

DOWNLAND TRAVERSE

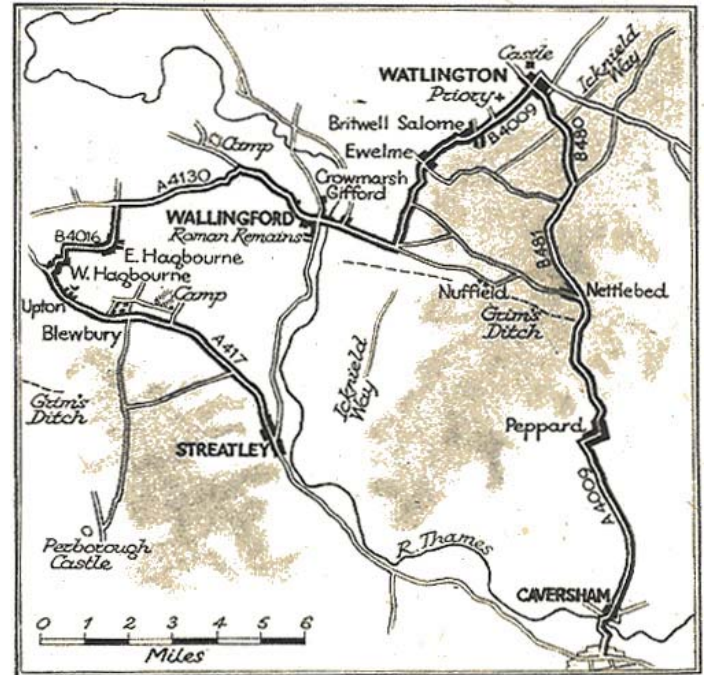
SUNDAY MILEAGE AROUND ICKNIELD WAY

By Michael Brown

UNDETERRED by Easter weather, we followed motoring tradition by getting the car out last Easter Day for the type of restricted touring outing which petrol permits these days. As a matter of fact, the weather in East Berkshire might have been worse; bright sunlight alternated with black showers, and the worst feature was the bitter gale, so that one dived back into the shelter of the car after a foray to see the sights.

The route, however, had few sights that called for lengthy external contemplation; yet it can be recommended for several virtues, not the least of which is that it avoids main roads and popular directions. It starts north of Reading on A4009, an unimportant A road with a nice line in curves and a peach of a hill just before Peppard. The road swings wide on a right-hand bend at the foot, climbs sharply and then bends left equally sharply at the summit, calling for a quick drop into a lower gear just before the final bend. Such hills are fun, even in the family saloon. Peppard, straggling indeterminately over the hillsides, is marked by sanatoria, through which the Chiltern breezes blow, one trusts, beneficially for the patients. A feeling of sadness is engendered by the ascetic chalets and one continues northwards with spirits muted by sympathy.

Towards Nettlebed the Chiltern beeches can be enjoyed. Where the road crosses the ancient earthwork of Grim's Ditch—so frequently encountered in this part of the country—they are conspicuously fine. The right-hand turn is taken almost before the car enters Nettlebed and the route is now B481 and then B480 for Watlington.



In this area the Chilterns are a plateau. As a result there are no great valleys over which to hover in enjoyment. But the sky and landscape have merit, especially in a changeable Spring day. The clouds chase each other over the fields, subduing the colours, sometimes deepening them, and affording fine contrast with the following sunlight. Up here the wind is fitting, for great areas of sky call for the winds of heaven; they invigorate, and emphasize, too, the roaring, spinning atom on which we live while it rockets through space. In fact, they put man in his insignificant place.

The hill down into Watlington is superb, and on this escarpment the Chilterns pose more consciously. Watlington itself makes no effort, however. It is pleasant enough, certainly, and seems remote however much one knows it. But it does not hold the imagination.

No Veils

The name of Britwell Salome does, though. It is a mere huddle of houses and a pub two miles away on B4009. The huddle deserves the expletive-sounding Britwell; the euphonious Salome belongs somewhere else; in the imagination, which is influenced by the Biblical counterpart. There is, of course, no connection. In 1236 Britwell was owned by a family bearing the name Aumaricus de Suleham, which became Anglicized by the good folk of Oxon into Sulham, and Salome is a fanciful by-product of this. Sulham and Sulhamstead are extant names of villages in the area.

The view towards Ewelme is grand, disclosing the distant Thames Valley and marked by the celebrated Wittenham Clumps, two prominent beech coppices on Sinodun Hill, site of Sinodun Camp. The Icknield Way is a mile over to the left on the hilltop, and one can imagine the ancient travellers sighting the camp from this point. To them, however, it was still a long march away. To the car it is a matter of minutes.

But you must linger in Ewelme. Why Ewelme should be as delicious as it is is one of those accidents of history. Its houses are stacked up on the lower slopes of a hill, atop

which stands the magnificent castellated church to dominate the village. Visit this church. It contains many splendours and, we are told, the tombs of Chaucer's son and his wife and of his grand-daughter, the Countess Alice de la Pole. The tombs are there, but a Chaucerian scholar, from whom I sought verification of the link doubts its authenticity.

To the de la Pole family are owed the lovely almshouses and the village school, both 15th-century red brick. To Henry VIII and Catherine Howard Ewelme owes a reputation as a royal honeymoon resort, for the king and his bride stayed there in a palace the ruins of which are incorporated in the Manor House (not open). Thames-lover Jerome K Jerome lies in the churchyard. Strangest sight in Ewelme was Highland cattle in an orchard, most familiar sight the sunlit hills revealed suddenly and enchantingly at various points during a circumnavigation of the village. As you leave for Crowmarsh Gifford and Wallingford do not miss the delightful view back over the barns to church and village.

Berkshire Downs

We headed east to west straight through the narrow streets of Wallingford on A4130, for this road provides the best view of the Wittenham Clumps. Just before Didcot we turned south on B4016 for East Hagbourne and then continued to Blewbury for tea in one of the nicest, tea houses I know. Everything is home made and there is room to park. Up on Blewbury Down excavations are at present going on, unearthing some quite remarkable finds. The area is rich in earthworks, ancient tracks, barrows and other evidences of Our forerunners. A417, sweeping south-east over the curving shoulders of the Berkshire Downs, provides a succession of views, the crisp natural line of which is frequently broken by an earthwork. It is a curious reversal that the descendants of the men of the hills should cling so obstinately to the valleys. Perhaps the race has become softer although it is more likely that the ancients would have preferred the valleys had they not been difficult of passage owing to the trees and undergrowth. Much history has been made on the Berkshire Downs; and it would be kindly to think of Harwell atomic energy town—over to the west—in that light. It is difficult though. The aesthetic gap between Sinodun Camp and Harwell is unbridgeable.

So much for a Sunday jaunt. I have left you high and dry in your car on the Berkshire hilltops. Never mind; you are in good company. Ancient Briton and Roman travelled freely in these parts, and so do motorists on pleasure bent. Funnily enough, it is only if you are engaged in making history at Harwell that you need the passes and paraphernalia that go with modern civilization. I'll take the ancients.



"15th-century red brick." This is the village school, founded by the de la Pole family of Ewelme.



"Strangest sight . . . was Highland cattle in an orchard."



"Wittenham Clumps, two prominent beech coppices on Sinodun Hill."

Below: "The delightful view back over the barns to church and village."

