

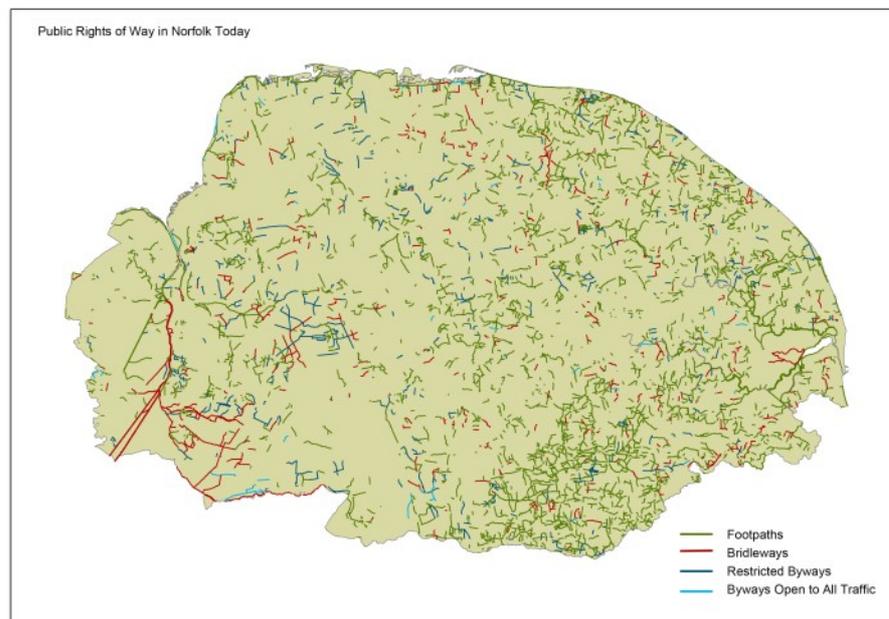
NNAS Lecture Summary

7 December 2014

Pathways to History: Researching Public Rights of Way in Norfolk Dr Jon Gregory (University of East Anglia)

The *Pathways to History* project is being carried out by landscape historians at the University of East Anglia, working with students and volunteers across the county. The project began in Spring 2013 and this lecture presented a summary of the work carried out so far and a discussion of some of the questions to be researched in more depth in the coming months. The central aim of the project is to examine the landscape context and long-term history of Norfolk's rights of way network through a combination of fieldwork, documentary research and GIS analysis. This also provides opportunities to research related topics such as the impact of enclosure, the relationship between paths and other features (veteran trees, parish boundaries and settlement patterns for example) and more recent developments including urban expansion and the laying out of airfields.

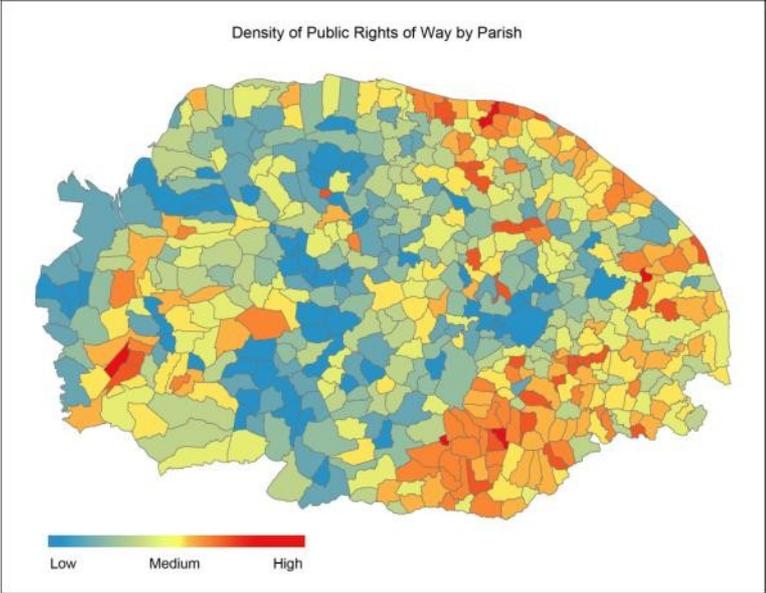
When the current rights of way network in plotted on a map of the county a number of patterns emerge. These include a dense network of footpaths in the south east of the county, contrasting with a number of 'holes' where few rights of way are found. This is particularly true in the area around Norwich, in the north west of the county and in Breckland. Combining the rights of way network with modern roads fills in some of the gaps, but an east-west distinction remains to some extent. In many cases the distinction between roads and public rights of way (footpaths, bridleways and byways) is a relatively recent one and in many areas results from decisions made in the early 20th century regarding which routes were to be metalled. Of a sample of 40 nineteenth-century roads in north Norfolk 19 no longer form part of the modern road network but are instead now defined variously as footpaths, bridleways and byways.



The modern 'Definitive Map' of public rights of way in Norfolk.

In total Norfolk has 3,833km of public rights of way, of which 2,701km are footpaths. Between May and November 2013 222km of these were surveyed by project volunteers, a figure that has continued to rise since and will hopefully continue to increase in coming months. Using GIS in conjunction with Definitive Map data provided by Norfolk County Council we have been able to study the length, location and density of PROW across the county. Of those parishes which have very high densities of

PROW (in terms of metres of path per hectare of parish) a number of similar characteristics emerge, including late survival of common land (Wacton, Runton) and the existence of long paths following rivers and drainage channels (Downham, Thurne). At the opposite end of the scale those parishes with very few rights of way, or indeed no rights of way, tend to lie at the centre of large landed estates.



Density of public rights of way by parish

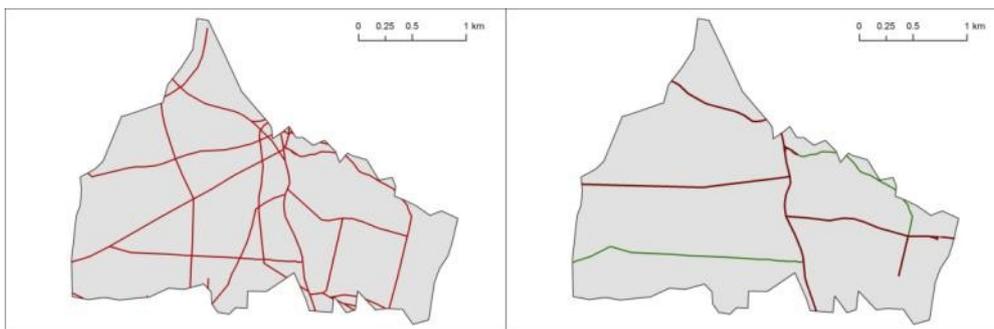
Some of the key factors which have been identified as having a significant influence on current patterns were discussed, working backwards from the twentieth century. In Norfolk the influence of military activity has been strongly felt in some areas, particularly the Stanford Battle Training Area (STANTA) in Breckland which contains the only Norfolk parish with no public rights of way and no public roads (Sturston). Elsewhere the creation and expansion of airfields has led to the closure or diversion of a number of routes, particularly around those sites which remained important in the 1950s and 1960s.



A former road between Great Snoring and Little Walsingham

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the road network of Norfolk was transformed through the activity of large landed estates and through the re-planning of the landscape which accompanied parliamentary enclosure acts. While there is no straightforward correlation across the county between parishes with few rights of way and those that were subject to parliamentary enclosure, it is notable that in the south east of the county parliamentary enclosure acts tended to deal only with small areas of individual parishes, leading to the survival of a higher proportion of public roads and paths. In the west of the county parliamentary enclosure tended to affect larger areas of heathland and common land within each parish, leading to a greater reduction in the number of routes.

Alongside parliamentary enclosure, other legal changes made it easier for landowners to close and divert roads in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The 1773 Highways Act made it possible to close or divert a route with the consent of the landowner and two Justices of the Peace. As these tended to be neighbouring landowners it was unlikely they would refuse the application. A high proportion of eighteenth and nineteenth-century road closure orders affect routes passing through or close by landscape parks and their surrounding plantations. Across the north and west of the county many parishes saw a major reduction in the total length of roads and paths between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. In Thorpe Market, to take one example, the total length of routes today is 54% less than the total shown on a map of 1643. In the south and east, however, it is possible to find parishes where the route network has remained remarkably similar when compared with seventeenth and eighteenth-century maps. Morley near Wymondham has seen a reduction of 6% compared to the routes shown on Thomas Waterman's map of 1629.



Roads and rights of way in Thorpe Market in 1643 and 2013

Fieldwork carried out for the project has focused on the physical character of public rights of way, recording width and depth of routes, the nature of their boundaries and the existence of veteran trees. At this stage the results are still being process and have not been analysed in depth so far. However, a number of points can be made, albeit tentatively. Firstly, it is notable that the character of unsurfaced lanes is very similar in different parts of the county and that they serve to preserve elements of an older landscape (pollarded trees, species-rich hedgerows) even in areas where the surrounding fields have been transformed in the last century. Secondly, based on paths surveyed so far there appear to be a higher than average number of sunken lanes on particular soil types. This requires further research to determine which factors (age, usage, topography, soil type) are most significant in explaining the distribution of sunken lanes across the county. Future research will also look in more depth at the relationship between routes and administrative boundaries, particularly parish and hundred boundaries. Such relationships may help to uncover the longest established elements of the current network of roads and paths by identifying those which seem to predate the boundaries that follow them.



Narrow Lane, a footpath in Tibenham

Pathways to History will continue throughout 2014 as volunteers and members of the project team continue to carry out fieldwork and archival research. At present the focus is on a number of key areas:

- The 20th century – changing definitions and perceptions
- The impact of landed estates and enclosure c.1600-1900
- The physical character of public rights of way
- Landscape context – the relationship with settlements and boundaries.



Volunteers carrying out fieldwork in Little Walsingham

As the project continues to accumulate and analyse material additional questions will undoubtedly emerge, along with (we hope) a few answers.

For more information on the project please see <https://www.uea.ac.uk/history/pathways>

Dr Jon Gregory (University of East Anglia)
30.12.2013