



WALKING WITH INTENT

Dr Guy Hayward opens the door to the magic on your child's doorstep as he guides us through some of the best pilgrimage routes in the UK

If 2020 was the year of walking, perhaps 2021 will be the year we give walking a purpose, and go on pilgrimage. This 'setting of an intention' is the distinguishing element of pilgrimages and is something people have been doing since the beginning of time. Today, an intention might be as simple as asking for help with something you need resolving in your life, like finding a new direction in your work or working through a crisis. Just bringing a receptive openness to whatever the journey offers is enough and perhaps less intimidating for children.

For the past six years I have been exploring and helping to open up around 120 of these old routes and have found them as exciting for journeying with a family or groups as in the more traditional solo adult or duo style. I recently facilitated a family pilgrimage in the period between lockdowns one and two as a bespoke commission and in the process resurrected the old Dorset Cernunnos and Catherine Way.

Pilgrimages have experienced something of a renaissance worldwide. One of the most famous, the Camino de Santiago de Compostela opened in the 13th century with half a million pilgrims walking across the Pyrenees into northern Spain every year. By the 1980s, however, only a few hundred pilgrims walked the route. The 2010 film, *The Way* starring Martin Sheen and directed by Emilio Estevez put the network of pilgrims' ways leading to the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain back on the map. Now it attracts over 350,000 pilgrims a year.

But you don't have to go to Spain, France, Italy or even Japan to do a pilgrimage, some of the oldest are right here on our doorstep and are as interesting if not more so. Thankfully too, modern technology has

made them much easier to find as holy places such as churches, holy wells, ancient yew and oak trees, labyrinths and prehistoric monuments are now marked on various apps. If you are lucky enough to be near one, you might even get to do it during a pandemic lockdown.

London is full of them. 'Taking a cart up Holborn Hill was a euphemism for going to the gallows,' says Jason Goodwin, author of *A Pilgrim's Guide to Sacred London* (Argonaut Books, £7.99), who explored the London Gallows Way with myself and Blue Badge Guide Kate Davey. Goodwin has reinvented it as the Martyrs' Way, which starts at the scaffold of Tower Hill and finishes at Tyburn Convent. The route includes the sites of many religious executions so there is lots of gory detail for children although it does visit many of London's spectacular churches as well.

My favourite route in London is the London Royal Route which feels thematically complete, and unlike the Martyrs Way which can be a bit maudlin, is uplifting in reminding us of our sovereignty. It starts at the old place of royalty and sovereignty, Tower Hill, where legend has it, Brán the Blessed, a giant and a king of Britain in Welsh mythology asked to have his head buried, and was associated with the ravens (like the character Bran in *Game of Thrones*, the 'three-eyed raven').

The route follows the river to Westminster Abbey, where Edward the Confessor is buried intact in his shrine, as well as many of our great poets, musicians and scientists. The quality of churches and variety of holy places it passes by is not only of outstanding calibre, but a walking history lesson of England. Near the beginning there is the prehistoric London Stone, later the Roman Mithraeum Temple before the Strand Lane healing Roman baths with pure spring water. You might not know it but there is a 900-year-old holy well under Australia House.

Pilgrimage has pandemic pedigree too. Boccaccio's great epic *The Decameron*, inspired by Florence's 1348 plague, is a comedy focused on a small group of young Florentines exchanging wit and banter to kill time after walking out of the plague-filled city into the wilderness. So far, so Chaucerian – indeed Chaucer was inspired by *The Decameron* to write his *Canterbury Tales*. More literally, the destination of the modern British Peak Pilgrimage route is the plague village of Eyam in the Peak District, which self-isolated during the Black Death, sacrificing the majority of its community to successfully save the rest of the surrounding area.

What better way to introduce young children to the complexities of the past, and all the while fulfilling their modern day needs. The structure of a pilgrimage – starting at a holy place with an intention, picking a suitably 'epic' destination and then walking – frames it as a 'rite of passage' experience. Each individual family member's purpose will be determined by their heart and activated by their feet, and as such provide a perfect antidote to the looming post-lockdown physical and mental health crisis, in which even those who are not usually susceptible might find themselves struggling.

In my experience, pilgrimage lifts people out of slumps and puts a smile on children's faces, and parents too. There are lots of studies on how walking lifts the mood, how walking in woodlands improves your immune system, and how engaging with our heritage opens the mind. But you don't need to read studies to intuitively know walking with purpose between holy places is likely to be good for you.

On the point of heritage, the way children engage with history during pilgrimage is unique. It is not delivered as a pre-packaged curriculum of linearly-connected facts, but instead is a disjointed, jumbled-up factual mess discovered at the natural pace of the journey, dependent on which sites you come across as you walk.

Surprisingly, the kind of history determined by the land is rather engaging. Having said that, one key period



The Tower of London

that comes up again and again is the Reformation, given that Cromwell banned pilgrimage in 1538, because pilgrimage was seen as too Catholic – prompting a mixing of horrible and holy histories. For a fun take on this, see a video produced by my duo Bounder and Cad, a rap battle between Martin Luther and Pope Leo X.

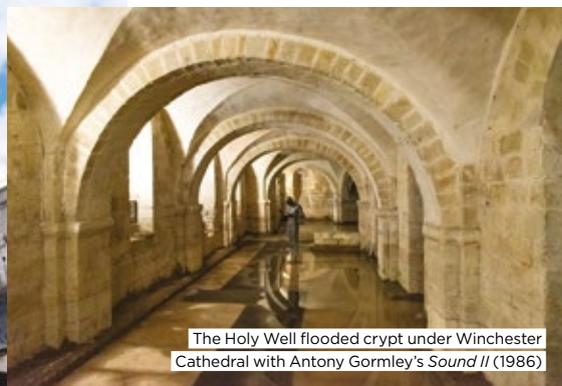
Cathedrals are epic destinations for children, literally. Already Oxford, Gloucester, Salisbury and other cathedrals run education outreach programmes for local schools and it's a lovely way for godparents to bond with their godchildren, a birthday treat of a one day pilgrimage to a cathedral rounded off with a cream tea and choral evensong. If this is too churchy for you, then prehistoric sites are great for connecting to spirit of place, which some would say is more ancient than any overlying histories. Connecting to nature also works wonders – foraging, filtering and drinking wild water, wild swimming in streams, climbing trees. All this can be woven into the tapestry of a pilgrimage.

The combination of extended physical activity with holy places effectively calms hyperactivity. Whatever type of holy place suits you, the feelings that one has in these places are worth tuning into – with silence, lighting candles and touching holy water. The

astonishing success of the *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* series suggests that children had previously been starved of magic – with pilgrimage, children can discover that magic directly, without staring at a screen. ■



Along with Oxford and Salisbury, Gloucester Cathedral runs education outreach programmes for local schools



The Holy Well flooded crypt under Winchester Cathedral with Antony Gormley's *Sound II* (1986)

NEED TO KNOW

PILGRIMAGES IN THE UK

Visit the British Pilgrimage Trust for bespoke and group organised pilgrimages and its Old Way online guide.

britishpilgrimage.org; To contact Guy Hayward for guided pilgrimages, email guy@britishpilgrimage.org

Britain's Pilgrim Places: The First Complete Guide to Every Spiritual Treasure by Nick Mayhew-Smith and Guy Hayward (Lifestyle Press, £19.99), is an illustrated compendium of British pilgrim places and routes.

A Pilgrim's Guide to Sacred London by John Michell and Jason Goodwin (Argonaut Books, £7.99).

Rap video by Bounder and Cad can be streamed at youtube.com.

Apps to find local holy places:
megalithic.co.uk
explorechurches.org
labyrinthisinbritain.uk
ancient-yew.org
ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk