

Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke



February 2010 Newsletter Number Thirty One

Newsletter 29 (June 2009) began with David Barden's study of the varieties of violet to be found on the Fleam Dyke. It seemed a good idea to reprint it, so that readers could have it in a handy format to take to the Fleam Dyke as spring begins, at last. Thus, in the best tradition of the tabloids, after the **FULL COLOUR FRONT PAGE**, we now have a **FREE PULL OUT COLOUR SECTION**. We hope it will inspire you to go on a Violet Walk, when spring finally arrives. Do send us any comments.

One of the pleasures of being Secretary of the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke is the permission I feel it gives me to talk to the people I meet on my way. Quite a few new members were nobbled and recruited in this way. Apologies to those who were left feeling sympathy for the Ancient Mariner. The following three articles are the result of such encounters. Julia Napier

War Ditches in the Twentieth Century by William Foot

I first became interested in the Cambridgeshire Dyke systems when I was researching 1940 defence landscapes for English Heritage a few years ago. As we know, the Saxon dykes defended East Anglia from attack from the south, and were probably constructed in the immediate post-Roman period: the Heydon (or Bran) Ditch, however, may well have had an Iron Age origin. These defences of a massive bank fronted by a deep ditch ran from the forest edge growing on the higher land to the east up to the watery wastes of the undrained Fens to the west. The open chalk land in between forest and fen, probably always heathland until recent centuries, was traversed by the Icknield Way, the principal route into the fastnesses of East Anglia, and it was the blocking of this route that was the main purpose of the dykes.

It was the tensions in pagan Saxon society that led to the dykes being surveyed and built, but hundreds of years earlier this vital route must have been used by other armies in conflicts which are largely lost to us. The Romans would certainly have realised the strategic value of this broad, firm swathe of land running towards what had been the wealthy Iceni kingdom. They built early forts at Great Chesterford, at Cambridge, and possibly at Saffron Walden, to control the crossing of the Cam Valley. A marching camp, perhaps from the very earliest years of the invasion, has recently been identified on Pepperton Hill above Ickleton. The Icknield Way, the ancient route of which seems to have been engineered by the Romans, might even have been the direction of the re-conquest of Iceni territory after the defeat of the Boudican rebellion: indeed it is my conjecture that the great battle of 60AD that crushed the rebellion may well have been fought at a point on the low hills overlooking it.

To turn now to the defences by which Britain sought to defend herself against a feared German invasion in 1940 - my own research enables me to write perhaps with more authority about these! Inland from the coastal defences that were established in depth from the sea's edge, a remarkable system of stop lines was developed.

These were basically anti-tank lines, the main intention being to prevent the feared German armoured columns breaking out and running amok as they had done during the blitzkrieg in France. The principal stop line was known as the GHQ Line. Its purpose was as a back line - a 'last ditch', if you like - behind all the other defences from the coastal edge in front of it, to protect London in particular (which had three additional rings of anti-tank defences) and the industrial Midlands, as well as the hinterland of the country generally. It ran west-east from the North Somerset coast (passing to the south of London) as far as the Medway in Kent, where it turned north to meet the Thames: it was then continued through Essex into Cambridgeshire. Its eventual destination, always running parallel with the coast, was Richmond in Yorkshire, from which further defence lines linked the English defence with that of Scotland.

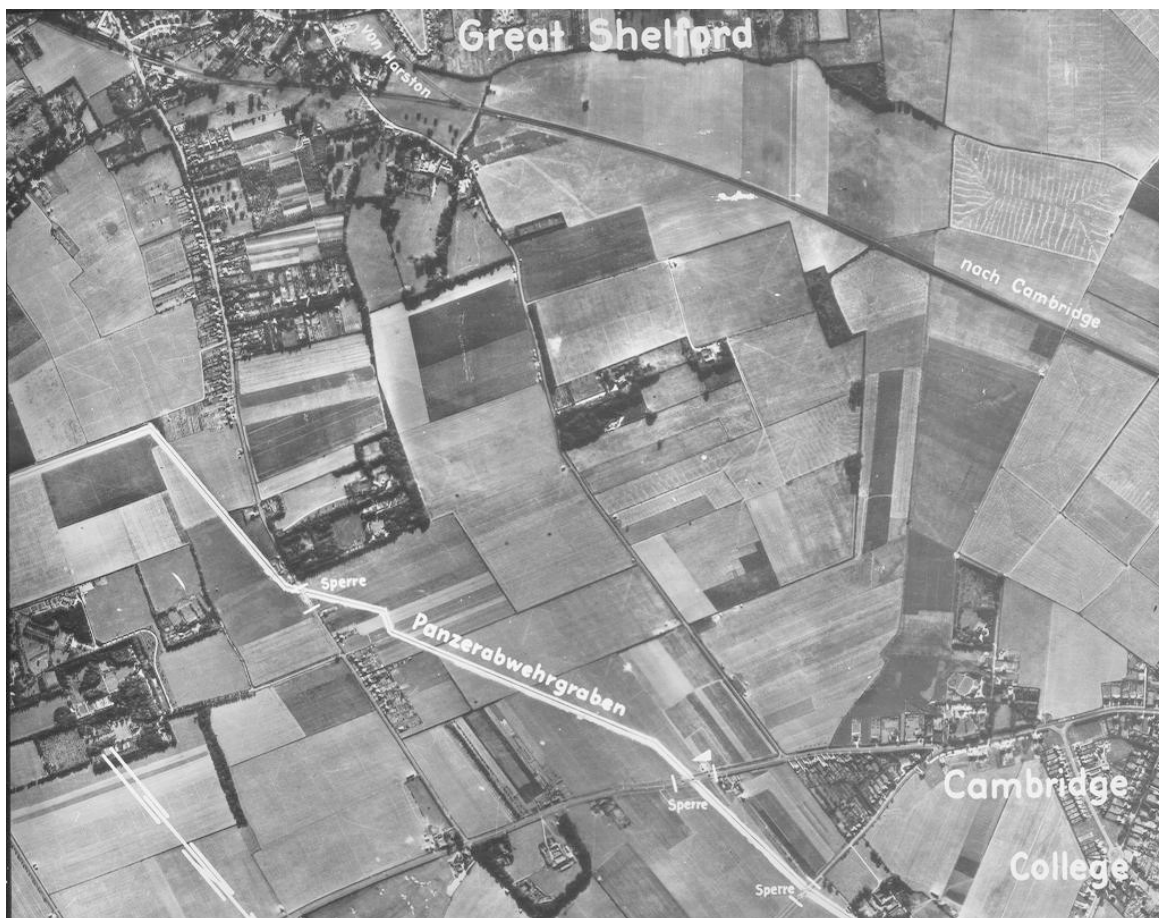
Stop lines formed continuous barriers, making use where they could of natural waterways, but, where these were not available or an insufficient obstacle, there were machine cut anti-tank ditches (hundreds and hundreds of miles of which were dug throughout the country, by far the most extensive system of defensive earthworks this nation has ever seen). Sometimes as well the barrier was formed by row after row of fixed concrete obstacles. Where roads and railways crossed the Line, these points were defended by anti-tank gun emplacements and infantry pillboxes, as well as by obstacles that could be moved into place to block the carriageways should the invasion threat become reality. Other hardened defence works (as concrete pillboxes and emplacements are more correctly known) were placed at intervals along the Line, normally at points where they could lay down enfilading fire. All this was constructed in a few short weeks from June 1940 until the period of greatest danger invasion in September 1940.



Map showing the 1940/41 GHQ anti-tank line in relation to Fleam Dyke and the Roman Road, from GSGS Sheet 85 War Office 1941

To return to a consideration of the defences in Cambridgeshire, those of 1940, of course, had an entirely different strategic purpose from the dyke systems that had centuries before blocked the route of the Icknield Way (It is worth an aside here to make the point that, had that not been the case, the dykes would undoubtedly have been incorporated in some way into the 1940 defence planning: there are many cases of medieval castles being refortified in the Second World War, and even Iron Age hillforts: Chanctonbury Ring on the South Downs is one example of the latter). The purpose in 1940, however, was to protect the heartland of the country from possible German landings on the Suffolk and Norfolk coast, so the defences were set out against an expected attack from the east. From Essex, the GHQ Line ran along the Cam Valley, passing through the grounds of Audley End house, where some components of the defence still survive. Reaching a point south of Stapleford, the Line was taken up by an artificial anti-tank ditch, passing to the west of the Gog Magog Hills and crossing the A1307 road near to the present Park and Ride terminal (a Neolithic settlement was discovered in this area when the ditch was being excavated). The Line then swept around to the east of Cambridge (thereby forming a sector of the all-round anti-tank defences of the city) until it made a junction with the River Cam again, then following it as the Ouse to Ely and Littleport.

If you look at some of the aerial imagery of the Wandlebury area available on Google Earth, you can make out the infilled line of the anti-tank ditch - a fascinating mid-20th century addition to the earlier military earthworks of Cambridgeshire.



German reconnaissance photograph showing the anti-tank ditch of the GHQ line south of Cambridge. The present day A1307 runs at the bottom. (Imperial War Museum, Duxford)

William Foot is a military archaeologist. He was for several years the project manager of The Defence of Britain Project, which won the Silver Trowel Award run by the Council for British Archaeology. His study of the 1940 defences for English Heritage resulted in a research report published by the Council for British Archaeology entitled 'Beaches, Fields, Streets, and Hills: The Anti-Invasion Landscapes of England 1940'. Subsequently he wrote two more 'popular' books entitled, 'The Battlefields That Nearly Were' and 'Defended England 1940'.

For more information google Defence of Britain Project, or more precisely, <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/dob/> The Project is now closed.

My Birding Year in 2009 on the Roman Road by Pat Lambert

For the last 15 years I have taken a daily walk along the Roman Road, starting from the Hildersham Road and walking for a couple of miles towards the A11. As a keen birdwatcher I find that the hedgerows in this area are fruitful territory in an otherwise barren farm landscape. In 2009 I have counted 43 different species of birds, not the most I have ever seen here, but not bad given the decimation of hedgerows and scrub along this route in recent years.

Sadly this reduction in habitat seems to have led to the disappearance of the turtle doves, which always nested along this section of the road, and the willow warblers and blackcaps are now rarely seen or heard.

However there have been some gains - flocks (charms) of goldfinches are capitalising on the vast amount of thistles and the resulting thistledown which have grown up - I have seen groups of 30 or more in the autumn. Similarly yellowhammers are plentiful in the hedges this year, and the skylarks continue to thrive - their songs can be heard at most times of the year. Fieldfares and redwings have compensated for the lack of food and cover in the hedges and scrub near the Gunner's Hall site, by moving nearer to the Hildersham Road, where the hedges are relatively untouched.

In the summer a few swallows, swifts and house martins skim along the footpaths hawking for insects, and in spring and autumn we see a few migrating birds calling in at the "drive-in" for a top up of insects en route to and from Africa. For me this clearly illustrates the value of wildlife-friendly corridors such as the Roman Road.

In spring for the last two years I have seen several wheatears which seem to capitalise on this little oasis on their way to the northern moors. They stay for a week or two and are a delight to see - as well as being easy to identify!

Birds of prey are doing well in the area - buzzards are now seen all year round - one increases to two in spring and summer, so presumably I am seeing either a breeding pair or parent and young. Also the kestrels and sparrowhawks are ever present, finding good pickings in the hedgerow.

Finally large numbers of rooks and wood pigeons frequent the fields all year round and the blue, great and long tailed tits, chaffinches, blackbirds and robins are ever present.

More Clearance on the Roman Road

Further clearance work is under way at the Balsham-Hildersham end of the Roman Road. The extensive rabbit warrens can only be dealt with by gassing, for which some scrub must be cleared back. The hedge on the western side, which has become very tall and straggly, is being reduced to six foot, which will benefit the flower-rich areas. This essential work is being done by the farmers at their own expense. The heavy machinery which was used in 2006 is not being used this time.

Support from the Ely Runners

On a wonderfully sunny day in early August, I walked from Worsted Lodge to the Balsham-Hildersham Road, counting butterflies, (over 100 Painted Ladies) and came back counting flowers and handing out Roman Road and Fleam Dyke leaflets to anyone who appeared interested. In this way I met the secretary of the Ely Runners, John Turner, who offered to suggest to his committee that they might consider joining the Friends. In the event, they voted to send us £100 either as a donation, or perhaps to be viewed as a large initial payment for Corporate Membership. We are most grateful to them, and hope they will continue their support. If you know of any other running groups, please let me have contact details. Julia

Thoughts from the Fleam Dyke **by John Turner**

For a long time I'd been latently interested in the 'other dyke' that crosses the A11 and was pleased to receive details of Fleam Dyke. Curiosity got the better of me, and soon afterwards I enjoyed a quiet evening run from Fulbourn to beyond the end of this fascinating dyke. It must be the longest gradual gradient in Cambridgeshire! Inevitably at this time of year it was a bit overgrown towards the SE end but it gave me an excuse to slow down and graze on the blackberries! By the time I got to the exposed and high Balsham Plateau, the south westerly wind had become quite strong with just the dyke's shelter belt to interrupt the horizontal drizzle. For a while I felt like the last chap in Cambridgeshire in this huge landscape, and thought about some lonely and runny-nosed Saxon picket peering through the gathering gloom listening for cattle rustlers! I was also captivated by the flora, especially the profusion of harebells and clustered bellflowers (or clusterbells as I lazily call them) and thought I felt quite a special atmosphere as I dawdled though the ancient Mutlow Hill burial site/meeting place.

You can't solve a problem by throwing money at it! **No, but it might help. Junipers again.**

In 1961, the late Dr Max Walters recorded 24 junipers on the Fleam Dyke. He described the history of the juniper in Cambridge as a history of decline with little regeneration. Despite the subsequent efforts of Max Walters, Dr David Clark, Sharon Hearle of the Green Belt Project, whose work is continued by Iain Webb, we now only have 9 junipers on the dyke, but since 2001, we do have several seedlings, growing very, very slowly. In an attempt to halt the decline of junipers all over the country, Natural England has given Plantlife International a grant to support their work on this declining species. £1,500 of this was allocated for work on the Fleam Dyke. Initial proposals are to try 'exclusion cages' designed to keep rabbits and mice etc. from nibbling seedlings, and also to try larger wire netting exclusion areas. Jon Gibbs proposed that a volunteer work party from the Cyrenians, who already help on the Wandlebury estate, might enjoy taking part in a small project to grow junipers from seed. There could be more extensive clearance, or re-clearance of scrub on the west facing side of the dyke with full treatment of stumps.

Even More Money for Fleam Dyke

As readers will probably know, the Secretary of State has over-ruled South Cambridgeshire District Council and given permission for Renewable Energy Systems to go ahead with their plans for the Wadlow wind farm. In exchange for permission to build on Green Belt land, Martin Baker of the Wildlife Trust bcnp has secured a legal arrangement for RES to pay £10,000 to the Trust for work on the Fleam Dyke. This could be for improved access, signage, management of vegetation along the Fleam Dyke and tree planting in the area of the Wadlow's Wind Farm. The committee for the Friends and the Roman Road Fleam Dyke committee (Linear Sites) are agreed that a visit to the site is essential before decisions are made. It is to be hoped that the money will be spent first and foremost on ensuring that the existing chalk grassland is maintained and improved.

Work Parties

Sunday 17th January The plan to mow and rake up the flower-rich area near the Balsham-Hildersham road had to be abandoned, because the grass had been so flattened by the snow. Instead, the work party did more clearance in the area around the junipers. Many thanks to Mike Albutt, Helen Baker, Helen Chubb, Lynne Farrell, Richard Fowling, Christine Newell, Cassie Sparks and of course, Iain for hard work on a cold day.

Sunday 28th February "After the sun the rain, after the rain the sun ..." Not in 2010. Iain and colleagues from the Wildlife Trust were unable to get out to mow the clematis on Mutlow Hill, and the forecast was so awful we cancelled the event.

Two Corrections and Comments:

a) The Carline Thistle

In the text which followed Marjorie Powell's beautiful illustration, I referred to the plant as an annual. Peter Grubb wrote to say that it is in fact a pauciennial. 'It is monocarpic (flowers only once) and can vary greatly from year to year in density (number per unit area), but on average it takes about 3 yrs to flower (range 2-9) as was established by a long-term study in Sussex, which was used as the basis of a paper published in 2002.

b) Greater Knapweed - white variety, by David Barden

I've seen this white *Centaurea scabiosa* in a few places in the last couple of years. Some plants were pure white, whereas others had a purple tinge over the whole flower, or just in the centre. It is not a particularly rare colour form, but it certainly is quite striking.

Many plants, especially those with pink/purple flowers, have occasional white-flowered forms. For example, over the last year or so I have seen white forms of red clover, greater and black knapweed, common hemp-nettle, creeping thistle, black horehound and autumn gentian, amongst others. These forms, as far as I know, have not been formally named, but the colour forms of violets have received more attention, and these do have names. However, they are still only varietal rank (hence *var. dumetorum*), not subspecies as was stated in the November newsletter, No. 30.

Subscriptions due in April

£ £ £ £

After reading about the showers of gold described above, you may be tempted to think that your subscription is not needed any more. It is. The juniper grant from Plantlife cannot be used on the Roman Road, and I fear that the RES wind farm money will be spent on ladder steps and grouting rabbit holes.

In previous years the cancellation of the work party on Mutlow Hill means would have meant that we had to just leave the clematis to regain ground. Thanks to you, last year we were able to pay for areas of clematis to be poisoned at the root. I hope that this year we shall be able to continue that work and also pay for the work on Mutlow Hill. There are several other sections of Fleam Dyke and of the Roman Road where work is done every other year out of necessity not by choice. Your subscriptions will help us to move forward not just to hold the fort.

The subscription is £5 per household, or £10 if you are feeling a bit richer.

About half the annual members now pay £10 or even more. Could members with Standing Orders consider doing so too? It would also be a great help if members who still pay annually could take out a Standing Order. However, if it suits you best to pay just £5, please continue to do so. Your membership of the Friends is one of the main reasons that we have been so successful in obtaining grants. Speaking of which

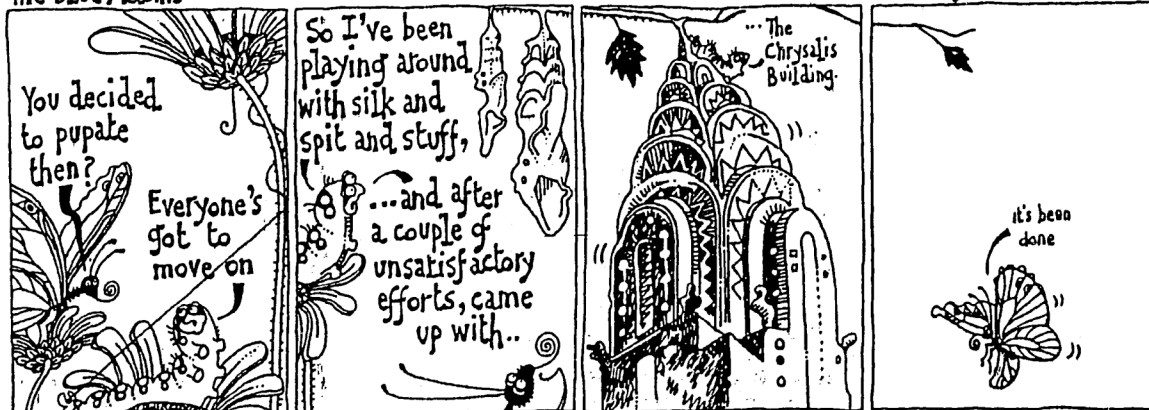
Coming shortly

The Awards for All grant given to us for the Fleam Dyke and Roman Road Walk project, included money for a website. John Williams, who designed the excellent Walk booklet, has been working with Roger Lemon on this, and the result will be on line soon at www.frrfd.org.uk. Apart from information about the history of the sites, the flora and fauna and the work of the Friends, we hope to have an increasing number of species lists for the sites. David Barden has produced a list of vascular plants on the Fleam Dyke, and is working on a similar list for the Roman Road. Pat Lambert's bird records will be included, plus, of course, Roger Lemon's butterfly records, and records of other species as they become available. Apologies to those who do not have a computer.

And, in the week that brought us the possibility of cloning the Elephant Bird from fossil egg shells found in Madagascar, it is time to bring to a conclusion the exciting saga of the Blue Adonis, discovered in a blob of amber.

The Blue Adonis

by David Shenton



Dates for your Diary

Sunday, 21st March Friends' Work Party on the Roman Road, Golf Course section. Meet at Wandlebury Car Park at 9.45am to walk to the site.

Thursday 22 April, 7.30pm

The Ninth Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke

in the Function Room of the **Six Bells Public House, Fulbourn High St.,**
A.G.M. followed by an interval for tea, coffee or drinks from the bar,

Wimpole Hall, Past and Present,

an illustrated talk by Simon Damant, who is the Head Ranger for the extensive grounds of this famous National Trust property, and an expert on many aspects of the varied wildlife there, from barbastelle bats to golden hoverflies

All welcome. Members free. Non members £3.

Talks run by the Cambridge City Group of the Wildlife Trust

7.30pm St John's Church Hall, Hills Road, opposite Homerton College

Wed. 31st March Wildlife Gardening in a Landscape Garden

Illustrated talk by **Richard Todd**,
 Head Gardener at Anglesey Abbey

Wed. 28th April Breckland Flora

Illustrated talk by **Tim Pankhurst**,
 Brecklands officer for Plantlife International

All welcome.

Entry: £2 for members of the Wildlife Trust, £3 for non-members

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