

Easter 2009: top five pilgrim routes in Britain

Pilgrimage is marching back in a big way, writes Jane Alexander.

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Chaucer's pilgrims set off for Canterbury on a fine spring day and a growing band of modern-day pilgrims are eagerly following in their footsteps. Britain is surprisingly rich in pilgrim trails and sites: from the epic St Cuthbert's Way in the north to the equally arduous Pilgrim's Way in the south-east; from a short stroll with a picnic in Essex to a plunge in the sacred waters of a shrine in North Wales; the opportunities for walking (and bathing) in the footsteps of the saints are pretty limitless.

"Pilgrimage is enjoying a huge revival across Europe," says Dr Ian Bradley, author of a new book, *Pilgrimage – a spiritual and cultural journey* (Lion, £20). "While figures for churchgoing continue to fall across Europe, the number of those making pilgrimages is steadily rising. Many people uncomfortable about sitting in pews and uneasy with institutionalised religion find it easier to walk rather than talk their faith."



Walk of life: one leg of the Northern Cross pilgrimage, which takes place this Easter, is waymarked with crosses

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On a sunny spring morning in Cornwall, you can see their point. The Saints' Way stretches from the wild and rugged northern coast at Padstow, right through the heart of Cornwall, to the mellow southern side (at Fowey). You could route march it in two days but please don't – the route connects a web of shrines, standing stones, chapels, churches and holy wells that all beg for inspection and reflection. Then there's the countryside itself, soft valleys, dappled woodland and bleak wind-swept moorland. This was one of the routes the Celtic Christian missionaries and pilgrims took when crossing from Ireland to the continent. It's a stunning hike by anyone's standards, but is it more than that?

Sally Welch, a rector with a parish in Oxfordshire and author of *Making a Pilgrimage* (Lion, £5.99), thinks so.

"Pilgrimage is a meaningful journey to a sacred place," she explains. "Pilgrims walk to change themselves; they walk to find meaning." The idea being that sometimes, in order to see clearly, we need to separate ourselves from the daily grind, from our everyday work and responsibilities. On a long (and sometimes arduous) hike, things often fall into perspective.

Answers to tricky questions can break through when your head is free of the internet and the news.

With the wind whistling through your hair and the sun on your face, life suddenly becomes far more simple. You have time to think, maybe even to pray – and sometimes answers break through like a shaft of sunlight glancing down into a clearing. "Any walking pilgrimage is a chance to get away from the world," affirms Judy Guy-Briscoe, who co-ordinated last year's Northern Cross pilgrimage (a week-long Easter walk to Lindisfarne).

"A pilgrimage is a chance to mirror life and, at the same time, step back from it and see what the important things are."

In his classic book *Songlines*, the late travel writer Bruce Chatwin suggested that humans are born to be nomads, naturally drawn to movement and journeying. Maybe that ancient urge lies behind this enthusiasm for pilgrimage. Whether that journey be a long hike tracing the routes of early Christianity or a simple meditative walk in woodlands, the idea of seeking meaning through walking is a very tempting pilgrim's progress.

Top five pilgrim routes in Britain

1 St Cuthbert's Way follows in the steps of the Anglo-Saxon saint, stretching from Melrose Abbey in the Scottish borders to Lindisfarne in Northumberland. The 62-mile route is waymarked with a distinctive cross symbol (www.stcuthbertsway.fsnet.co.uk (<http://www.stcuthbertsway.fsnet.co.uk>)). The Northern Cross-organised pilgrimage takes place each Easter. One of the legs follows St Cuthbert's Way (www.northerncross.co.uk (<http://www.northerncross.co.uk>)).

2 The Saints' Way stretches from Padstow (starting at St Petroc's church) to Fowey. The stunning 30-mile walk is well signed with Celtic cross

markers. Cornwall Country Council (www.cornwall.gov.uk (<http://www.cornwall.gov.uk>)) provides a route guide. The website also gives details on St Michael's Way, another Cornish pilgrim route that makes for great walking.

3 On the first Saturday in July around 1,500 pilgrims walk through the fields from Bradwell in Essex to the isolated Saxon chapel of St Peter's. This is pilgrimage "lite" with a picnic, music, dance, stalls and refreshments. www.bradwellchapel.org (<http://www.bradwellchapel.org>)

4 St Winefride's Well in Flintshire is Wales's answer to Lourdes, a shrine to St Winefride (whose head was chopped off by a would-be rapist but miraculously reattached itself through prayer). Pilgrims can bathe in the outdoor stone bath. www.saintwinefrideswell.com (<http://www.saintwinefrideswell.com>)

5 Canterbury remains an important centre of pilgrimage. www.canterbury-cathedral.org (<http://www.canterbury-cathedral.org>). Diehard walkers can attempt the Pilgrim's Way, the 120-mile track that runs to Winchester, much of it parallel to the North Downs Way (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/northdowns) (<http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/northdowns>).

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