

Andy Bull, author of the new book on the London to Walsingham Camino answers some reflective questions.

What inspired you to write the book?

When I first thought of walking to Walsingham from London, I was surprised to find that no waymarked, long-distance footpath existed that would enable me to do that. I could easily trace the Pilgrim's Way to Canterbury and find any number of guide books to help me plan my trip, but for Walsingham – it appeared – I was on my own.

How difficult was it for you to re-establish this pilgrimage route?

The first challenge was to identify the pre-Reformation route. I learned of a book by Leonard Whatmore, a Catholic priest, called *Highway to Walsingham*, written 50 years ago and long out of print. By a stroke of great good fortune, archivists at the Anglican and Catholic shrines enabled me to get hold of a copy.

I quickly learned two things from Fr Whatmore that spurred me on. The first was that Walsingham, rather than Canterbury, was by far our most important shrine, pre-Reformation. The second was that the road to Walsingham from London was the most important in the country.

It is often said that there were not pilgrim routes, just routes that pilgrims used. Not so with the road to Walsingham. Once away from London, pilgrimage was the only reason to visit this village in Norfolk and, once pilgrimage was outlawed, the road fell into disuse.

Unlike Canterbury, which remained an important city post-Reformation, and had Chaucer to seal it in the popular consciousness down the centuries, Walsingham became once more just a village in Norfolk.

However, while Fr Whatmore did a wonderful job of collating all the available evidence and outlining the medieval route, he did not walk it, nor apply it to modern maps. I would have to do that myself.

But this was lockdown. We were allowed to walk for, I think, an hour a day, and were urged to stick close to home. Again, a stroke of great good fortune came to my aid, through a pilgrim organisation called the Confraternity of St James. The CSJ supports British pilgrims who wish to walk to the shrine of St James the Great in Santiago de Compostela, northern Spain.

The CSJ had members who lived along the route that I wanted to research: pilgrims who were not able to walk in Spain as they would do most summers. They responded wonderfully to my appeal for help.

Volunteers walked stretches close to their homes. I followed up once I was allowed to. Finally, after two years, and much trial, error, and footslogging, we refined and improved the route until we had something that, while being as true as possible to the original path, took account of modern realities on the ground, and was a truly inspiring 180-mile path, almost exclusively along footpaths and quiet country lanes.

For those who have never experienced a walking pilgrimage before, can you explain what it is like, and also the benefits that walking can have when going on a pilgrimage?

The health benefits of walking are widely accepted. The mental and spiritual benefits perhaps less so. There is a Latin phrase: *Solvitur ambulando*, 'it is solved by walking', which I think is absolutely right.

So there's all that. But is walking as a pilgrim any different to simply walking? I believe it is.

As I explored the way to Walsingham, I experienced a revelation. I discovered the fundamental difference between simply walking, and walking as a pilgrim. It was as profound as the gulf between speech and song. To travel as a pilgrim makes walking a celebration.

Do you have a personal favourite section of the route, and if so, why?

The countryside is glorious all the way, but for me the section from Brandon to Castle Acre is the most inspiring. At Weeting there is a surviving pilgrim cross, the Stump Cross, one of many that would have shown the way to Walsingham; at Houghton on the hill there is a remarkable Saxon hilltop church that was rescued from Satanist desecrators; and at Castle Acre you find a walled Norman village where pilgrims were welcomed at the Cluniac priory, and whose parish church is dedicated to St James the Great, patron saint of pilgrims.

Can you tell us a bit more about the upcoming launch walks that you have planned?

I'm really excited about this! There are two major events – celebrations really.

From March 24-26 there will be a Walsingham-based launch for the route and the guidebook, with a two-day pilgrimage from Castle Acre via Fakenham followed by events at both Anglican and Catholic Shrines, and an ecumenical service with clergy from both shrines at the site of the Holy House.

Then, from April 11 to 25, I shall walk the full route over 14 days, with a one-day rest in Bury St Edmunds, on the 18th, where a day of pilgrim events are being planned.

I hope to gather a small band of pilgrims around me who will walk long sections (possibly all) of the route. We will also invite local congregations to join us on an ad-hoc basis along the way.

What advice would you give to someone considering their first ever walking pilgrimage?

If you are not used to walking, start with just a few miles, perhaps to a local shrine or church. Walk regularly, and invest in the best quality boots and all-weather gear you can afford.

In *London to Walsingham Camino: the Pilgrimage Guide*, I divide the route into day sections averaging 14 miles, achievable for any reasonably fit person. I further split those in half, for those who prefer to walk around 7 miles a day. And remember, you don't have to walk to Walsingham in one go, you can do stages as and when you have the time.

The important thing is not how quickly you walk to Walsingham, rather that you do!