

Robert Macfarlane is a young British university professor (aged 45 this year).

He has written an intriguing book, *The Old Ways*, 2010, about his walking tours, along very old, often almost unmarked pathways in Europe and the Middle East.

These are the old public footpaths or “ways” that human beings have travelled on since...well, since there have been human beings.

Nowadays they have often been paved over or diverted away from commercial land.

But in the countryside they often still exist as deep grooves cut into the land by centuries of walking feet.

One such “old way” is the Icknield Way from the south Norfolk coast in England to about halfway across England where it meets another “old way” that continues on to Dorset and the English Channel.

The Icknield Way goes through chalk land...and the centuries of walking it have left white lines on the green landscape it passes through.

In 1936, a pioneer of aerial photography, George Allen took a photograph of the Icknield Way, from his plane using a handheld camera.

*Horizontally across the image runs a series of near-parallel lines.*

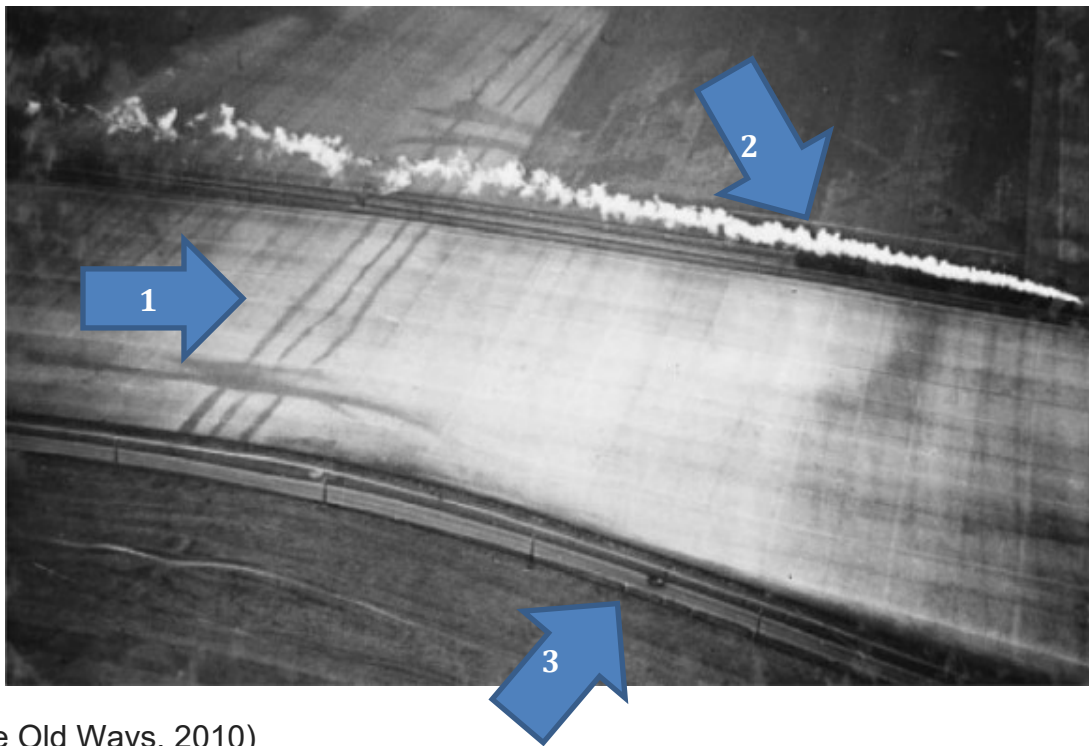
*Uppermost of these is a railway track, upon which a train happens to be chuffing eastwards, trailing a long plume of steam.*

*Below that is a road upon which a single car is driving westwards.*

*Concealed from the passengers of either train or car, but clear to the bird's eye of the camera are other lines in the landscape: the dark streaks of backfilled Iron Age ditches running north- south, medieval field boundaries, and— within a few yards of the road's tarmac—the white rutted tracks of the Icknield Way itself.*

*‘What is astonishing to the point of uncanniness...is the way in which these ancient features secretly share the landscape with the living as they go about their daily business.’*





(The Old Ways, 2010)

This old photograph shows three successive ways of travelling, each still there (at least in 1936), each carrying people on a journey...

Well, they seem to me to almost define the Christian church with

- 1) its roots deep in the past (those grooves in the chalk),
- 2) its present (the railway the major means of transportation in 1936, certainly in England) and
- 3) its future (the car which would come to dominate the world two decades later, after the last war).

In the church itself, past, present and future are all there...and at any moment in a church person's life, they can travel the Christian way as of old, as of now or in the future.

Robert Macfarlane sums up his walks on the 'old ways' as follows:

*The journeys told in this book take their bearings from the distant past, but also from the debris and phenomena of the present, for this is often a double insistence of old landscapes: that they be read in the then but felt in the now*

*The way markers of my walk are not only the archeological features of dolmens, tumuli and long barrows, but also last year's ash-leaf frails (brittle in the hand), last night's fox scat (rank in the nose), this very minute's bird call (sharp in the ear), the electricity pylon's lyric crackle and the crop-sprayer's hiss.*

(The Old Ways, 2010)

Thanks be to God for our shared old, present and new ways to follow Him.

Lorne Ellaschuk