Portway and Icknield, a Common Origin.

By LIEUT.-COL. J. B. KARSLAKE, M.A., F.S.A.

MANY interesting sidelights on the early history and topography of Berkshire are to be found in the valuable series of Berkshire Charters which Dr. Grundy has so ably edited in the Society's *Journal*, and among such there is one matter to which I would venture to call particular attention in view of the light it throws on the much discussed origin of the term Icknield Way, not only in Berks but throughout the country generally. It is this: Certain of the Charters make it clear that the road which runs below the northern slope of the Downs through Compton Beauchamp, Wantage, and Blewbury, known as the Portway, was at the date of the charters—tenth century— known as Icen-hilde weg.[1] And further that we have evidence from a charter in Thorpe that the Icknield Way or Ridge Way on the summit of the Downs where it passes Cuckhamslow was then called Portstreate.[2]

From which the inference seems justified that the tenth century Portway or Portstreate and Icknield Way were synonymous terms applied indifferently to the same class of ways or tracks traversing the region of the Berkshire Downs.

I propose to show from other sources that this inference is fully warranted—that in fact Portway and Icknield Way have etymologically the same meaning.

To deal first with Portway. Its derivation and meaning presents little difficulty. Expressed in modern English it means simply 'market town-way.' A Saxon 'port' was a walled town,[3] where also markets could be held and market and transit tolls were collected.

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1 *Journal*, vol. 28, p. 200.   *Ibid.*, p. 79, and vol. 29, p. 87.

2 Thorpe: *D.S.*, 291.

3 Bosworth: *A.S. Dict.*, s.v. " port." The element port in the same sense surives in portreeve, port meadow, port-mote and portmen, of which numerous examples can be found in the constitution of our mediæval cities and towns.

Portways were ' the ancient roads that run from city to city and from market to market.'[4]   The term was applied both to Roman roads and to pre-Roman trackways,[5] but not to the main trunk roads of the Roman Period—Fosse Way, Watling and Ermine Street—which were under the King's Peace, the King's highways or chemini.[6]   They correspond to what were known in early French records as chemins vicinaux, described in an edict of 1671 as " ceux qui conduisent d'une ville a l'autre ou d'un bourg a l'autre et ne sont pas royaux.'[7]

Stretches of existing roads, many obviously of Roman origin, others clearly prehistoric trackways, to be found in a belt of country extending through Cambridgeshire and along the Chilterns, Berkshire and Hampshire into Wilts and Dorset, still retain the name of Portway or Portstreate.   And early records supply evidence of many others now forgotten.   So much so, that it has been said that Portway ran from Norwich to Exeter.[8]

But in fact evidence of Portways in connection with the sites of former Roman centres of population can be found in most counties of Southern England, and are by no means confined to the district above mentioned.   Ancient names survive longest in the less populated districts, such as the Down country of Southern England.

To name but a few instances—the road from Dover to Canterbury was formerly known as Portway[9] ; a road from Caerwent to the Severn is still so called on O.S. Map ; a road due north of Bath is Portway[10] ; another runs up the Cherwell Valley into Northamptonshire[11] ; and numerous instances occur

4 Birch : *Domesday Book*, a popular account, p. 295.   Baldwin Brown : *The Arts in Early England*, I, p. 84, ed. 1903.

5 Cyril Fox : *Archæology of the Cambridge Region*, pp. 171-2.

6 *Laws of William the Conqueror*, 30.

7 *Grand Encyclopedie*, s.v. " chemin," p. 1022.

8 *Surrey Coll.*, i, 64.

9 Somner : *Antiq. of Canterbury*, p. 10.

10 Pitt Rivers : *Map of Ancient Dorset, etc.   Excavations*, vol. iii, p. 1.

11 *O.S. Map.*   C.D. 736.

in Worcestershire[12] and Herefordshire,[13] as far north as Derby-shire[14] and Staffordshire.[15]

In fact it may be said generally that wherever there were Saxon ports there also are evidence of portways connecting them.   Now the Saxon ' port ' derived its name, and in many instances was lineally descended from, a former Roman Portus. The reader may well ask : What was a Roman Portus ?   And it must be admitted that our information on this matter is very scanty ; but this much we do know : that, in the later Roman Empire, if not earlier, portus or customs stations were established in the principal cities ' municipia ' and civil townships ' vici,' where   markets   were   held.   Says   the   Digest, ' Portus est conclusus locus quo impertantur merces et inde exportantur.'[16] And fortunately there has been preserved in respect of the Roman station of Zarai[17] in North Africa, in the form of an inscription, a complete Lex Portus giving the rates of customs duties levied and the privileges for produce brought in only for the weekly market.

It is from such ' portus ' which we must assume to have been also established in Britain as elsewhere in the Empire, that the Saxon port derived its name.

Now, just as the Saxons derived their term ' port ' from the Latin portus, so portway was also derived from the roads which connected and linked the markets held in the ports established in the municipia and vici.[18]   These roads were known in the Roman system as ' viae vicinales,' as distinguished from the main routes of communication which connected up the provinces of the Empire, the ' viae consulares ' or ' praetoriae ' or the strategic roads in the provinces maintained by the military

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12 Nash : *History of Worcester*, II, app. cvii.   Dingman, *Worcester Place Names*, 131.

13 Bannister : *Place Names of Hereford*, p. 156.

14 Camden, ed. 1610, 557.

15 Dingman : *Stafford Place Names*, 120.

16 Dig., 50, 16, 59.

17 *C.I.L.* : viii, 4508, et suppt., p. 1788.

18 For the synonymous use of Port, Burgh or Wic (vicus) *cf*, port-girefa, Burgh-girefa and Wic-girefa ; Kemble : *Saxon in England*, p. 11, cvii.

authority, ' viae militares.' And whereas the two latter classes of road were paid for out of imperial funds—' fiscus '—the ' viae vicinales ' were maintained out of local sources of revenue in the districts they served.[19]

Portway then is the Saxon equivalent to the Roman ' via vicinalis,' the roads of the vici, and we have already established the proposition that Portway and Icknield Way are interchangeable terms. Does Icknield Way correspond also ' via vicinalis '? I think of this there can be no doubt. Icknield is a modern form of several earlier forms of the word. The earliest is Icenhylte[20], which is not very far removed from vicinalis, and it goes through various stages—Ykenilde, Ekenyld, Ykenylde— until the modern Icknield is reached.

Aubrey, as late as 1697, has ikenil, and the form Rickenild of Higden, 1360, is almost certainly due to a copyist's error for hikinil[21], whence the confusion between Icknield and the Ryknield Street in the midland counties has arisen. The original Saxon form of the name everywhere applied to the Icknield Way is almost certainly Icinil, where only the Latin v has dropped out[22] from vicinalis. We must remember that it was the language of the common people rather than in the records of the clerks that it survived during the early Saxon period.

One principal difficulty has to be cleared up before we can definitely assign to Icknield a derivation from vicinalis. It is this. From a very early date Icenilde Way has been considered as the title of a definite and continuous Roman road, one of the four roads (chemini) which traversed Britain.

It originated in the so-called Laws of Edward the Confessor— usually supposed to date in their present form from about the thirteenth century—where four ways are given as under the King's Peace, viz., Watling, Fosse, Hickenild and Ermine Streets. But in the Laws of William the Conqueror only three such ways are given, viz., Fosse, Ermine and Watling.[23]

19 Momimsen : *C.I.L.*, v., p. 933, and viii., p. 859.
20 *Place Names of Bucks* : E. Place Name Society, vol. II, 2.
21 One of the earliest MS. of Higden has Hikenil.
22 *Cf.* Vectis into Ictis for Isle of Wight.
23 Codrington : *Roman Roads in Britain*, p. 28.

It is idle now to speculate as to how the discrepancy arose. It is more to our purpose to examine the course of an Icknield Way on a large scale map, and to note how entirely different it is from the other chief Roman roads.   Instead of a straight definite course across England it is made up of a series of irregular tracks frequently altering in direction and doubtfully continuous. Like Portway, its course from Norfolk to Dorset is to-day a line of scattered roads or tracks often paralleled one with the other.   And count must be taken of the many scattered Icknield of Ryknield Streets through the west and central counties, such as Warwick, Worcester and Hereford, which have no connection with what is marked on our modern maps as the main Icknield Way.[24] Icknield Ways are as common as portways and cannot be made to form a definite Roman road.   They are in fact mainly local and not highways, and in many instances they coincide with portways, especially in Worcestershire, just as we have found in Berkshire.[25]

In fact all the evidence points to the conclusion that Portways and Icknield Ways were secondary or local roads and both lineally descended from the viae vicinales, the names being derived one from the portus, the other from the vici, of Roman Britain. Both have their origin in the local roads of Roman Britain and furnish one of the few surviving links between Rome, Saxon and Modern England.

24 V.C.H., Warwick, i, 239.
25 *E.g.*, Droitwich to Worcester ; a section of Ryckneed Street called Portstraete, C.S., 552 ; also Worcester, Stow-in-the-Wold, C.D., 612 and 617.