

# Travel and retreats: Maidenhead revisited

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A new pilgrim route has been developed in the diocese of Oxford. **Sarah Meyrick** walks along it

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Journeying: walkers on the new Oxford pilgrimage route

IT IS an unseasonably warm and sunny September day, and a straggling group of 50 people is making its way along the Thames Path between Bourne End and Maidenhead. There is nothing unusual in that - apart from the size of the group, that is, and that no one is saying a word.

It is the afternoon hour of silence, when pilgrims are invited to walk in contemplation. Quite what the passing dog-walkers make of us tacet pilgrims is an open question.

A few miles on, we pause for a drink, and the (now retired) Bishop of Oxford gently brings us out of the silence. The walk resumes, and so does the conversation; but the mood has shifted subtly. It is hard to put our finger on what, exactly, has changed, but there is a sense of having shared something out of the ordinary.

It's either that, or it's the cheerful thought that we are nearly at our destination, where members of the congregation of St Luke's, Maidenhead, are waiting to serve us a marvellously English tea in the beautiful setting of Ray Mill Island, a public park in the middle of the Thames.

Our hosts do us proud: not only do they produce hot tea (without electricity), but there is an impressive array of home-made cake and sandwiches. And, as a result of a frantic exchange of text messages, they have even managed to shift the whole event forward, because we have arrived earlier than planned. The afternoon ends with a short open-air act of worship.

Our journey to Maidenhead is the ninth day of the ten-day, 104-mile-long pilgrim route along the Thames, the Thames Pilgrim Way. It is a gentler day than some, in that we walk only eight miles (day two stretched to 13 miles); but, for those of us who have walked every day, the lower mileage provides welcome relief for blistered feet.

We are walking to inaugurate this brand new pilgrimage route through the heart of the diocese of Oxford. The idea came out of the enthusiasm for pilgrimage of the Rt Revd John Pritchard, then Bishop, matching the recent surge in interest in pilgrimage, from both inside and outside the Church.

About 70 of the diocese's 815 parish churches lie within half a mile of the River Thames, many of them treasures. Why not, the group setting up the route thought, reclaim and bless a well-established national trail, which happily passes through the three counties that make up our diocese, and create a pilgrim way for posterity?

Besides being beautiful, the mighty River Thames offers a powerful symbol for baptism, new life, journeys, and so on.

PILGRIM routes, old and new, are springing up all over the world. Statistics from Santiago de Compostela, which is visited by about 200,000 a year, suggest that 50 per cent of pilgrims are under 25. Seventy-seven per cent make the journey on foot, and 22 per cent by bicycle. Only about half say that they belong to a religious denomination.

Working with the former Bishop, I was part of the group that consulted the parishes along the Thames. We divided the route - from Radcot, on the edge of the Cotswolds, in rural west Oxfordshire, to Runnymede, not far from the M25, and directly under the Heathrow flight-path - into manageable stages, and, where possible, linked to public transport. We designed a logo, created a website that was optimised for smartphones, and prepared a handbook full of maps, practical information, and spiritual reflection.

For various reasons, the idea took a couple of years to execute. But, in the end, the timing fitted serendipitously with the Bishop's retirement: the Thames pilgrimage offered him the chance to spend ten days in September walking through his large diocese, meeting about 200 people, from babes in arms to a 93-year-old - a month before laying down his episcopal staff in the cathedral.

EACH day begins with a morning gathering, and an act of worship. Two or three hours later, we break for lunch and a midday reflection, where food for thought for the silent hour is suggested. At the end of the day, we pause again for prayer at our destination.

Every day provides its own fascination. We walk through a surprisingly deserted landscape for the first couple of days, before reaching the glories of Oxford. Pretty Thames-side villages nestling in leafy landscape follow. Tilehurst and Reading provide a more urban setting, before the well-heeled towns of Henley, Marlow, and Maidenhead - and, at the end, the splendid views of Eton College and Windsor Castle - greet us.

The stages average ten miles each, and, since the pilgrimage route largely hugs the river, the path is generally flat - the one exception being the steep hill at Goring Gap (day six). The week we are walking, the path is in excellent shape: firm underfoot, and easy to follow. Just nine months earlier, great swaths of the Thames Path were under water, as a result of the winter's dramatic floods. Flooding frequently means repairs and diversions; so fellow pilgrims should check this before setting out.

NONE the less, some of our party are challenged by the walking. One or two discover that they

are not as fit as they had hoped, while others find the gentle group-pace frustrating. This is central to the experience of group pilgrimage. For all its frustrations, there is something hugely important about travelling together, about falling into a rhythm each day, about looking after our fellow travellers should they stumble. Journeying together means sacrificing one's own habits and inclinations to the common good. In spiritual terms, that letting go proves to be liberating.

We pilgrims gradually fall into step with one another, and begin to chat: idly at first, but with more intent as the days go on. We share our stories, discuss our faith, and share our heartbreaks. As we relax with each other, laughter bubbles up. A running gag emerges about the superfluous safety briefing (as advised by Ecclesiastical Insurance), and friendships form.

One or two walkers, who initially signed up for a single day, make covert phone calls, rejigging their diaries to wangle more time on the riverside. All of us report feeling refreshed and nourished by the silence.

Of course, there are mishaps. One day, the back-up vehicle has to be pulled out of a ditch by a passing tractor; a phone and car keys go missing (both are later found); and the Bishop's lunch goes astray, necessitating an emergency flapjack. But, helped by glorious weather (only one hour's rain in ten days), magnificent hospitality along the way, and a splendid open-air service at the end - where pilgrims' feet are washed - our pilgrimage proves a truly memorable experience.

LIKE many pilgrimage routes, the new Thames Pilgrim Way can be walked in one ten-day span, or a day or two at a time, to fit other commitments. It would be possible to walk the route alone, or as a pair; but this would undoubtedly be a quite different experience.

It might take more self-discipline to walk slowly, to pause and pray at intervals throughout the day. But the idea was always that there should be a legacy, and the route now exists in perpetuity for anyone and everyone to discover.

### **Travel details**

All the details about the Thames Pilgrim Way are online at [www.thamespilgrimway.org.uk](http://www.thamespilgrimway.org.uk). The smartphone-friendly site includes directions, maps, and information about travel, accommodation, and food. For each stage there is spiritual reflection, a prayer, and an activity for children. Copies of *Walking the Thames Pilgrim Way* are on sale for £5 plus p&p; phone 01865 208200. For luggage-transfer along the Thames Path, email [movemybags@gmail.com](mailto:movemybags@gmail.com), or visit [www.movemybags.com](http://www.movemybags.com). Visit also: [www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thames-path](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thames-path).

### **Other UK pilgrim routes to try Pilgrim's Way**

The 120-mile Pilgrim's Way from Winchester to Canterbury is made up of a combination of the St Swithun's Way ([www3.hants.gov.uk/longdistance/st-swithuns-way](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/longdistance/st-swithuns-way)) and the North Downs Way ([www.nationaltrail.co.uk/north](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/north)

downs). St Swithun's Way (34 miles) runs between Winchester - the capital of Saxon England - and Farnham. From Farnham, join the North Downs Way to arrive at Canterbury Cathedral ([www.canterbury-cathedral.org](http://www.canterbury-cathedral.org)).

### **St Cuthbert's Way**

St Cuthbert's Way (<http://stcuthbertsway.info>, [www.stcuthbertsway.net](http://www.stcuthbertsway.net)) follows in the steps of the Anglo-Saxon saint, and stretches from Melrose Abbey, on the Scottish borders, where St Cuthbert started his religious life in 650, to Holy Island, off the Northumberland Coast - his eventual resting place, and his original pilgrimage shrine.

### **The Saints' Way**

The Saints' Way, in Cornwall, stretches from Padstow (starting at St Petroc's) to Fowey. The 30-mile walk is well signed with Celtic-cross markers. Route guides are available at [www.cornwall.gov.uk](http://www.cornwall.gov.uk) and [www.visitcornwall.com](http://www.visitcornwall.com). See also St Michael's Way.

### **The Way of St Andrews**

The Way of St Andrews ([www.thewayofstandrews.com](http://www.thewayofstandrews.com)), in Scotland, has recently been revived, with the impressive ambition of rivalling the Camino to Santiago de Compostela. The Way of St Andrews incorporates the 200-mile St Columba's Way, from Iona in the west to St Andrews in the east, but also incorporates a number of less ambitious variations (the shorter St Margaret's Way from Edinburgh, or the St Duthac's from Aberdeen, for example).

### **North Wales Pilgrim's Way**

The 130-mile North Wales Pilgrim's Way, or Taith Pererin ([www.pilgrims-way-north-wales.org](http://www.pilgrims-way-north-wales.org)), links St Winefride's Well ([www.saintwinefrideswell.com](http://www.saintwinefrideswell.com)),

at Holywell, with its long tradition of pilgrimage and healing, with Bardsey Island ([www.bardsey.org](http://www.bardsey.org)), the legendary island of 20,000 saints.