to use a rather attractive bridleway, he phoned me in strict confidence to ask me to warn our members in the area to keep away from the path as the landowner had both a gun and an unpredictable temperament. Almost incredibly, he was a member of the County Council!

Regrettable attitudes emerge from various directions

I am not suggesting that the conduct of this man and of the others that I have mentioned was the norm, but the dislike of our organisation was not just confined to some of the landowning community. The attitude which emanated from a section of County Council members, often descending into outright contempt, was distinctly worrying. One senior Council officer, with whom I had established a very good working relationship, told me on leaving the Council's employ that he had been warned by a member of the Council that his job might not be secure if he appeared to be in any way sympathetic to the Ramblers.

The most unsavoury example of this came when I applied for a teaching post at another Suffolk school. As was customary, the local county councillor was a member of the appointment panel and suggested to those present that my membership of the Ramblers Association demonstrated that I was not a fit person to be placed in charge of children.



Springtime!

A lovely lane between Acton and Lavenham



Rattlesden

Ramblers in Suffolk began to be distinctly suspicious about the frequency with which we were accosted and harassed when out walking. Was it really just repeated coincidence that we were so often spotted and pursued during our not particularly high-profile excursions?

This remained something of a puzzle for a very long time until, one day in 2006, I happened to read in a Suffolk magazine an article that had been written by a relatively young farmer. The fact that I knew the man and had found him considerate and helpful heightened my interest.

His comments took the form of a frank acknowledgement of the way in which his father and those of the same generation had adopted a practice of deliberately making life unpleasant for us Ramblers by keeping watch and telephoning their friends whenever we were seen heading in the direction of their land - so that the opportunity for a 'bit of fun' should not be missed.

The writer made it quite clear that he was ashamed of this history and profoundly hoped that this was a thing of the past.

Better late than never!



Wordwell

Unusual situations

Not infrequently one came across situations where rights of way had been overtaken by development and this could produce real problems when the planning authority had not taken the trouble to look at the definitive map before giving the go-ahead for such schemes as housing and industrial estates.

I recall with a degree of amusement, that cannot have been shared by the owner, coming across a half-built house where I followed a still existing footpath line through the front door and out of the back.

Probably the most surprising example of this kind was what had happened to a footpath in the parish of Eriswell which originally ran across heathland, but had subsequently been engulfed by the Lakenheath air base. The path now entered the base via the main gate and ran from there along the footway of the access road before exiting via a pedestrian gate, on which there was a bell to ring, so that someone could come to let you through.

On arriving at the main gate, you would be asked what you were doing and grudgingly given the OK to continue. Within a couple of minutes you would hear a vehicle approaching from the rear and then discover that you were being followed by an American Military Police car, which would escort you as far as the point where you left the premises. This path was, predictably, closed some years ago.

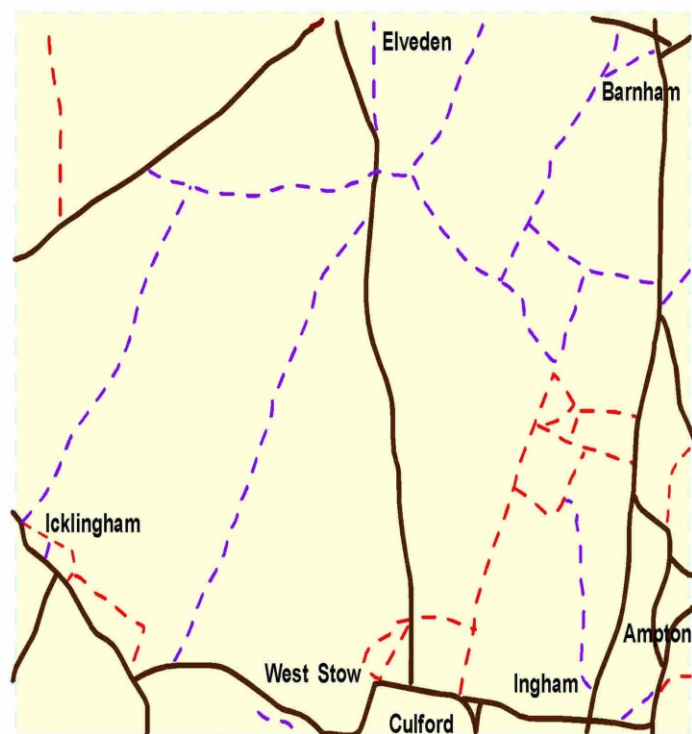
The doubtful reliability of the Suffolk Definitive Map

It had not taken me long to question why there were so very few rights of way shown on the Definitive Map for West Suffolk - and especially in the north of that former county, as well as in the adjoining area of Norfolk.

There was one huge 'black hole' across the County boundary, having an area of about 80 square miles, where not a single right of way was to be seen. Was it entirely coincidental that the land in this area was owned by only a handful of people?

I was prompted to do more than just wonder about it by a phone call from the Clerk of the Parish Council in the village of Icklingham, who had evidently seen a letter that I had written to the local newspaper.

She was angered by the actions of the vast Elveden Estate of the Earl of Iveagh - family name Guinness, which owned most of the land in the parish.



5 miles

----- Rights of way on original Definitive Map

----- Rights of way added to Definitive Map since 1985

In the past few years the Estate had been making it increasingly difficult for local people to go for walks along paths and tracks that they and their families had been accustomed to use for generations.

I went to visit her, so as to get a better idea of the problem, but, before doing so I had to learn about the process by which this 'definitive map' had been created. Mostly, it appeared, the information had been obtained in response to enquiries which were sent by the County Council to all the parish authorities in about 1950 – asking them to mark the known rights of way on a map and say why they had selected them. The parishes were required by law to hold a public meeting for all their residents in order to gather this information. In addition to that, other organisations and individuals could contribute to the data gathering. I already knew that the map for Icklingham – a very large parish for a lowland one – had only three short footpaths marked on it and those were in or on the edge of the village. In the large surrounding area, where old OS maps showed numbers of paths and tracks, not a single **public** path or road was to be found – if this map was to be believed!

One of these tracks was marked, in antique lettering, 'Ickniel Way'. Another one, leading for several miles across ancient heathland, was named 'Seven Tree Road'. And then there was the 'Pilgrims' Path', whose very name suggests an ancient public route. What had happened here – or not happened? One explanation came very quickly from the Parish Clerk. When she had shown the Chairman of the Parish Council the papers that had come from the County Council in 1950, he, the only other major landowner in the parish, had torn them up and thrown them 'in the bin' because he didn't believe in rights of way.

I was soon to find out that this was by no means untypical and that several parishes, mostly those whose definitive maps were either deficient or a total 'blank', had failed to hold the obligatory public meeting. These were mostly places where there was no parish council and the affairs of the parish were in effect run by the agents of the big estates.

The feudal system, I was beginning to discover, was still alive and kicking in that part of the world.

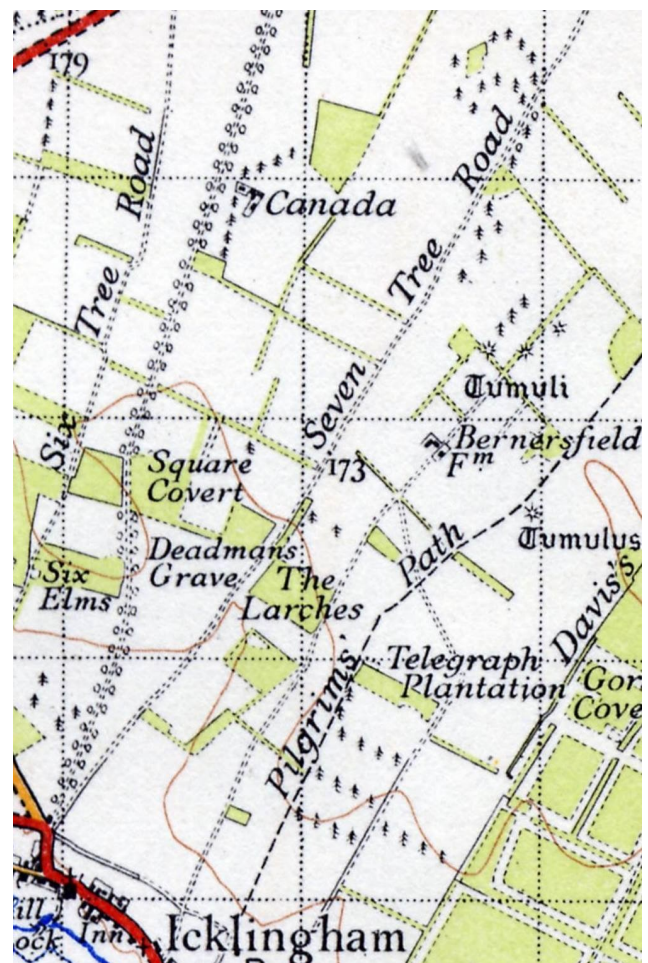
It was some years later that I came across an item which showed that there was another reason why the West Suffolk Definitive Map was so inadequate. The purpose of the legislation was to create maps on which all known public rights of way were recorded.

So, it was with more than a little surprise that I came across a letter written in 1950 by the then County Surveyor, in which he advised the parish councils that they should only put forward for inclusion in the new maps those paths which they considered desirable to preserve.

When one recollects the extent to which the parish councils were dominated by the farming and land-owning community, this grotesque mis-representation of what they should have been doing must have been received by some with considerable delight.

Attempts to put things right

By an extraordinary coincidence, I soon moved to live in Icklingham and shortly after that was persuaded to become the Clerk of the Parish Council.



Extract of the O S One Inch Map published in 1946. The Pilgrims' Path is irretrievably lost.

During my time there the new Suffolk County Council, which had come into existence in 1974, decided it was time to carry out a 'review' of the County's Definitive Map. This was supposed to be done every five years, but the former West Suffolk CC had never managed to comply with that aspect of the legislation. The Review commenced in 1979 and was a major exercise which resulted in hundreds of claims of historic, but unmapped rights of way being lodged with the County Council. These claims came not only from parish meetings, but also from a range of other organisations and individuals. On behalf of Suffolk Ramblers I submitted over 400 of them - a figure which grew during successive years to over 700.

It was my duty to arrange for a parish meeting to be held in Icklingham - in order to discover if my fellow parishioners wanted to identify any historic rights of way which ought to be on the 'Map'. When the notice of the meeting was posted I soon received both visits and letters from a number of elderly folk, all anxious to give me details of the public paths that they used to be able to walk along, but no longer could.

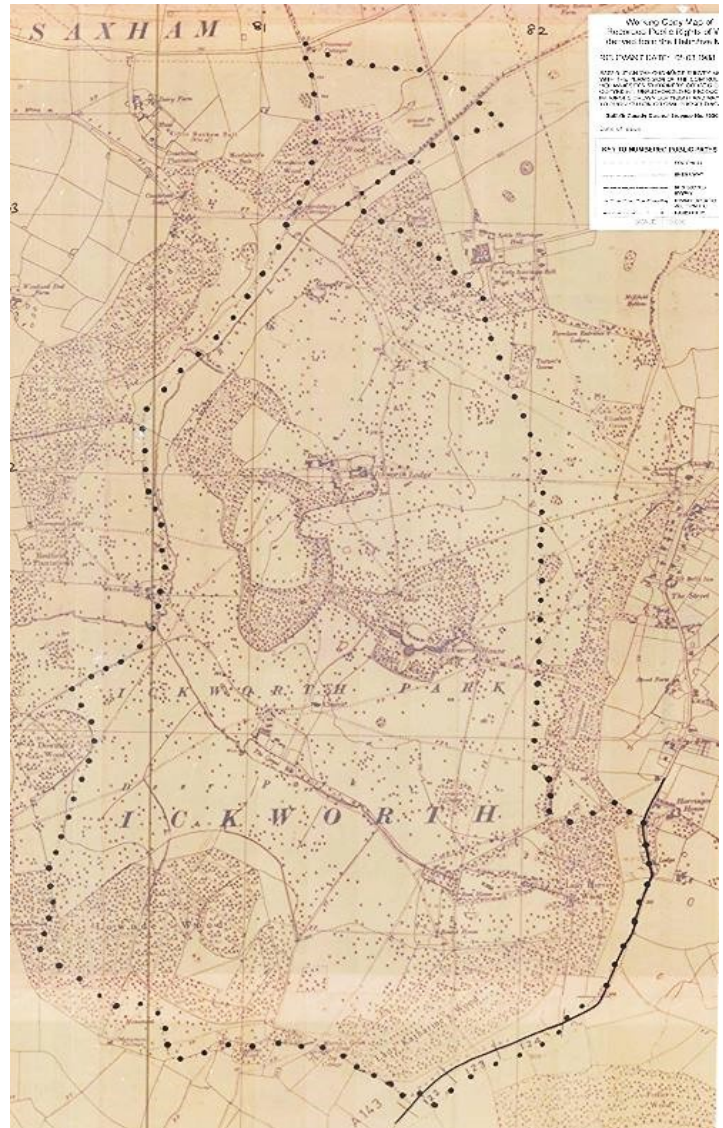
The meeting that followed produced an almost incredible and certainly unforgettable turn of events. We had just started to hear from those present what they wanted to say, when in strolled the Agent of the Elveden Estate accompanied by the village policeman. One could almost feel the mood change. Not one of the suggestions that I had previously been given was supported by anybody present and several of the oldest inhabitants made a hasty and unobtrusive departure.

A couple of weeks later I attended a similar meeting in the village of Barnham, which was part of the Euston Estate of the Duke of Grafton and for which the definitive map was entirely blank. There was no parish council and the meeting was chaired, predictably, by the Duke's Agent. He explained the purpose of the meeting and immediately announced *"I rule that there are no public rights of way in this parish. Meeting closed. I'm sorry you have had a wasted journey"*.

An elderly parishioner started to protest, but was immediately silenced by a stony glare from the 'Chair'. One has, of course, to take into account the fact that, in both of these instances, for most of the community the 'Estate' was not only their employer but also their landlord.

However, to return to the Icknield Way, Seven Tree Road and the Pilgrims' Path - I thought it was just ridiculous to suggest that the first of these, being a cross-country route of great antiquity and having been 'improved' by the Romans, was only a private farm track, as was asserted by the Elveden Estate. In addition, I was convinced that the second, which I had come to love on account of its tranquil location and unusual Scots Pine-dominated heathland character, was also an old public road. Unfortunately, the peace of that part of the countryside was often shattered by the arrival of a motorbike-riding and gun-carrying gamekeeper, whose message to me and any others wanting to pass that way was crystal clear.

As for the Pilgrims' Path, surely the origins were self-explanatory.



The Definitive Map of the parish of Ickworth, which shows not a single public right of way



Ampton Hall

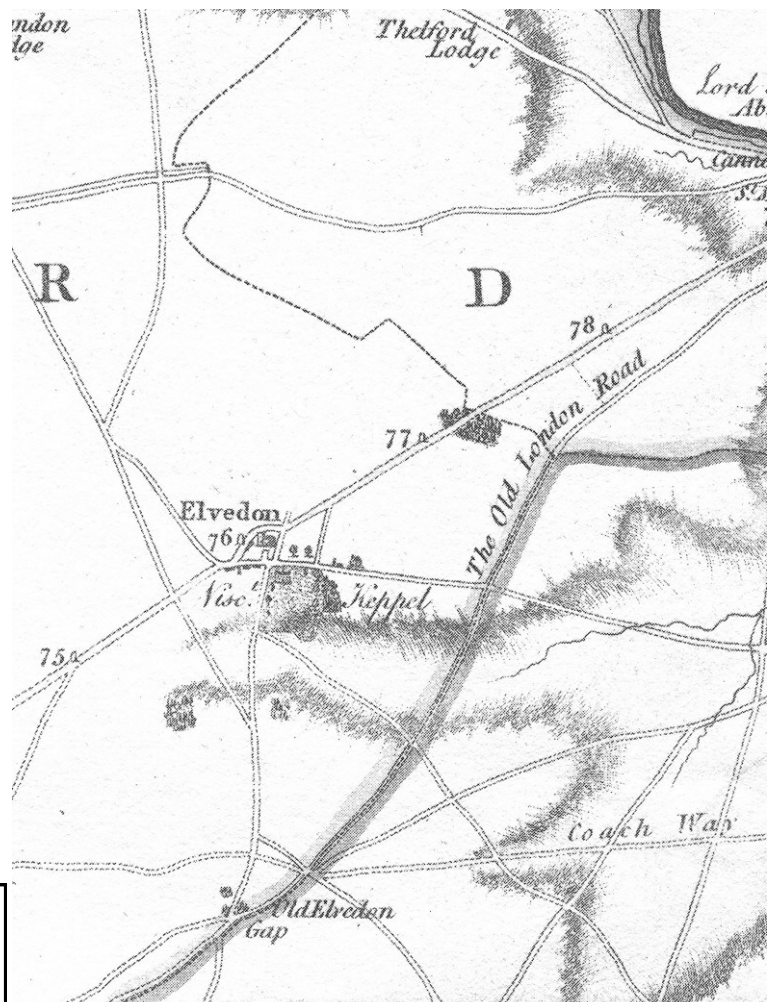
Getting to the root of the matter

I began to realise that I needed to find out if there was some reliable way of establishing whether or not the villagers of Icklingham were right in their assertions that these were historic rights of way and it seemed to me that I might find some evidence from written records of earlier times. Fortunately, a friend who was a local historian suggested to me that I might find it both useful and interesting to see if I could join an appropriate course of study.

That is how I came to sign up to a 3-year part-time diploma course in English Local History run by the Cambridge University Board of Extramural Studies. Quite apart from being one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, it did indeed prove to be of real practical value. I became familiar with some important old classes of documentation and was delighted to come quite soon across unequivocal evidence that, as far as the two old roads was concerned, they were indeed ancient public roads.

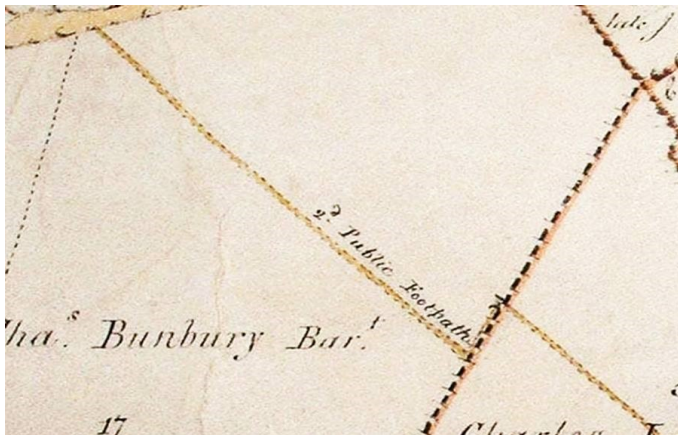
What to do about this happy development? I decided to make an approach to the Elveden Estate. I was amused to discover, mindful of the family name, that the only item available to read whilst waiting in the Estate Office, was the 'Guinness Book of Records'.

I had come armed with convincing evidence of the public status of a number of ancient public roads which traversed the extensive territory under the sway of the owner and hoped to persuade the management of the Estate that it was not reasonable to continue with their aggressive 'Keep out' policy. I explained that I would be presenting this evidence to the County Council, with a view to seeing the real status of these routes confirmed by their addition to the County's map. I was, however, politely informed that my chances of success were slim because his Lordship's lawyers would see to it that this could never happen.

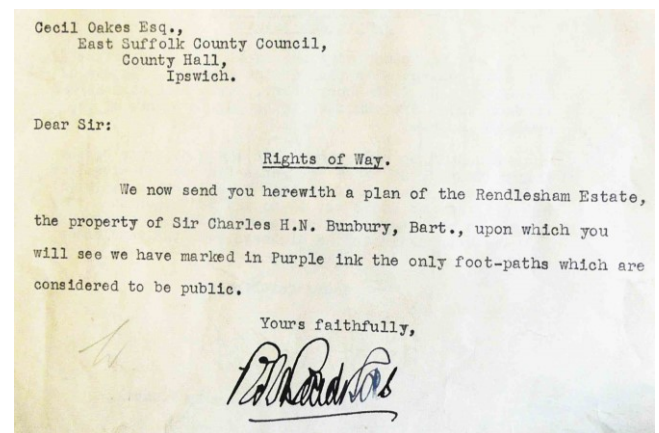


Joseph Hodkinson's 1783 Map of Suffolk, on which the Icknield Way is named 'The Old London Road'

Despite that intransigence, a series of public inquiries in the early 1990s had a dramatic effect on the situation and numbers of byways, including Seven Tree Road and the Icknield Way, now provide access across the former 'desert'. Sadly, the evidence to save the Pilgrims' Path proved too elusive.



An extract of the 1805 Great Barton Inclosure Map which has very recently been instrumental in proving the existence of this old public footpath.



A letter to the East Suffolk CC in 1933, in which the owner of the land gives details of the only footpaths that he believed to be public.

It's mere coincidence that these two items relate to the same family.

Consequences of having a map that could not be trusted

There was another major problem with the West Suffolk Definitive Map. Not only was it severely deficient in terms of the number of rights of way which ought to have been shown on it – it was also a disastrous mess. Drafted in the days before computerisation or comparable mechanical processes, it had every appearance of being the creation of a young child or person very little manual control. The lines intended to show the routes of the rights of way had evidently been drawn using primitive pens and tended to 'wander' quite haphazardly backwards and forwards across such features as field boundaries, streams and roads and even over the roofs of buildings.

Equally unhelpful were the numbers of places where path routes were shown terminating at locations where there was no logical reason why they should have done. This was to be seen most typically at parish boundaries, but even in such inexplicable places as half way along a path shown on the base map or in the middle of a field. Since the base map in question was the small-scale OS two and a half inches to a mile one, it is not difficult to appreciate that reaching a decision on what ought correctly be shown was and is a constant source of debate and dispute.

One particularly absurd, but frustrating example of this was to be found in the tiny village of Shelland, where the long narrow village green ran through the centre of it. Several footpaths leading into the village from various directions were shown to stop at the point where they reached the outer edge of the green, rather than continue for a short distance across the grass to reach the road.

This might not have mattered but for the fact that the green was in private ownership – the property of a belligerent farmer who had erected 'Private Green – keep off!' notices and had a habit of putting in surprise appearances whilst carrying a gun. It took a lot of work to get that single lunacy corrected.



Bridleway No. 2 at Lidgate terminates, inexplicably, in the corner of a field.

The Council created a dossier of these anomalies, of which there were said to be several hundreds – to be addressed at some unknown future date.

The fact that the Map was so unreliable had another downside. Some landowners attempted to bring about the removal from it of a right of way that ran over their land. Fortunately, there were not many of them and it was more difficult to prove that a path or track was not a public right of way than the reverse.



Nevertheless, we did have to be alert to the possibility that mistakes might be made and in one particularly contentious instance we had to call again on the skills of Jerry Pearlman to avoid losing a lovely meadow path at Stansfield.

The rescued footpath leading towards Cordell Hall at Stansfield

Photo Phil Snelling

Hopes raised – and dashed!

The long-awaited Review of the Definitive Map was to prove a false dawn. When all the submissions had been made the CC set up a panel of officers and members to work their way through this daunting collection in order to examine the evidence and recommend which paths should be put on the new draft map. The panel took over 4 years to complete this task and the resulting revised draft map was prepared. However, in 1981 a new Act had come into existence, one effect of which was the abolition of the 'one-off' review procedure.

Despite the pleading of the CC, the Government instructed it to abandon the Review and to commence operating the new procedure. This required every single claim case to be re-examined on its merits and, if the evidence seemed strong enough, for an order to be made to add it to the Map and notices of the order to be published so that anybody could object to it.

So, the CC was faced with the task of in effect going back to 'square one' and re-examining the evidence for all these claims one at a time. Progress under the new system did begin, but was extremely slow because so few staff were appointed to do the work. What was to be done about this?

Ramblers raise the stakes

In 1985 the Ramblers Association had launched its 'Forbidden Britain' campaign, which was designed to get public support for greater access to the countryside. Suffolk Ramblers decided to join in by holding a number of walks along routes, which we knew to be public ones, but which were not on the Suffolk map and whose public status was strongly contested by the owners of the land that they crossed.

On one of these occasions over 100 of us walked along part of the Icknield Way with the inspiring Peter, Lord Melchett leading the way. Elsewhere we trod along some lovely old green lanes in the company of Chris Hall, then Ramblers GB Chair, and a BBC reporter. I think both of them were a bit disappointed that we did not encounter any of the landowners over whose disputed routes we travelled. To our great surprise, this led to the production of a half-hour programme on the BBC – more publicity than we had ever thought possible.



Peter Melchett addresses 'trespassing' Ramblers in October 1986

There was one quite unexpected and amusing outcome of this activity. An old green lane at Boxted crossed the property of a banker who lived in London and had bought the house, together with the surrounding land, as a retirement home. He strongly objected to any suggestion that the lane was a public route. However, he was wrong and it is now safely 'on the Map'.

Some years later, out of the blue, came a phone call from this same man. He had now retired and was enjoying his new life in the countryside – apart from the unfortunate problem that he was struggling to find places to walk. He explained, rather sheepishly, that he had noticed lots of footpaths on the old maps, but they were no longer to be found on the ground. Could I possibly give him some advice on how to get some of these once more made available for public use?

The campaigning was great fun, but did not, in all honesty, seem to have any significant effect and we called in help from Ramblers Central Office. This move followed shortly after a significant development when, in 1993, the county council elections brought about the loss of control by the Conservatives, whose rule over the western half of the county had lasted over a century. The new Labour/Lib Dem coalition included a number of senior figures who were very sympathetic to our aims.

When we threatened to refer the Council's performance to the Local Government Ombudsman, the key committee chairmen sought the advice of the County's Deputy Solicitor, a man who was something of a rights of way expert and had been invited by the Planning Inspectorate to lead a training session for the team of inspectors which handled rights of way cases. He told them that we had a very strong case and this led to a productive meeting with the Chief Executive and senior members. The outcome was that the Council set up a team of officers whose sole function was to examine the evidence, carry out consultations, report to members and represent the Council at the public inquiries which would decide whether the evidence was good enough to add the route in question to the Definitive Map.

Progress at last – for a while

From 1994 and for a further ten years there was a remarkable speeding up of the work and much progress was made. However, it was also a period when I was to discover just how much deviousness still tended to surface around disputes about rights of way. Some of this was merely absurd, e.g. the antics of the landowner who produced 118 identical printed letters, a number of them from places many miles away, asserting that the path in question was a private one.

Much more disturbing than that kind of activity, however, were the situations when local people – very often the oldest in the community – were faced with the prospect of attending a public inquiry in order to testify to their use of paths in former years. This frequently proved so daunting that they simply did not put in an appearance. In discreet conversations I learned what had some had been faced with.

One farmer had offered to pay for the redecorating of the houses of three old folk who had said there was a public footpath over his land, provided that they withdrew their testimony.



Autumn near Preston St Mary

Another had knocked on the door of an elderly lady late at night with threats about what he would do if she did not stay away from the inquiry.

This progress came swiftly to a halt in 2005, when the regaining of control by the Conservative Party soon brought about the disbanding of the 'Review' team and a return to the previous disastrously slow and reluctant pace of activity. The reluctance was – and still is - commonly to be seen in action at the meetings of the committee which scrutinises the recommendations of the officers whether or not to approve the making of an order to add a new route to the Map. The Committee has been heard to say that *"We don't like this, so will the officers please think up some reason for refusing it."*



An unusual sunken lane at Stanton called The Grundle

Complicated issues concerning roads

So much of what I have touched on so far has been about the document called the 'definitive map' – the term 'definitive' indicating that it is an unchallengeable record of the footpaths, bridleways etc. that are shown on it – unless, which is very difficult to do, one can prove that a path was put on the map by mistake.

Some of our most treasured routes, however, are the unsurfaced ancient roads – often referred to as 'green lanes', along which you may still drive vehicles. It's not always wise to try it, but they are nonetheless public roads.

How do you know which of the many tracks that cross the countryside fall into this category and are not just private farm or estate roads?

If they are shown on the definitive map as a byway or a restricted byway, that's clear enough, but how do you find out about those that are not? The answer is that the Council keeps a list of these that it has inherited from previous authorities – its origins going back into earlier centuries.

Taking time to explore this historic network can lead you into some surprising situations. Possibly the most remarkable example is the lane which runs along the bed of the River Brett at Kettlebaston. It's rather less surprising that it is called Water Lane. I once drove a Renault 4 through this watery highway in summer - not really very sensible, but ...

It has become easier to identify routes like these since the Ordnance Survey began marking them on its maps with – depending on the scale of the map – either red or green dots. They are described as 'Other routes with public access' (ORPAs).

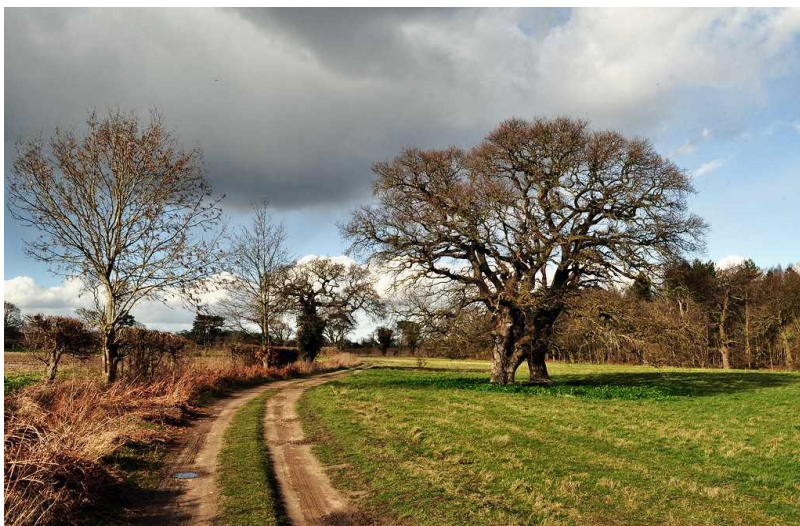
Unfortunately, this status is proof of nothing at all – neither of the use to which they may be put, nor even that there is any public right to do so.

Not surprisingly, there are occasional challenges from landowners, which can require a detailed and sometimes rather inconclusive investigation to be carried out.



Beside the Stour at Clare

One of the most long-running disputes of this nature concerned an old unsurfaced road at Benacre, called Holly Hang Lane, where the landowner refused to accept that the public had a right to use it and erected 'Private road' notices. The arguments went on for years until the Council accepted that the only way to establish if this was indeed correct was to launch a full-scale investigation. Eventually the examination of various old records proved that it is indeed a public road, but it was not until 2005 that the order which saw it added to the definitive map as a byway was confirmed.



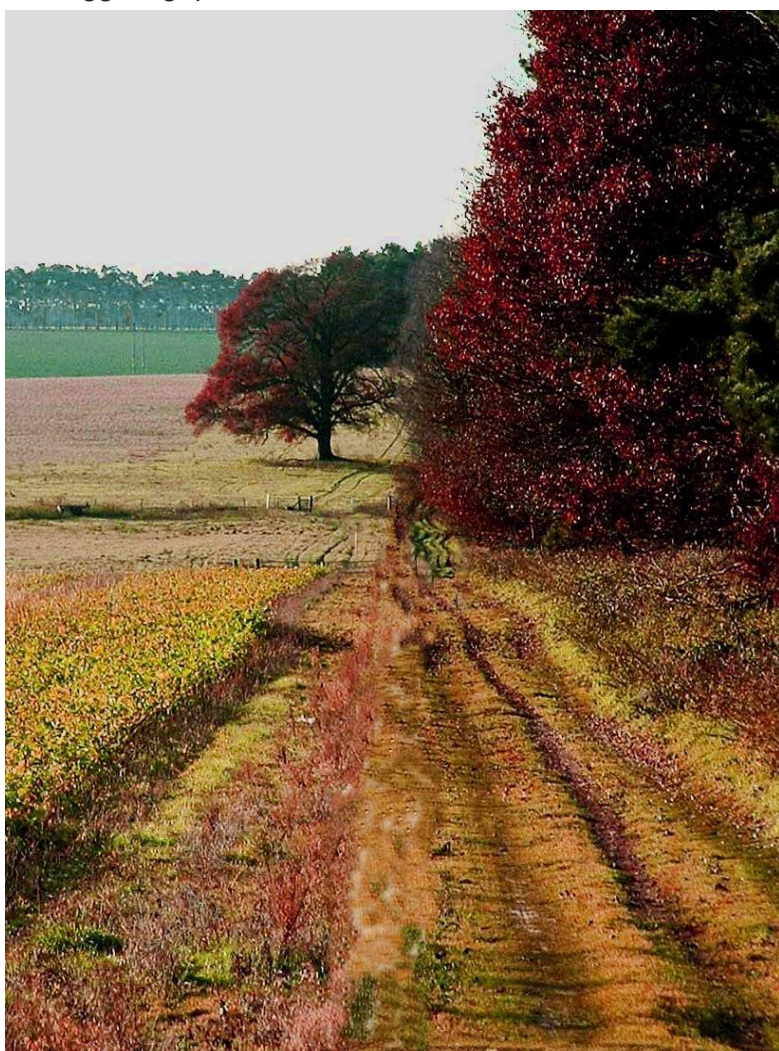
Inadequate efforts at improvement

In 2000 the arrival of 'The Countryside and Rights of Way Act' had presented the Council with the duty to draw up a 'Rights of Way Improvement Plan'. This seemed to be an opportunity too good to be true, but the Council seemed keen to act upon it and asked us to think about places where the rights of way network was most in need of improvement and put forward our suggestions.

Holly Hang Lane at Benacre - an unclassified road and a byway open to all traffic

Photo Robert Newell

We were somewhat sceptical about the potential effect of this exercise. However, after lengthy discussions, we sent the Council a list of proposals for the creation of new paths that would fill some of the biggest gaps in the network.



The Council made contact with some of the landowners, with a view to negotiating agreements for the creation of new paths. I was, therefore, encouraged to receive an invitation from the agent for the large Thurlow Estate, in the SW corner of the county, to come and talk to him about our ideas for new paths in an area where there were very few. This involved a round trip of about 60 miles.

The conversation was brief and went like this:- *"Good morning Mr Andrews. I just want to take this opportunity of telling you to your face how much I despise you and your organisation. Have a nice journey home!"*.

I'm not entirely sure if this 'Improvement Plan' ever achieved anything, but I have no recollection of any benefit that derived from it.

The Icknield Way near the place called Marmansgrave - between Elveden and Barnham

Looking back

Although I have been away from Suffolk for over 10 years, I continue to keep in touch with the situation and am profoundly unhappy that there are hundreds of claimed rights of way that are still unavailable to the walking public. Some of them have been awaiting investigation since as long ago as the 1979 debacle.

With all this talk of dreadful things and 'battles' one might be forgiven for thinking that walking in the Suffolk countryside was an unremittingly grim way of passing one's time. Despite the hazards, it was, of course, not all like that, even in the early days, and during my time in Suffolk there was a steady and pleasing improvement in the condition of the rights of way network. Suffolk Ramblers can take some degree of credit for that on account of the constant pressure applied over the years as and when it was needed.

It would be grossly unfair, however, to fail to acknowledge the major contribution to this that has been brought about by the officers of Suffolk County Council. For their hard work, fair-mindedness and constant courtesy, despite all the never-ending problems that test their skills and patience to the utmost, I - for one - am extremely grateful.

My last words on this subject have to be about the most important elements of my Suffolk experiences – the paths and ways which I was so lucky to be able to enjoy. They can't speak for themselves, so I have scattered a few photos throughout this account which are simply a small selection of the views and aspects that gave me such pleasure.



Seven Tree Road, Icklingham - at the spot called Deadman's Grave

Photo Bob Jones



The path to Dalham Church.

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