

CHURCH TIMES

the world's leading Anglican newspaper

A chalk road to Canterbury

Posted: 29 Jan 2016 @ 12:03

Sarah Meyrick sets out along the Pilgrims' Way to Canterbury



Ancient route: the Pilgrim's Way runs east to west along the North Downs

IT IS the penultimate day of our journey — a 15-miler — and we have just slogged our way up Soakham Downs. The hill is well named: it has been raining all day, and our feet are squelching in our boots. Fortunately, two miles of dense woodland follow, offering some shelter from the relentless downpour.

And then, suddenly, there is a break in the trees to our right, and we catch our first glimpse of Canterbury. The cathedral rises majestically on the horizon in the misty distance, a mere seven miles away, and we realise that the end of our 104-mile journey is almost within our grasp.

The Pilgrims' Way to Canterbury is full of glorious moments, but this is one of the most memorable. It is easy to romanticise how this might have felt to medieval pilgrims who were travelling nervously through the woods on the lookout for robbers — people who had never seen the cathedral before, for whom Canterbury was a foreign city that had, until now, only ever existed in their imaginations. For us, I suppose, this is a more prosaic but still welcome reminder that the end is in sight.

The Pilgrims' Way runs from Winchester to Canterbury. It is a route that is based, broadly, on ancient tracks that run west to east along the chalk downs that originally developed for reasons of trade rather than anything more spiritual.

Later, of course, both Winchester and Canterbury became significant places of pilgrimage, as people flocked to the shrines of St Swithun, St Augustine, and St Thomas Becket. As pilgrimage reached its peak in popularity, many travelled onwards on the *Via Francigena* towards Rome, and even the Holy Land.

IT IS now thought unlikely that there was ever a single identifiable medieval Pilgrims' Way between the two great cathedral cities, in spite of the efforts of many writers (including Hilaire Belloc, of *Cautionary Tales for Children* fame) to prove the contrary. Rather, pilgrims simply took the best path available.

Many of the old cart-tracks that might once have formed part of the route have now been swallowed up by motorways and A roads. But this should not deter the would-be pilgrim. It is possible to take advantage of two well-established modern paths: St Swithun's Way, from Winchester to Farnham, a 34-mile route that wends its way east through the picturesque Itchen Valley via Alresford and Alton to Farnham; and the North Downs Way, which takes you the 115 miles from Farnham to Canterbury, via Guildford and Rochester.

And what a route it is: miles and miles of footpaths through remarkably unspoiled countryside, taking in rolling hills, ancient woodland, open fields, and chalky tracks along the way.

The route is rich with history: Iron Age forts, Roman remains, Norman castles, medieval churches, and much more.

The wildlife is remarkable, too, offering the chance to enjoy spectacular wild-flowers and butterflies.



TO COVER the whole distance enjoyably, it is probably best to allow a fortnight, based on walking an average of ten miles a day. Fitness, of course, varies from person to person, but it is all too easy to underestimate the cumulative effect of walking long distances day after day. (A friend of mine walked the whole way in eight days, but ended up with an excruciating ligament injury.)

Whether you are walking alone or as part of a group will also make a difference to your speed. Most important, perhaps, too high a target in terms of miles means missing out on many of the pleasures of the journey: the fascinating pilgrim churches along the way, the times to pause and pray, the welcome drink in the pub at lunchtime.

For reasons of practicality, I walked only part of the route, and turned it into three separate expeditions, over long weekends, in July, August, and October, each with a different member of my family.

While this might sound like “pilgrimage-lite” to purists, the decision proved to have many advantages. First, it extended the pleasure of pilgrimage — the anticipation, the slog, the sense of achievement, the storytelling, and the recovery — over several months rather than compressing it all into one intense burst.

As a consequence, it also allowed me to enjoy the route in different seasons, from high summer to early autumn. From a practical point of view, it made it far easier to minimise the contents of our backpacks, because we were only ever away for two nights at a time. And, finally, it gave me the rare joy of spending time away with my daughter, son, and husband, each in turn.

In general, the route is easily accessible by public transport, enabling us to arrive by train at one station, and leave from another three days later. Overnight accommodation varied from a tiny youth hostel to a gastro pub — and, perhaps best of all, a night with extremely kind friends we had first met on another pilgrimage, who insisted on washing and drying our very wet clothes before dispatching us (sadly, into the rain again) the following morning.

THE highlights are almost too many to mention. There was the kind lady who welcomed us at Guildford Cathedral without a murmur about the rainwater that streamed from us in rivulets, forming puddles at our feet on a July day that had, all on its own, delivered a month's rainfall.

The next day, we walked up the steep Box Hill in glorious sunshine, and thought of the Olympic cyclists in 2012. There were the wonderful views over most un-English vineyards. The Millennium Standing Stones at Gatton Park, each carved with a different quotation, designed to demonstrate the spiritual power of words and artistic lettering.

We walked through glorious countryside and chocolate-box villages. We crossed the River Medway over the vertiginous bridge at Rochester, and marvelled time after time as yet another jewel of a church came into view.



We were startled by the sudden appearance of Brother Percival, the wooden figure of a sleeping monk on a bench, encouraging us to “rest our bones” at the end of a very wet day. We walked through fragrant apple orchards that groaned with fruit, before finally arriving in Canterbury one Sunday afternoon in time for choral evensong.

One of the notable surprises was how uncrowded the route was. There is a moment near Caterham where you look up to see the skyline of the City of London under 20 miles away. Yet, in spite of the proximity of such urban density, and the resurgence of interest in pilgrimage notwithstanding, we met remarkably few other walkers.

As far as low points go, they are few and far between. It did rain, of course, and very hard; but only for three days out of the nine. Otherwise, the sun shone for much of the time. We got lost a couple of times, but never disastrously so — although it’s true that when you have been walking for 12 miles, even the shortest diversion can feel catastrophic.

Signage is variable: for great stretches of the route it is almost non-existent; at others, it is extremely good.

It offered all that a good pilgrimage should: time away from the hurly burly; time in the company of the people you love; good conversation and much laughter; a series of small adventures; and much-needed physical and spiritual refreshment. The only question is: where next?

The action of Sarah Meyrick's forthcoming novel, Knowing Anna, to be published in June, takes place on a pilgrimage to Canterbury.

TRAVEL DETAILS

The official National Trails guidebook is helpful in working out transport links and finding accommodation: *North Downs Way* by Colin Saunders, the official National Trail guide (Aurum Press).

The parish of Shottermill has also published an online resource that would help if you were planning to walk as a group: www.shottermillparish.org.uk/Data/pdf/The_Journey.pdf.

Other useful websites include: www.nationaltrail.co.uk/north-downs-way; www3.hants.gov.uk/longdistance/st-swithuns-way.htm; and www.pilgrimswaycanterbury.org/.

Good-value accommodation options en route include: camping in Puttenham Eco Camping Barn, from £15 per person per night; the YHA youth hostels in Holmbury (near Dorking), Tanners Hatch, and Canterbury; Otford Manor (the home of Oak Hall Expeditions, www.oakhall.co.uk); and Aylesford Priory (www.thefriars.org.uk).