Britain had roads and tracks when the Romans arrived. The most important historic route in East Anglia was the Icknield Way, a network of tracks running along the edge of the chalk from Norfolk to Wiltshire. Many settlements in this area lie on routes of the Icknield Way, connected by tracks running between them.

The Romans probably improved an existing track to create our Roman Road. It linked Cambridge with a road from Great Chesterford (roughly on the line of the modern A11), then continued southeast towards Haverhill.

To build this relatively minor road they rammed chalk rubble onto the surface of the existing track to form a mound or *agger* up to 1m high. Water ran off the agger into roadside ditches about 14m apart. On the section from Cambridge to Worsted Lodge the chalk rubble was surfaced with gravel to provide a good all-weather surface but there is no evidence of this further southeast, where it may have carried only local traffic.

**A cross-section of a typical Roman Road**

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The Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke were set up in 2001 in order to maintain and enhance the areas of chalk grassland which remained on these two SSSIs. In previous centuries Fleam Dyke was maintained by grazing. Travelling shepherds brought their flocks to the Dyke, and at night folded them in the adjoining fields where their dung enriched the soil. The track of the Roman Road was kept clear by riders, walkers and wagons taking people from place to place, or goods to market. Cattle and sheep might be driven to market or to a new home. Astonishingly, geese were driven all the way to London along such roads. However, with the advent of vehicular traffic, the A1307 was surfaced with tarmac, leaving the Roman Road to be maintained by local farmers, who used it for getting to adjoining land or to nearby roads. Walkers and horses were the main visitors.

**Who owns these sites?**

Cambridgeshire County Council owns the surface of the Roman Road to a notional depth of two spits, about two feet. The land on either side of the central line belongs to the respective landowners. Natural England is involved in decisions about the management of the sites and Historic England has a controlling interest in any work which would affect the Ancient Monument.

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**Roman Road wildlife**

The chalk grassland is at its best between May and August but the species in flower will change throughout the season. In early summer watch out for bright yellow **Common Rock Rose** and **Horseshoe Vetch**, delicate white **Dropwort** and the tight green flowerheads of **Salad Burnet**. Summer flowers include lilac-blue **Small Scabious** and the larger, lilac **Field Scabious**, the feathery yellow flowers of **Lady’s Bedstraw** and sky-blue **Harebells**. **Knapweeds** have thistle-like bright purple flowers on tall stems; **Greater Knapweed** may be accompanied by the strange brown flowerspike of its remarkable parasite, **Knapweed Broomrape**. The pinks and mauves of **Wild Basil** and **Restharow** add to the array of colours.

This variety of flowers brings a profusion of insects. **Bees and bumblebees**, **solitary wasps**, **butterflies**, **moths**, **hoverflies**, **beetles** and others compete for nectar and pollen from the flowers. There are also many less visible species (including **spiders**, **grasshoppers** and **ants**) living here. Some of these are only found on chalk grassland.

This abundance of plants and insects in turn attracts larger species. Listen for birds singing in the hedgerows: **Chaffinch**, **Blackcap**, **Whitethroat**, **Yellowhammer** (“A little bit of bread and no cheese please”), and **Corn Bunting**, which has a song like a bunch of keys being shaken. **Meadow Pipit**, **Skylark**, **Swallow**, **Buzzard**, **Kestrel**, **Sparrowhawk** and many more may be seen from the Roman Road. **Rabbits** and their burrows are easy to spot but **shrews**, **voles**, **moles** and other mammals are less obvious; watch for their burrows and tracks. **Hares** can often be seen in the adjoining fields.
Today the Roman Road is home to a variety of plants and animals that were once found everywhere in the chalk grasslands of southern Cambridgeshire.

**Why is the Chalk special?**

During the Cretaceous period, about 100 million years ago, this part of Britain lay under several hundred metres of warm seawater. The chalk on which you walk is actually made of fossils, the skeletons of tiny algae and other organisms that rained down on the seafloor for millions of years.

Chalk is porous, which means water runs down through it to layers of impermeable clay, then along the top of the clay to appear as springs lower down in the valleys. Routes such as the Roman Road took advantage of high, dry chalk ridges, while villages grew up where water was available, near the springs.

**Chalk grassland**

True chalk grassland is full of wildflowers, including many special plants able to survive on shallow, dry infertile soil. Once, much of Cambridgeshire between the fens and the clay-capped higher ground to the southeast was covered with grassland. Sheep grazed here for centuries, eating tree and shrub seedlings and thus maintaining the open downland. Large areas of grassland were ploughed when arable farming became more profitable than sheep. Relatively little grassland survived, mainly remnants that were impractical to farm - including ancient tracks such as the Roman Road. Rabbit-grazing helped to maintain the grassland until myxomatosis arrived in the 1950s.

Since that time the trees and scrub have taken over until relatively few areas of good chalk grassland survive along the Roman Road, the best being from Copley Hill to Mount Farm and then along some of the verges from Worsted Lodge to Deadman Hill.

**How to reach the Roman Road**

**On foot:**
The Roman Road is part of a good network of public paths. See OS Explorer maps 209 (Cambridge) and 210 (Newmarket & Haverhill). See also the Flea Dyke and Roman Road Walk booklet, £2.50 from the Gift Shop near the Tourist Office in Cambridge, the Saffron Walden Tourist Information Centre, and our website www.frrfd.org.uk

**By bus:**
The regular service from Cambridge to Haverhill stops at Wandlebury, Babraham, Hildersham, Linton and Horse Heath. A separate service from Cambridge calls at Fulbourn and Balsham. For more details see www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk

**By road:**
There is limited car parking at the northern end of the Roman Road, where it meets Wort’s Causeway; at Wandlebury (pay & display); and at Mount Farm or Worsted Lodge at the A11 flyover. Take the small road on the A1307, opposite the road to Babraham.

**The Roman Road SSSI is maintained by:**

Cambridgeshire County Council
Information about Public Rights of Way 0345 045 5212.
Problems should be reported to highways@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

The Wildlife Trust BCN
Mid-week conservation work parties include about 6 visits to the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke. Contact Iain Webb, 01954 713531 or iain.webb@wildlifebcn.org

The Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke
Members pay an annual subscription of £15 which, with donations and occasional grants, enables us to pay for work by skilled contractors.

For further details, and photographs of the flowers and butterflies of these sites see www.frrfd.org.uk. We are grateful to Natural England, the Heritage Lottery Fund and South Cambridgeshire District Council for financial support.

To join us, please contact frrfdjin@freebie.net
Tel: 01223 213152

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This leaflet was paid for by **Tesco Bags of Help**
The Roman Road runs along the chalk ridge to avoid heavy soils and mud on lower ground. Known as Woles or Wolves Street in the 13th century, later records refer to the Roman Road as Woolstreet Wy. This suggests that traders in wool, sheep or worsted yarn (probably from Norfolk) used the road, from which it is also known as Worsted Street. Its third name, the Via Devana, was invented by 18th century historians who assumed the road ran from Colchester to Roman Deva, now Chester.

1 People lived and worked in this landscape long before the Romans arrived. The remains of what may be a prehistoric religious site were found here at the Park & Ride site. Some barrows and other prehistoric features still survive along the Roman Road - a reminder that people have walked this route for thousands of years.

2 The Beechwood and Wandlebury are nature reserves near the Roman Road; a third in Fulbourn includes the site of a medieval moated house. For more information visit www.wildlifefcn.org

3 The Gog Magog Hills may have been named after the mythical giants that lived in Albion, or after two tribes of barbarians who, according to the Bible, will appear as a sign of the Last Days. However, Lord Godolphin at Wandlebury used the older name of Hogmagog, as did the last owner, Lady Gray.

4 Wandlebury Country Park and Nature Reserve contains an Iron Age hill fort that may have controlled the Icknield Way, the valley of the Cam and the settlement that became Cambridge. The two circular banks were levelled in the 18th century when the Earl Godolphin built his mansion here, (much changed later), leaving only one circular ditch. In 1954 the estate was purchased by the Cambridge Preservation Society, following a public appeal to ‘Save the Gogs’. There was not enough money for necessary repairs, and the old house was pulled down; but the stables, famed as the home of the Godolphin Arabian, an ancestor of the modern thoroughbred racehorse, were converted to offices and accommodation. See www.cambridgeppf.org and “The Godolphin Arabian” by Wendy Clark.

5 Mile Road, a pleasant green lane, is actually a Romanised prehistoric track. A complex of Roman buildings once stood in the field to the north-west, while the field to the south-east is a Scheduled Monument preserving the site of Bronze Age livestock enclosures and a barrow or burial mound. Copley Hill, at the junction of Mile Road and the Roman Road, is a natural chalk knoll topped by what may be a barrow.

6 The ditches on either side of the track are typical of the bank and ditch structure of a Roman road. Best seen opposite Signal Hill.

7 This curving patch of woodland, mistakenly known as Signal Hill, like Telegraph Hill at Wandlebury, is one of several places marked on old maps for a pole or post. These have been interpreted as semaphore stations dating from the Napoleonic War (1802-1815), but Bill Clark has shown them to be just the sites of unconnected beacons. During WWI a decoy runway was laid out in the field between Signal Hill and the Roman Road to lure German bombers away from Duxford. Meg’s Mount (near the point where the Roman Road crosses the A11) was a searchlight site.

8 The Roman Road joined another road running north from Great Chesterford on the line of the modern A11. Archaeological work here found that the remainder of the Road, running south-east towards Haverhill, is less well-built.

9 Chilford Hall was bought in 1966 by Sam Alper, designer of the Sprite Caravan and founder of the Little Chef Restaurants. Bistro, teas, wine tasting, Thursday - Sunday, 10 - 5pm. The estate contains the oldest established vineyard in England and the largest in East Anglia with 18 acres of vines producing award-winning wines. www.chilfordhall.co.uk

10 Borley, Ricey Hill, Balsham and Hare Woods are listed as ‘ancient woods’ because they are shown on 15th century maps, but they are probably far older. These may have been windbreaks when the Romans arrived but the native trees of Borley Wood have been replaced by planted pines. A possible Roman barrack survives at the edge of the wood.

11 Mark’s Grave is a mystery: we don’t know who Mark was. Perhaps an old parish boundary marker was mistaken for a gravestone!

12 Recorded as Streteiae in 1086, Streetley means ‘clearing by a Roman road or street’. Many Roman finds have been reported from this area.

13 At 112m above sea level this is the highest point on the Roman Road. The great Cedar of Lebanon is all that remains of the second Horseheath Hall. In the 17th century, its owners bankrupted themselves on the house, gardens and lavish parties. The new owners demolished the house in the 1790s and the last remains of the gardens were destroyed in 1991. The beautiful wrought iron back gate of Trinity College and the side gate of St John’s College were salvaged from here. See www.tf rdf.org.uk Newsletters 12 & 13.