



FAITH

Oh to be a pilgrim in Britain's green and pleasant land

Walking routes are being launched next year that track ancient paths of pilgrimage to the nation's cathedrals, writes Bess Twiston Davies

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Pilgrims depicted on stained glass at Canterbury Cathedral

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A man was recently observed in tears in the nave of an English cathedral. “I am a secular person,” he shouted. “But something about this place has got to me.”

Surveys of the 10.5 million Britons a year who visit England’s 42 cathedrals suggest that such a reaction is not unusual. “Frequently people are almost ambushed by the atmosphere,” said the Rev Dr Dee Dyas, director of York’s Centre for Pilgrimage Studies.

Dyas has researched medieval English cathedrals and the ways in which visitors respond to them; awe at being in a 900-year-old building and marvel at the craftsmanship are typical responses. According to an Association of English Cathedrals (AEC) poll, only 10 per cent arrive intending to pray, yet nearly half unexpectedly find themselves lighting a candle or leaving a written prayer. Last year 240,000 people lit a candle in York Minister.

“The overwhelming comment in cathedral visitors’ books is: ‘I have found some peace here.’ People talk incessantly of the spiritual experience they have had in cathedrals,” said the Very Rev Adrian Dorber, dean of Lichfield Cathedral and chairman of the AEC, which has decreed 2020 the Year of Cathedrals and Pilgrimage.

This nationwide celebration is inspired by several significant anniversaries: next year is the 800th anniversary of the consecration of the shrine of St Thomas Becket, while Bury St Edmunds is honouring the millennial anniversary of the founding of the Benedictine monastery St Edmund’s Abbey. Handbooks will detail symposiums, lectures on relics, workshops exploring saints and miracles, night-time cathedral events, concerts and plays including TS Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*.



Modern pilgrims in Co
Durham Cathedral
GUY HAYWARD/BRITISH
PILGRIMAGE TRUST

Dorber hopes to showcase the “hidden gems” of lesser-known provincial cathedrals off the tourist track. “There are places with Saxon foundations like Lichfield, while Chelmsford Cathedral is a treasury of modern art,” he said.

Indeed, visitors have a unique chance to “touch things such as an [ancient] carving or a piece of wood in a cathedral in a way that you never could with objects on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum”, said Diana Evans, the head of strategy for places of worship at Historic England. Definitions of who or what a pilgrim is are changing, she said: “There’s an increasing realisation that you don’t have to sign up to the faith of a building to go there as a pilgrim.”

What is beyond doubt is the growing popularity of cathedrals among pilgrims. “We’re noting a huge increase in the numbers of people walking purposefully with a spiritual agenda,” Dorber said.

Of 1,300 people who recently downloaded a walking route from the British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT) website, 60 per cent were first-time pilgrims. The aim of the walks, also printed in English Heritage handbooks, is to make pilgrimage paths more accessible. “People are reconnecting with the ancient tracks walked by their ancestors,” said Guy Hayward, a co-founder of the BPT.



Evening sunshine on
Durham Cathedral
GETTY IMAGES

So what is driving this uptake in pilgrimages? “The top reason for pilgrimage is emotional well-being,” Hayward said. He views this as part of a broader sociological trend. “The rise of pilgrimage is part of the shift from the age of knowledge, which has dominated the past three centuries, to the age of experience.”

This move away from an enlightenment model of acquiring knowledge links into developments in neuroscience, Dyas said. “Research in America suggests that emotion is the main trigger for reasoning and a change of behaviour,” she said. “Therefore, the ways that buildings make people act is very important.”

In 2014 Dyas conducted a project to explore the design and purpose of medieval cathedrals. “We recreated in digital form what the pilgrim experience would have been like in Canterbury with help from archaeologists, architects and social scientists,” she said.

The pilgrim left a grey-toned world to enter a sacred space filled with glittering jewel-like colour in glass, painted tombs and stone. “Medieval cathedrals were designed to reveal a sense of God’s majesty to the pilgrim,” Dyas said.

Their beauty was intended to inspire pilgrims with a glimpse of paradise or to prompt a spiritual encounter. Pilgrims were also drawn to the tombs of saints such as Becket in the hope of obtaining a miraculous healing.

In Hereford Cathedral lies the shrine of St Thomas de Cantilupe, who died in 1282. Seven years later the Welsh outlaw William Cragh marched into the cathedral holding a noose that had been used to hang him. Witnesses alleged that Cragh had died on the scaffold, only to come back to life after his parents prayed to Cantilupe. In July 2018 Hereford launched the St Thomas Way, tracing Cragh's journey from Swansea, and next year Cantilupe's skull will be held at the cathedral. "You might say relics aren't a very Anglican thing, but they are to do with the human body and remind us that saints were flesh and blood," said the Very Rev Michael Tavinor, dean of Hereford.

Relics were swept out of England's cathedrals by the Reformation. In 1538 King Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell banned the pilgrim practice of "wandering unto shrines". The resulting decline of pilgrimage lasted until Victorian times, when its resurgence was linked to the beginnings of tourism to the Holy Land. Since then pilgrimage has evolved and it is no longer seen as an exclusively religious phenomenon. Indeed, Hayward says that pilgrimage can be a "container practice" including "yoga, chanting and holding stones".

Next year pilgrims can trace their predecessors' routes to cathedrals on tracks old and new. They can even start the road to the Spanish shrine of Santiago de Compostela from Co Durham. From next Saturday the route known as *El Camino Inglés* (the English Way), from the Galician coast to the shrine of St James, may start with an initial 22-mile hike through the county.

Those who don't make the journey to Spain can obtain a "pilgrim passport", which throughout 2020 can be bought at cathedral bookshops and stamped at each cathedral visited.

Highlights of the Year of Cathedrals and Pilgrimage• Spring 2020 Six Northern Saints routes will be launched, including four to Durham Cathedral. • May Pilgrim walks will be launched in Ely and St Benet's Abbey, Norfolk, to follow the path of medieval pilgrims to Bury St Edmunds. The town will host an exhibition of manuscripts from the Benedictine monastery, which had been kept in Cambridge for the past 500 years. • July Canterbury Cathedral marks the 800th anniversary of the translation of the body of St Thomas Becket to a new shrine. • August 1 Cantilupe Capers, a day of medieval-themed activities in Hereford. • October 2020 to February 2021 The British Museum holds an exhibition on St Thomas Becket. • November 2020 Lincoln Cathedral marks the 800th anniversary of the canonisation of St Hugh.
