

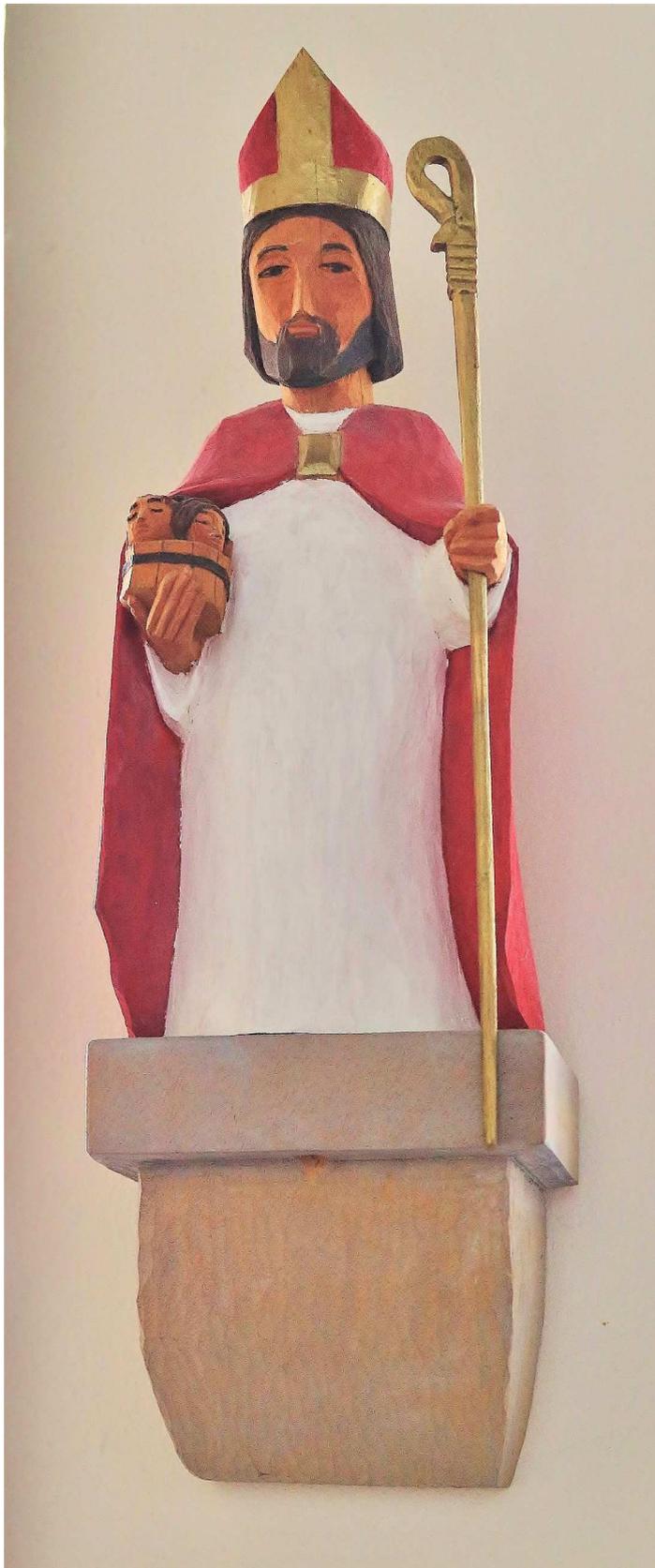
ST SIGFRID'S WAY



INAUGURATING THE ST SIGFRID'S WAY

MAY - AUGUST 2021

This book is dedicated to all those who
accompanied us on the journey and made it
possible.



St Sigfrid's Way is a celebration of the shared journeys, physical and spiritual, taken by Christian communities in Britain and Sweden, dating back to the journey of St Sigfrid in the 11th century.

The route binds together Sigfrid's journey from York in the North of England to Växjö in the South of Sweden, carrying in his pilgrim's pouch the liberating and unifying teachings of Christ and the journey towards shared Christian communion, inspired by those teachings, undertaken by the dioceses of Oxford and Växjö in the last twenty years.

St Sigfrid's Trust exists to promote and strengthen the relationship between the Church of England and the Swedish Church, formalised under the Porvoo agreement to which the Church of England signed up in 1995.



Between May and August 2021 Hugh White and Bethany Thomas left their respective homes and embarked on the great task of inaugurating the 760+ miles of the St Sigfrid's Way. This was a second attempt at Hugh's initial inauguration in the previous year, which was prematurely ended due to the pandemic. This year - with the support of countless at home and on the route - we did it!

We walked in the embrace of abundant hospitality and companionship from start to finish. It was a pilgrimage of reconnection, gathering with friends and strangers to cross boundaries - physical and psychological - that had been put in place during the COVID lock-down, returning to one another again in faith and trust, walking together and sharing in prayer and food, offering each other mutually enriching sustenance for the journey of life.

This book recounts the story of the inaugural pilgrimage in photos and words, originally shared through posts on social media as we made the journey day to day.

We carried with us a St Sigfrid's Way vial to collect drops of water from water sources along the way. This was offered to our destination at Växjö cathedral, firstly as a gift of healing and connection, remembering that although we may make divisions between us politically, in our basic humanity we are united. Water heals, blesses and re-unites, and it is water that flows within us, around us and between our respective pieces of earth. Secondly, it is a symbol of baptism, remembering Sigfrid's baptism of the first monarch of Sweden, baptism being an act of welcoming one another onto the path led by Jesus, which early followers called the Way.



DAY 1: YORK TO TADCASTER



The pilgrimage begins! And what a first day it was. We were joined by Hazel, Tony, Krystyna and Cecilia who were local to the area, and Rev Canon John Toy who had travelled by bus from Scarborough after seeing an advert for the pilgrimage in the Church Times and felt motivated to meet us because of his long history with the Swedish church. After being welcomed into York Mister and blessed by Revd. Canon Michael Smith, we were led through the city by our wonderful local guides and out into the country along the River Ouse.

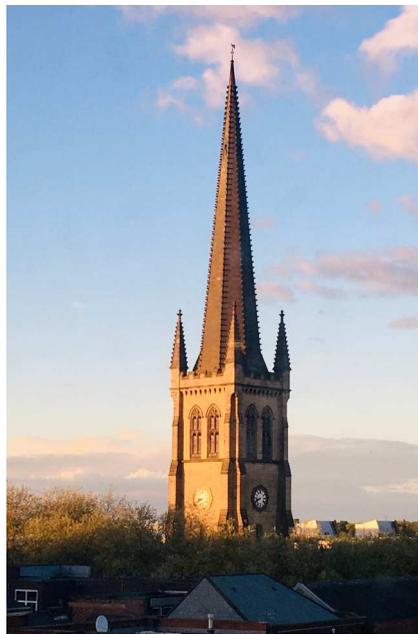
DAY 2: TADCASTER TO GARFORTH



We were blessed and sent off by Revd. Tricia and Rachel from St Mary's Tadcaster, Dorothy and John (who like John Toy have a long connection with the Swedish Church), and Hugh's old school friend Martin.

On the way to Garforth, winding footpaths through fields and woodland, blossom falling as we saunter, bluebells inviting us to stop and absorb beauty, the M1 crossed with the shock of the sign to York (which for us is now 2 days of walking behind, but for cars just ahead), arrival into Garforth both Hugh and Bethany limping slightly with painful feet but greeted with incredible warmth and hospitality by those at St Mary's Garforth. Bed for the night in the church hall.

DAY 3: GARFORTH TO WAKEFIELD



Such a very warm send off by many from St Mary's Garforth and two of them (Margaret and Jane) joined us for part of the way. An old train track re-purposed as a walkway called 'Linesway' carried us out of Garforth, then we walked along lakes, through villages and small roads, and followed the river Calder and the canal into Wakefield where we were greeted by Bishop Tony at the cathedral and fed a very well needed feast by Eleanor, Mary and Dave at their home.

DAY 4: WAKEFIELD TO BARNESLEY



Starting the day with a meditative walk through the labyrinth of Wakefield Cathedral, then a very rainy day out of Wakefield and through the countryside to Barnsley. Hugh made much of this day on his own as Bethany took a pause to nurse a swollen foot! He made it, soggy and tired and a bit grumpy, but made it nonetheless.

DAY 5: BARNLSLEY TO STOCKSBRIDGE



We started the day saying morning office with Fr Stephen Race at St Mary's Barnsley, then welcomed musician and fellow pilgrim Joe Holtaway who travelled up from London to walk with us for a few days. Weather forecast bad but we were kept dry for most of the day until the end. Trans Pennine Trail, rolling green hills, old mining railway line, stone walls, lovely locals, singing as we walked, descending into Stocksbridge, and hosting the St Sigfrid's Folk Club!

ST SIGFRID'S FOLK CLUB



A magical coming together of pilgrims and locals with a sharing of poetry and music, from this land and further afield. The event was hosted at a Care Farm near Stocksbridge called Greave House Farm, founded and run by Barbara and Chris. It was a miraculous coming together with the help of a Facebook community page for Stocksbridge, and a good dose of pilgrim spirit. We gathered under a shelter (that only half sheltered us from the wind and rain) and took turns to step onto the stage, facilitated by our temporary pilgrim musician Joe.

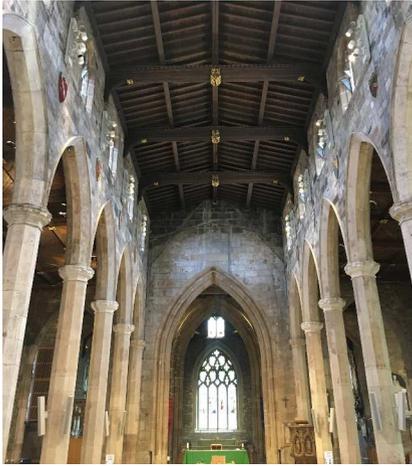
DAY 6: STOCKSBRIDGE TO SHEFFIELD



We are in the land of the steel industry, felt in the landscape and stories of the people. In Stocksbridge it's almost gone but it's thriving in Sheffield, although jobs are in decline because of computerisation.

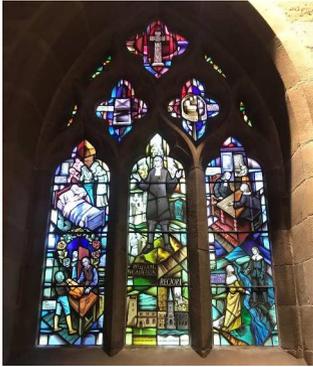
The birthplace of stainless steel, once called 'rustless steel', and the centre of cutlery making! After leaving Stocksbridge we stopped at the bank of the little don river where water was collected into our vial. Then we walked much of the way along the trans pennine trail and it took us through beautiful woods carpeted in vibrant undergrowth, through a few villages, and into a different part of Sheffield than the route had planned because of being hosted by Steve and friends from Crosspool. So St Columba's Crosspool was our destination today. This is a church that has given itself to becoming a vaccination centre, so the people in the photo are actually waiting to have their jabs, even though it looks like they're praying! Maybe they're doing both. End of the first week, time for a day of rest, hosted by Steve & Hazel.

DAY 8: SHEFFIELD TO EYAM



We started the day at Sheffield Cathedral with Canon Keith who welcomed and sent us off so warmly, then followed the Porter Brook (and collected a few drops into our pilgrim water vial) out of the city and into the hills of the Peak District, where city landscape was replaced by the rugged expanse of moors. Rocky roads on high and then down low through the Hope valley, embraced by moss covered trees and a feeling of faeries living here. Achy legs carrying us to Eyam, met by Mike and Jenny from Eyam Church with home-made lasagne and an evening of sharing; our stories of pilgrimage and their stories of plague! More on that in next post.

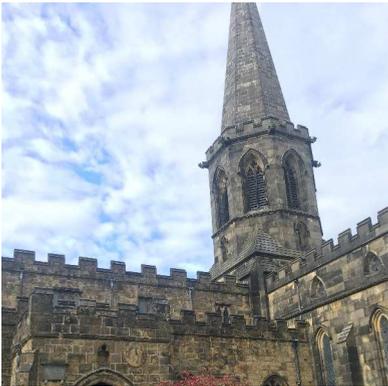
DAY 9: EYAM TO BAKEWELL



We started in Eyam church where the lovely Revd. Mike gave us a guided tour and potted history of Eyam during the plague, famed because of their sacrificial decision to quarantine for a year which prevented it spreading to the rest of the north. The photo of the dog on the rock is the boundary mark where Eyam people would leave money in the holes with vinegar to disinfect and they'd receive resources from the outside in return.

The route took us along the Peak Pilgrimage, following the River Derwent, graced by massive vistas, sheep and lambs, great old trees and drooping but still beautiful bluebells, through the grandeur of Chatsworth Park and a final wooded descent into Bakewell where we fell into a giant Bakewell tart and were never seen again... only joking, but it is the town where Bakewell tarts are from! We shared in a feast with those from Bakewell church before setting our sleeping bags down on the floor of the church for a good night's rest.

DAY 10: BAKEWELL TO HARTINGTON



The day started with a heartfelt sharing circle and silent prayer in Bakewell church with the 14 who had joined us either to walk or to send us off. Eleven stepped onto the way together, guided out of the village by Rick & Cath from the church walking group. Down to Lathkill Dale where water was collected in the pilgrim vial, into woodland and onto high pastures met by cows and badger-faced sheep. Landscape shaped by lead mining. Bakewell pudding shared in a field in the rain. Weaving conversations and silence. New friends. Early arrival into Hartington with a pot of tea to celebrate at the Devonshire Arms, followed by a few delicious pints of Ramblers ale made by local brewer Winkle Beer Co. Bed for the night in Hartington Hall - a 17th century Manor House converted into a youth hostel.

DAY 11: HARTINGTON TO ASHBOURNE



A beautiful but very long day amongst the rolling hills of the Peak District, guided by the River Dove and accompanied by hundreds of sheep. Also a hare and two tiny bats! And several running pheasants that caused much hilarity to exhausted pilgrims. After many many hours of walking in the warm sun without enough liquid and dreaming of a pub in Ilam, here's a limerick that sums up our state when we found there wasn't one (hence the despairing looking pilgrims on a bench):

Three pilgrims rolled into Ilam
In desperate need of asylum
But there was no beer
So they left feeling queer
And no one did ever quite find 'em.

Finally we made it to Ashbourne via the Okeover Arms.

DAY 12: ASHBOURNE TO ROCESTER



Joined today by Philip from the Lichfield Diocese and his dog Pippin, both of whom brought much needed energy to the 3 tired pilgrims after the long day before. Just 8 miles today, along the Staffordshire Way and Limestone Way, accompanied once again by the River Dove who is beginning to feel like a family member as we walk the way. The Peak District is behind us now and the landscape is very noticeably different. No more rugged hill grazing sheep, more arable farming and enclosed fields. Masses of meadows, creating clouds of seeds as we waded through. Greeted in Rocester by the town vicar Revd Liz and her husband Terry, who hosted Hugh, and the curate and his wife Garry and Carole who hosted Ivana and Bethany.

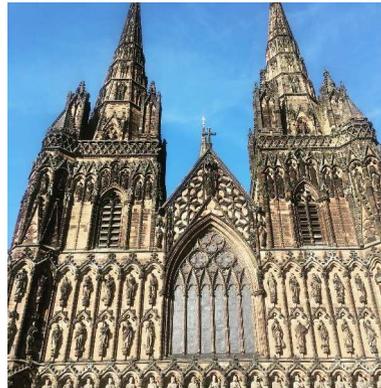
DAY 13: ROCESTER TO ABBOTS BROMLEY



We began today with morning prayer live-streamed on Facebook (with the hope it was being watched by our fellow pilgrims in Sweden), and then 10 of us walked out onto the way together - Liz, Garry and Richard from Rocester, Bishop Michael from Lichfield, his wife Julia and friend Ann, and Simon from Abbots Bromley.

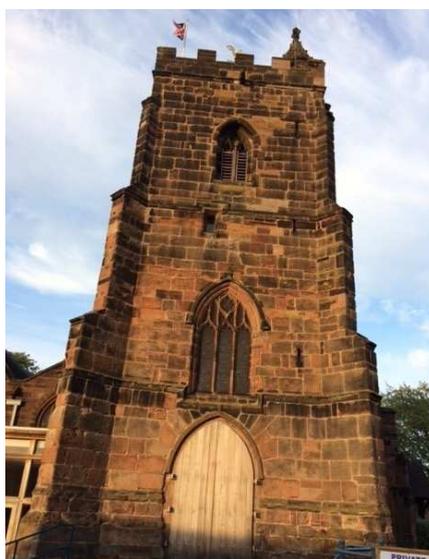
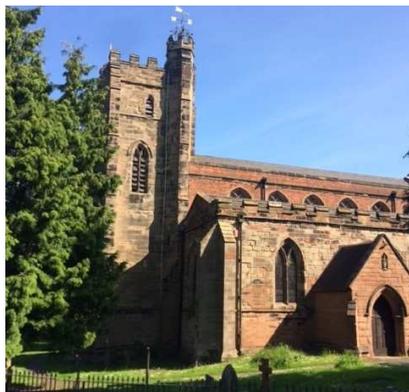
We followed the Staffordshire Way, again with the River Dove. Worst section for challenging stiles and challenging heat. Surprisingly few sheep and cows, but swamps of cow dung giving most of us very brown and smelly shoes. Views of the Peaks behind us, again marvelling at how different the landscape is here compared to there. Many fields of wheat and barely, a few hares spotted bouncing through. Idyllic lunch beneath the shade of a grand old oak. Lichfield cathedral - our destination for the following day - spotted in the far distance. Greeted in Abbots Bromley by an angel (called Carole!) baring homemade brownies, which created a moment of pure and utter bliss on the grass outside Abbots Bromley church. Revd Simon (vicar of Abbots Bromley) showed us the 11th century horns hanging on the church wall used in the infamous horn dance every year, and then showed us to our resting place in the 17th century church rooms round the corner, and joined us for dinner made by his generous parishioners. A very rich and wonderful day, but it has to be said, drizzly rain is easier to walk in than searing sun!

DAY 14: ABBOTS BROMLEY TO LICHFIELD



A very challenging day with exhausted bodies through searing heat and very confusing footpaths. Highlights of the day were being sent off by Revd. Simon, fording the Ash brook, taking respite in a pub mid-afternoon, and Lichfield cathedral coming into view late afternoon signalling the end of the walk. Other than that, it was a slog. Face down, one foot after another, nostalgically remembering the days of cool drizzle. Last photo is of three slightly broken and delirious pilgrims awaiting trains to take us to places of rest.

DAY 15: LICHFIELD TO SUTTON COLDFIELD



Early success in getting water from St Chad's well was followed by brief prayer in the Cathedral, a walk out of the city to the Heart of England Way and smooth going on after an initial field full of slightly threatening cows. The pigs passed definitely smelt of roast pork in the heat. There were the scents too of cow parsley and hawthorn. A long descent into Sutton Coldfield was gratefully accepted and the right Church found for the meeting arranged with the Churchwardens and their spouses of Holy Trinity, a fine and interesting building. Sue, Colin, Stella and Dave provided an alfresco fish and chip supper and good conversation - another very generous welcome - and with tomorrow's breakfast and a St Sigfrid teddy bear thrown in.

DAY 16: SUTTON COLDFIELD TO BIRMINGHAM



Did you know you can walk pretty well all the way from Sutton Coldfield to central Birmingham - along waterways? First the Ea Brook (known on the map as Plants Brook) and then canals. The canals are a bit grungier than the brook but it was on the canals that two pairs of Canada geese were spotted protecting their broods in the face of a good number of humans using the towpaths. And there was a heron under the M6 - really! - on the approach to Spaghetti Junction. Less satisfaction on the ecclesiastical front: St Chad's RC Cathedral closed; St Philip's CofE Cathedral closed; St Anne' RC Church (St John Henry Newman woz here) closed. So nothing for it but to head for the Moseley Arms In Deritend, tonight's accommodation, which, despite Google Maps suggesting it had been demolished still exists in amid the new offices and building sites. Many lagers on offer - no bitter; but hey! what does a weary pilgrim care about that?

DAY 17: BIRMINGHAM TO HOPWOOD



Walking from central Birmingham into Worcestershire was a journey of contrasts. From the reconstruction of Digbeth past the Bullring, through Five Ways (and some pretty brutalist office architecture) to elegant Edgbaston, across the University of Birmingham campus and down past Selly Oak and Bournville on the canal and on to King's Norton and Rednal and then the North Worcestershire Path was almost phantasmagorically various. The weather was kind (not too warm) and the going was easy, level and well-surfaced until right at the end a bit of muddy Staffordshire transposed south led to the first fall of the pilgrimage; to the knees - no damage. The day was pain free largely, footwise, despite a lot of pavement and the energy levels high. That might have had to do with the caffeine intake required respectfully to secure a seat at a cafe for the Corpus Christi Eucharist Zoomed from Witney - a fine service. More Canada geese with young and lots of time-taking friendliness when asking for directions.

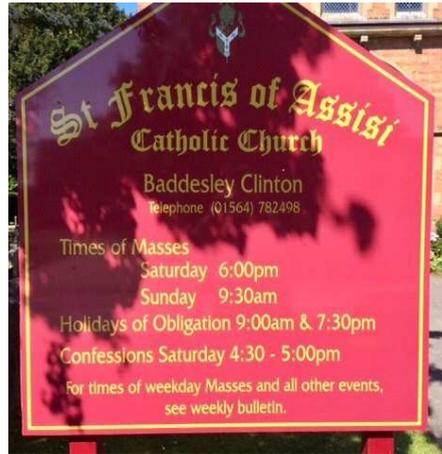
DAY 18: HOPWOOD TO HOCKLEY HEATH



Covid having disturbed the normal run of things at last night's hotel, breakfast was served to the only occupant of the breakfast room by the owner of the place. We fell into interesting and ultimately intimate conversation. Ben, a Kenyan Sikh, came to this country in the 70s and has made good here by working hard and taking his opportunities. He didn't gloss over various difficulties he was facing now, Covid recovery among them, and it was a privilege to experience such openness and honesty. I suppose transient acquaintance, as with a passing pilgrim, can encourage people to reveal deep things.

On the North Worcestershire path it was a day of squirrels, oak trees and buttercup fields. There were wonderful views back to Birmingham, too. The sun came out but was never too warm. Laura at an animal sanctuary recorded a piece on her work for Radio Oxford. Careless map reading led me astray once (my digital map has lost some sections) but the Stratford Canal arrived soon enough and offered a swan pair and cygnets as a welcome. And then dandelion seed drift and millions of tiny flies, dancing and shimmering in the sun. What a creation we are part of!

DAY 19: HOCKLEY HEATH TO PRESTON BAGOT



An early start meant there was a fair chance of getting to Mass at Baddesley Clinton at St Francis' R C Church which St JH Newman knew as the chapel of the now defunct Poor Clares Community in the village. I impressed myself with my near sprint from Hockley Heath and I think the assiduous cuckoo and the heron may have been impressed too. I made the mass only ten minutes late - but it wasn't happening- which makes it four out of four Newman sites inaccessible. Still , that meant a leisurely pace would get me to Preston Bagot on time. Time enough to stop to record an interview with a Cubs expedition and to take a good break over lunch. So on time was I that I went a further three miles on to and back from Henley-In-Arden for something to give the Preston Bagot vicar if our supper date was confirmed (it wasn't, events having interposed). I wouldn't have contemplated that further three miles three weeks ago. A relaxed evening in the beautifully converted garage (Coach House) and garden of my most solicitous hosts, Ryder and Jill, was truly delightful.

DAY 20: PRESTON BAGOT TO STRATFORD- UPON-AVON



A stiff climb to Preston Bagot Church began the day. A gathering of 15 plus for the Book of Common Prayer communion and a sermon on Christian Unity which chimed with the presence of an ecumenical pilgrimage. Then down the canal to Stratford with a sweaty mugginess and a bit of rain giving way to a very pleasant afternoon. A lot of yellow irises at the side of the canal. My new superspeed meant I had time to get in to Holy Trinity on the river at Stratford before my appointment with Joy, a former colleague in the Witney Benefice. My former colleague in the Deddington Deanery, Stephen Fletcher, surprised me by ringing to say he would do the last half mile or so with me to HT. After that, a drink with Stephen and his wife, Jean and tea with Joy - with wonderful lemon drizzle cake.

Slightly strange tonight to be back at home at pretty much the mid-point of the pilgrimage in England (someone, surreally, has put a big tent on the lawn). Investigation suggests that I may be exempt from the Swedish travel restrictions recently imposed - and that's encouraging ahead of three days of RandR and continuation from Stratford on 10th.

DAY 21: STRATFORD-UPON-AVON TO HALFORD, WARWICKSHIRE



My hunch that I could manage a couple of days without the Holy Shoehorn of Witney proved correct. I extracted both feet from their respective boots without the Sacred Implement and also without serious difficulty or pain at the end of a good day's walking through a largely overcast and somewhat muggy south Warwickshire, with the gentle Stour the presiding genius of our journey.

There were ten of us in all at Morning Prayer in Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon and six walkers, four from Witney benefice and two locals, the latter successfully guiding us through diversions occasioned by excavations for a marina and down the Shakespeare Way. Much variety to enjoy in the rolling countryside (knee high grass to walk through was a feature), in the peaceful villages and in the conversation and companionship. Only the odd 'Staffordshire' stile and the occasional discourteous driver were causes for complaint. Nothing dramatic occurred but by the end of the stage, at Halford, we were a highly contented group of pilgrims. And it now feels a bit glamorous to be only a stone's throw from Armscote Manor where Guy Fawkes holed up after the Gunpowder Plot.

DAY 22: HALFORD TO WROXTON



The day began with a brisk mile to Halford Church to meet up again with Stephen and Jean Fletcher who had welcomed me to Stratford on June 7th. Both are cricket lovers, so some sacrifice was involved in dealing with me rather than the Test Match. Stephen and I walked from Halford to Idlicote and then Whatcote with the spire of Tredington Church, said to be the tallest in Warwickshire often presenting itself to our view. Jean was summoned to bring a picnic to Whatcote (well, it had been her idea) which we ate in a field lush with summer vegetation until three inquisitive horses appeared from nowhere and made it clear they wanted to join in.

So I went on alone towards the challenge of the North Cotswold escarpment down the Centenary Way - or sometimes down it, sometimes off it. It's clearly not a greatly-loved path and signage is not what it might be. Neither is the performance of farmers when it comes to keeping a path open through the crops. But without the loss of too much time, I reached Tysoe and some magnificent views back into Warwickshire. And then for the serious bit of the ascent, nearly as challenging as getting out of Dovedale, but offering no chance to stop and stare at the world below because the path ran through woodland.

Survival of this ordeal allowed entry into the Ironstone Benefice where I was Associate Vicar for five years and it felt rather odd to walk through this familiar territory from the life of which I am now disengaged. And, of course, it's a bit odd to be doing a pilgrimage and finding oneself at more or less its midpoint (in this country) back at home while still en route, as will be the case for the next few walking days.

DAY 23: WROXTON TO DEDDINGTON



A glorious morning saw eleven people assemble outside Wroxton Church for St Sigfrid Prayers led by Rector Alicia. Thus fortified we walked through the outer grounds of Wroxton Abbey, now an outpost of an American University, past a surprising obelisk having to do with 18th century royalty visiting the Abbey - it was the home of the Lord North who lost America - and down and round to Drayton Church hidden in the valley and on through Banbury. I think my companions felt there was a bit too much Banbury but at least it included a visit to the impressive St Mary's Church - we were lucky to get to it during the hour it was open.

A stretch on the Salt Way took us to Bodicote Church and a picnic in the churchyard. Then a steep descent and ascent before we got to Adderbury and its fine church (outstanding medieval carvings at roof level outside) and a most hospitable and welcome pub, from which we reluctantly tore ourselves away for the final couple of miles into Deddington. A day mixing urban and rural on which the sun shone and beer and good companionship bestowed their blessings.

DAY 24: DEDDINGTON TO WOODSTOCK



Our day began in Deddington church where Hugh used to preside, so many old friends and family. Lovely service led by Bishop Steven (Bishop of Oxford) who gave us a special pilgrims blessing. Refreshments after the service (including a glass of bubbly), then off to the beautiful church at Overorton where we were greeted with cake and drinks, and partook in a service dedicated to Newman who gave his first sermon there. Tired pilgrims drained by the sun, wanting to lounge for longer on the grass but needing to press on. Next stop at the house of another Deddington parishioner who offered us drinks as well as use of his facilities.

Other things of note: Daisies, buttercups and high cow parsley. Surprise to be rushed by a disorientated hare and a lady on a bicycle. The heat was felt to be not unbearable. A dead shrew on the path was mourned. Difficulties over cheese at the evening meal. Much honourable tiredness and a knee injury.

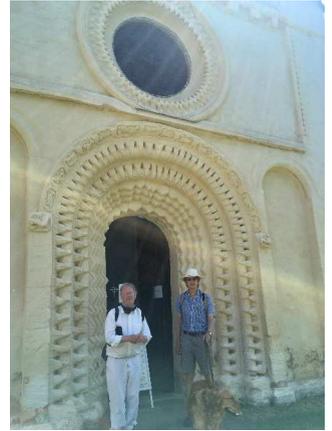
DAY 25: WOODSTOCK TO OXFORD



Coffee and croissants in Woodstock Parish Church courtesy of Jeremy, the Rector, and Christine, his wife. Bishop Gavin was to be at Shipton-on-Cherwell at 11.15 and we wouldn't make that in time to pick him up and take him along. No matter; Gareth, Rector of Akeman, had provided a scout who would conduct the bishop across the canal to Hampton Gay and then return to do the same for us stragglers. The Hexachord Choir singing Bruckner and Victoria greeted us. Slightly surreal – but sublime. The lunch was a prolonged one and Evensong at Christ Church Cathedral looked a bad bet (we were now an hour or more behind our schedule), especially with Jenny's knee giving her trouble. And Martin P had brought news of a towpath diversion. This we met and were directed, efficiently enough but depressingly, to various life-threatening crossings of major roads intersecting north of Oxford.

We survived the transits and got back onto the canal for the last stretch into central Oxford, which seemed to last, as these last stretches tend to, an eternity. But we all made it to Christ Church in time. Christ Church looks askance at dogs and Barley's presence was problematic, but very polite porters telephoned 'higher authority' (I asked but couldn't find out who that was – this is Alice in Wonderland's College, after all) and Barley was admitted to Evensong. Slightly surreal – but sublime. Canon Carol duly welcomed the St Sigfrid's Pilgrims 'and their dog', Frideswide Voices sang beautifully and St Frideswide and Lewis Carroll will have been well pleased with the evening's proceedings – which may have been some relief for them in the midst of the slightly surreal but less than sublime troubles currently besetting their Cathedral and College. Kyrie eleison.

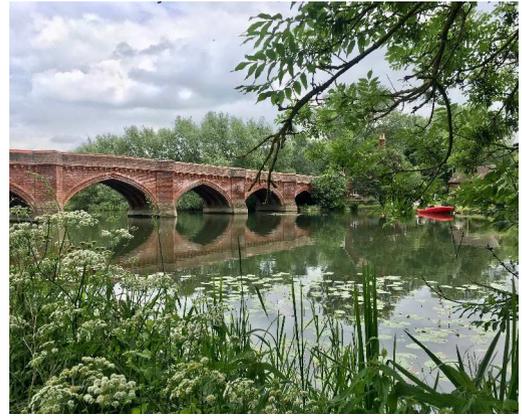
DAY 26: OXFORD TO ABINGDON



We began with a very special and intimate pilgrims' Eucharist at Christ Church Cathedral, led for us by Canon Richard, who also gave us a guided tour of the cathedral and grounds, including a visit to the shrine of St Frideswide and an very old oriental plane tree in the garden. Eight pilgrims (including pilgrim dog) set off for Abingdon following the river the whole way, marking the beginning of our journey along the Thames which will end close to the estuary on the other side of London.

First stop was a stunning Norman church in Iffley called St Mary the Virgin, where we quietly marvelled and paused in prayer. Next stop was a college of John Henry Newman, and then under the shade of a tree for lunch. Onwards in the heat, weaving times of silence and conversation (and a stop at a riverside pub to taste the local brewings), until we reached the gate of St Helen's Abingdon. We were greeted with a very nourishing meal cooked by Gwen of St Helen's. Seven pilgrims returned to respective homes while Bethany made her bed in the pews and settled down to sleep, feeling awed by the ancientness of this holy building and the privilege of being able to sleep there. The current church dates back to the 12th century, and there was a church standing there prior to that building dating back earlier. And of course, it has likely been holy ground for much much longer.

DAY 27: ABINGDON TO DORCHESTER-ON-THAMES



Breakfast in the church with Gwen, Alexandra & Revd Charles, before sharing morning prayer. Guided by the Thames once again, with added historical guidance from our local pilgrims. Including knowledge of a bridge where the World Pooh Stick Championships took place one year. We made a slight detour in order to cross the bridge and partake in this very sophisticated game! (Bethany was crowned winner after her thin stick made it through first). The day ended perfectly in the gardens of Dorchester Abbey with tea and cake from the Abbey tea shop.

DAY 28: DORCHESTER TO GORING



After a very precious evening with some of Bethany's family who so lovingly took us in and cared for us, we made our way to Dorchester abbey where we were given a tour of the abbey by Revd Rachel and a gift and blessing to send us on our way. We welcomed Monika into the pilgrimage, a dear friend of Bethany's who will be walking with us for the final 3 weeks to our English destination of Ramsgate.

We embarked with a spring in our step and joy in our hearts. Down to the river we headed, greeted by the confluence of the Rivers Thames and the Thames, Bethany reached into the meeting of the rivers to collect water into the pilgrim's vial. Onwards down the river, all in full waterproofs while the heavens opened and didn't relent until the end of the day. All discovering their waterproofs were not really that waterproof. Many signets with their swan parents gracing the water. Many fancy boats, many fancy houses, many fancy schools... clearly walking into wealthy land. Feeling the contrast from the areas we've walked through previously and the starkness of inequality in the UK.

Elderflower scenting the walk, nettle seeds providing pilgrim snacks, waterlilies budding vibrant yellow.

'Drowned rat' pilgrims met towards the end by Goring's vicar Revd Ben who brought us joyful companionship in our last hour. Ending in Goring at the church of St Thomas of Canterbury where we were offered scrumptious homemade cake and freshly brewed tea, and we sang our pilgrim hearts out within the beautiful acoustic of this Anglo-Saxon church. Hugh returned home for the night while Monika and Bethany bedded down in a campervan (after watching the Scotland vs England football match and filling up on dinner).

DAY 29: GORING TO READING



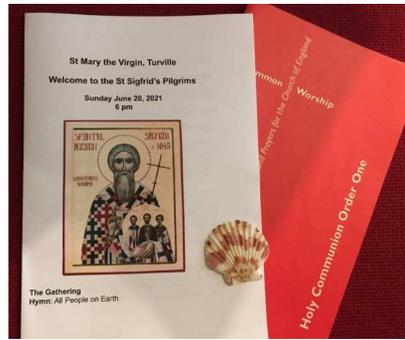
TOLLS to be TAKEN at this GATE	
For every person on foot	1/2d
For every horse, mare, gelding, or mule, laden or unladen, and not drawing,	2d
For every ass, laden or unladen, drawing or not	1 1/2d
For every bull, ox, cow, steer, heifer, or calf	2d
For every sheep or lamb,	1/2d
For every boar, sow, or pig	1/2d
For every horse, mare, gelding, mule or other beaft, except asses, drawing any carriage	2d
For every carriage with two or more wheels,	
For each and every wheel	2d

Note: Toll shall not be taken for the delivery of things, goods or articles, or for carrying them down the Barges or other vessels, into Whitehall's Bond Lock, but for the Performance and delivery thereof.



Nothing was written immediately after the day today, evidence of worn out pilgrims and need for a break. So from memory... another day along the Thames path, with some familiar faces and some new. Bishop Olivia and her husband joined us today, and rich conversation was had as well as times of prayer. At our arrival point in Reading Bishop Olivia offered a really beautiful closing prayer, before our pilgrim group dispersed, some returning home, one replacing a broken phone and another waiting in a long queue to receive a first dose of vaccine.

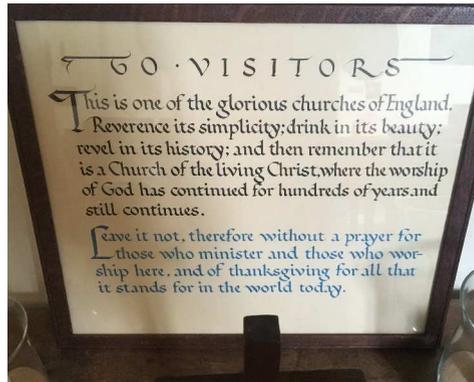
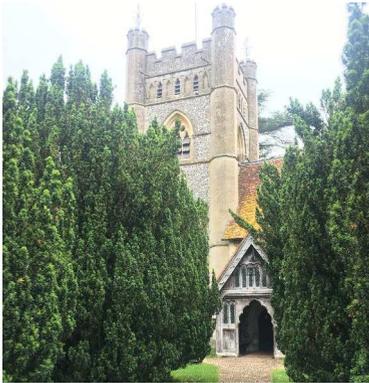
DAY 30: READING TO HAMBLEDEN



An earlier start to make sure we reached Hambleden in time to be ferried to Turville for a service with Bishop Alan, last of the four Oxford bishops taking part in the pilgrimage. Växjö veteran Christine led us down the Kennet and out of Reading (and provided excellent flapjacks). On our own, Monika and I (Hugh) exchanged life stories, reaching Shiplake College by lunchtime and meeting up with Sarah, who also has experience of Växjö through the course on the Swedish Church run there for Oxford curates.

Monika greatly appreciated the architecture and ambience of Henley, where preparations for the regatta were much in evidence on the river. Rain began as we walked the long bend that would bring us to Hambleden lock and the walkway over the spectacular weir and into Buckinghamshire. Sheep waved us through as we climbed up to the picture perfect village. And then with Sue, its vicar, and a refreshed Bethany, to Turville, or rather Dibley. We enjoyed the Eucharist, perhaps the more so for a number of Dibleyesque features. A comfortable evening was spent at St Katharine's, Parmoor, now a retreat home, previously the residence of Sir Stafford Cripps and King Zog of Albania; if their shades linger there, they were looking kindly on us.

DAY 31: HAMBLEDEN TO MAIDENHEAD



The core pilgrim group is going strong. The highlight of a rather uneventful day was a Stanley Spencer gallery in Cookham that all of us thoroughly enjoyed! It was a beautiful day for deepening our friendships with one another which was completed with a Monday party in a not so pedestrian-welcome Maidenhead!

DAY 32: MAIDENHEAD TO EGHAM



Blessed as we departed from Maidenhead by Revd. Will from St Mary's Maidenhead. We walked through Eton and Windsor, past Windsor castle. Quiet time in a chapel dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. Another day just the 3 of us, enjoying the increasing madness of each other's company. Hugh sped up on the final stretch to catch the train home for our rest day the following day, while Monika and Bethany hobbled slowly into Egham.

DAY 33: EGHAM TO WALTON-ON-THAMES



After a beautiful rest day in Egham, exploring the historic sites of Runnymede (where the Magna Carta was signed) and dwelling in the sweet embrace of the Anckerwycke yew (thought to be 2,500 years old), the 3 core pilgrims welcomed John and Andrew, with a morning circle of presence and prayers, and set out together along the Thames. Hosted that evening by John and his wife Tessa, such generous and warm hosts and a beautiful evening shared. Deep appreciation for pilgrim hospitality.

A poem by Malcolm Guite held and guided us during times of silence:

As pilgrim souls on whom your light has shone
Let us leave judgement to your tender mercy
And turn instead to you, keep pressing on

Towards the steadfast heights, the mountain country
Of your holy presence. Let us drink
From that swift river, our true ecstasy.

Refresh us Christ, and bring us to the brink
Of that deep well where life itself is light
And goodness, more than we can dream or think,

Flows from your plenteousness, from your delight
In all your works, and where your loving kindness
Shines through our day and comforts us at night,

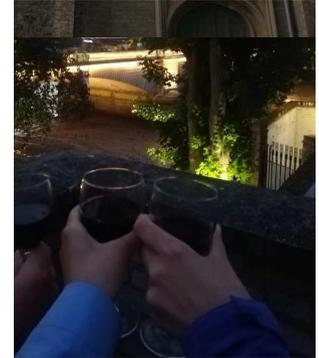
Like soft wings safely overarching us,
That we might put our utter trust in you
And fret no more for passing wickedness.

DAY 34: WALTON-ON-THAMES TO HAM



Seven pilgrims gathered at Walton parish church, blessed and sent off by Revd Caroline and Sally. Today we crossed the threshold into London, which is apparently at Hampton Court bridge. Holy sleeping spot tonight was St Andrew's church, Ham. We were welcomed so so warmly by church warden Beth and Revd Alice, and settled down to rest after filling up at the local pub. Last pilgrims to sleep in this church was a large group of Extinction Rebellion protesters (back in the day when we could gather in large groups).

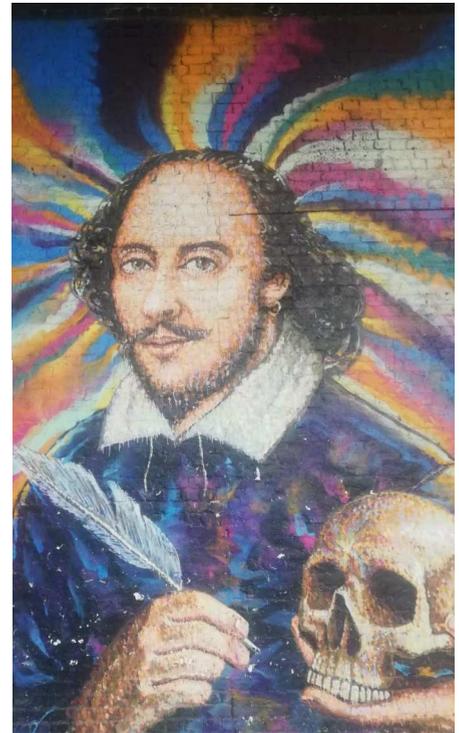
DAY 35: HAM TO PUTNEY



Mixed emotions today in the pilgrim core, some grumpy some cheerful, all welcome and brought onto the path as we continue our journey together. Gratitude for Charlotte, Graham and Martin who have walked with us several days now between Oxford and here, and Charlotte and Graham will join again in the last few days to Canterbury.

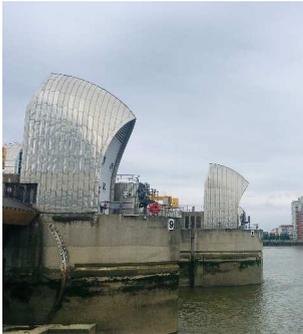
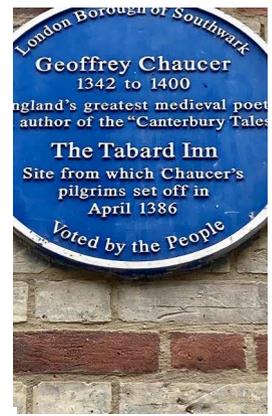
Nostalgia felt by Hugh as he walked through Teddington where he grew up. Surprise at how lovely the river is still, despite walking into the city of London. Holy sleeping place tonight was Putney parish church, welcomed so warmly by Revd Jono who handed us the keys and gave us full freedom of this ancient building. We found carpeted rooms to lay our sleeping bags down, and clinked glasses of wine on the terrace in celebration of our pilgrimage and in gratitude to hospitable churches.

DAY 36: PUTNEY TO SOUTHWARK



The pilgrimage separated into two today. Hugh woke early to walk the 6 miles to the Swedish church for its 11am service, while Monika and Beth stayed at Putney church for its 9:30am service. Hugh went onto Southwark, while Monika and Beth wandered slowly along the Thames through the heart of London, embracing the opportunity to encounter London as pilgrims, with open hearts and minds. We stopped at Tate Britain where we met with fairies and our old friend Stanley Spencer. Later at Westminster we got swept up into a rave protest, just at the moment it was being shut down by police. A topsyturvy experience of underground rave scene above-ground in daylight. Sleeping place was a hostel in Southwark, grateful for a bed and a shower after a few nights without.

DAY 37: SOUTHWARK TO ERITH



Reunited after a day off, with the intention of covering two sections in one today by getting a boat for half of it. Beginning at Southwark cathedral where we witnessed the cathedral school leavers service and then received a blessing from the Dean. Joined by pilgrim Joe (who was with us in the north) who sang with us by the river and brought such lightness and joy to our hearts and feet. Then a 3rd place of beginning nearby the cathedral in the place where the pilgrims of old would begin their pilgrimages to Canterbury, formally the Tabard Inn. Hugh recited a passage from the Canterbury Tales in proper olde English, and then translated for us.

Next a boat ride from London Bridge to North Greenwich, and then walking the last 12 miles of the way from Greenwich to Erith. A grey but very rich walk through heavy industry not often seen. Particularly struck by the enormous sewage works. Turning back towards London to see the skyline of sophisticated skyscrapers; a very interesting contrast. Sounds and smells of the sea as the river widens towards the estuary.

Arrival into Erith half way through the England-Germany match, managed to quickly find a pub to watch the 2nd half and soak in celebrations of England's victory. Clinking pints of John Smith's, taking us back to the beginning of the journey when we walked past the John Smith brewery in Tadcaster, 1st stop after leaving York.

DAY 38: ERITH TO NORTHFLEET



We gathered at Christ Church Erith, even though we weren't meeting anyone there. There was uncertainty as to whether the church was still in use as there weren't many signs of community life, except for a fitness class happening in the church hall. We circumambulated the church, then stood in its entrance together in a moment of silence and prayer, bringing those needing prayers into the circle, as well as ourselves and the communities we would be walking through during the day.

Foreheads to the church to give and receive blessings, before stepping on to the path, which today left the Thames path and almost totally followed roads. This part could do with being re-routed! We managed though, with the help of headphones at times to ease the road noise. Personally (Beth speaking) I returned to an old music love - Muse - and found it to be a very satisfying soundtrack!

Threshold crossed into Kent. Arriving into Northfleet we were greeted by an overwhelmingly wonderful welcome party, including people from both churches in the town and even the deputy mayor. They held a service for us followed by a meal in the church hall, then drove me to the Friars at Aylesford where I've been during our days of rest, and Hugh and Monika to the train station from where they travelled onwards. Tomorrow we reunite to begin the last week from Northfleet to Ramsgate. Feels quite surreal that it is our final week!

DAY 39: NORTHFLEET TO ROCHESTER



Pilgrims reunited after 2 days of rest. Wonderful sending off from Northfleet to complete the wonderful welcome we received on Wednesday. Happy birthday sung to our birthday pilgrim Monika. Twelve people waving us off, Fr Cyril and Wendy walking with us. Shared some silence in Rockerville church before taking a good pace to Rochester. Unfortunately along roads again, so without much reason to stop (except to admire the house of Charles Dickens). We arrived into Rochester at only 2:30pm. Birthday evening followed, beginning with bubbly and strawberries in the castle grounds. Definitely added a few extra miles by walking up and down the very long high street!

DAY 40: ROCHESTER TO DETLING



An absolutely wonderful day beginning with choral mattins at Rochester cathedral and a blessing from Canon Gordon, then along the North Downs Way and ending in the ancient pilgrim church of Detling where we put our sleeping bags down for rest.

After 2 days along roads, the feeling of ascending onto the North Downs away from cars and urban life felt absolutely blissful. Also the first time in what feels like a very long while that we walked on natural ground, as the Thames path is predominantly paved. Hugh, Monika and I fell into hushed silence as we entered into green, awed by old trees and magical woodland. Elderflowers now on their way to becoming berries, and the first conkers forming. After one stretch of yew woodland that felt particularly special, we stumbled upon a place of ecological contemplation, combining the earthly economics of E.F.Schumacher (author of 'Small is beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered') with the heavenly poetry of William Blake. Included in the piece on Blake was his Jerusalem poem, which we sung to the woods with passion and gusto. Quite an unexpected and wondrous encounter in the middle of the woods!!

Arriving into Detling we were greeted by Sally (the church warden) with homecooked food and the very large church keys. There was a feeling of having entered pilgrim zone, with this church being one where medieval pilgrims would have slept on their way to Canterbury, and the pub with plaques of old pilgrim ales called 'Canterbury Ales'. Unfortunately not an ale that is still served but tasty ales there nonetheless. Three pilgrims slept soundly within the ancient walls of the church, and awoke to the morning light streaming through the east window.

DAY 41: DETLING TO CHARING



After a good night rest in Detling church, we stood in circle with a few from the congregation to say a prayer before embarking on our day's walk to Charing. We followed the Pilgrim's Way, both the road and the pilgrimage footpath. Many signs of pilgrimage, from a house named 'Wayfarers' to a mural of nuns and friars and a Canterbury signpost on the side of the 'Dirty Habit' pub. Water collected into our holy water bottle from a stream beside Hollingbourne church. Greeted at Charing church by a welcome party with tea and homemade cake, followed by an Iona Community night prayer in the church and then to our place of rest, the very homely home of Christine. Felt slightly reluctant to leave this morning! But we managed it and onwards we went.

DAY 42: CHARING TO GODMERSHAM



Another wonderful day through the Kent Downs. What a place this is! Gently rolling land, very soft and feminine landscape as another pilgrim described it. Also a day of very changeable weather.

After our pilgrim check-in to start the day, Victoria offered us a Haiku by a Japanese pilgrim called Basho (translated by Jane Hirshfield) to get us going...

In Kyoto,
Hearing the cuckoo,
I long for Kyoto.

Onto the path, through many fields of barley and enchanted woodland (where Monika and Beth enjoyed some great tree hugs). Arrival pretty early into Godmersham, greeted the yew, circumambulated the church and entered to discover tea and snacks followed by dinner shared with parishioners and Cathy the vicar. Alive with the energy of the woods, we sat in the nourishing fellowship of other people. A feast of such selfless generosity, offered to strangers who call themselves pilgrims. We made our beds with prayer cushions and lay down to rest, full up in heart, body and spirit.

DAY 43: GODMERSHAM TO CANTERBURY



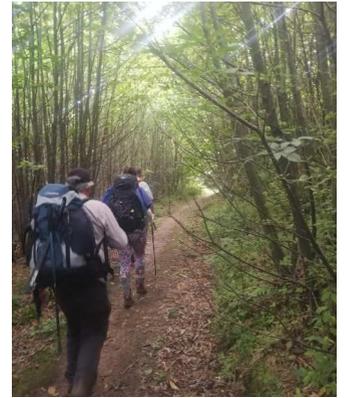
Big day today! Not our ending, but an important arrival. It could be compared to Santiago de Compostela and Finisterre. The former is the big arrival with bells and smells, whereas the latter is the humbler place, the place at the end of the world. Finisterre is our Ramsgate. So Santiago is our Canterbury. Anyway, it was a good day!

We packed away our church beds (I.e. returned prayer cushions to the pews), met with our VIPs (Very Important Pilgrims) Charlotte and Graham (named as such because they have returned to walk with us again and again), shared a pilgrim check in and a poem and set off on our way. I (Beth) personally was carrying with me the great sense of having walked from York to this point, heading towards Canterbury.

The magnitude of that distance and the significance of these two places very present as I walked.

Tea in Chilham with great metaphysical debates, and lunch in a woodland with more homely discussion about cleaning and family. Arrival into Canterbury through the Westgate - the pilgrim gate - met by Victoria who walked with us previously and took us down the high street to the cathedral. Canon Tim was there to greet us and take us as his guests into the cathedral for a prayer at the shrine of Thomas Beckett (via steps worn down from pilgrims of the past climbing up on hands and knees), before we sat in the heavenly chorus of evensong. Water blessing was given to each pilgrim and water drop into our holy water vial. Celebratory dinner and exciting football followed. It was truly a very rich and beautiful arrival.

DAY 44: CANTERBURY TO PRESTON



The film crew was underneath our window a bit before time and certainly earlier than we were ready for - stuffing stuff in rucksacks still takes us longer than we have estimated. But we tumbled out from our rooms and into the (until very recently) unexpected experience of being filmed for a piece on sustainable tourism in North Kent. We marched through various bits of Canterbury for the camera and did our interviews hoping the editing would be kind and the impact of our cheering for pilgrimage great.

Then, with Canon Tim from the Cathedral leading, we made our way eastwards out of Canterbury from St Martin's Church, most ancient of churches in the English-speaking world, a couple of centuries older than St Augustine's mission, and along the beautiful Stour Valley. Woodlands and wetlands, birdcalls, heron on the wing, an adder, a swan family resting, the wide sky of the Stodmarsh nature reserve. Glorious - as was our overnight accommodation in a fabulous modernist house on land recovered from monocultured strawberries for trees and water, ducks, dragonflies and hedgehogs.

Our accommodating hosts made possible a perfect penultimate evening on this pilgrimage - outside in the waning warmth; discussion, reflection, appreciation, the sense of an ending. What comes, I wonder, after the end? Gratitude for so much to so many, anyway - that's for sure.

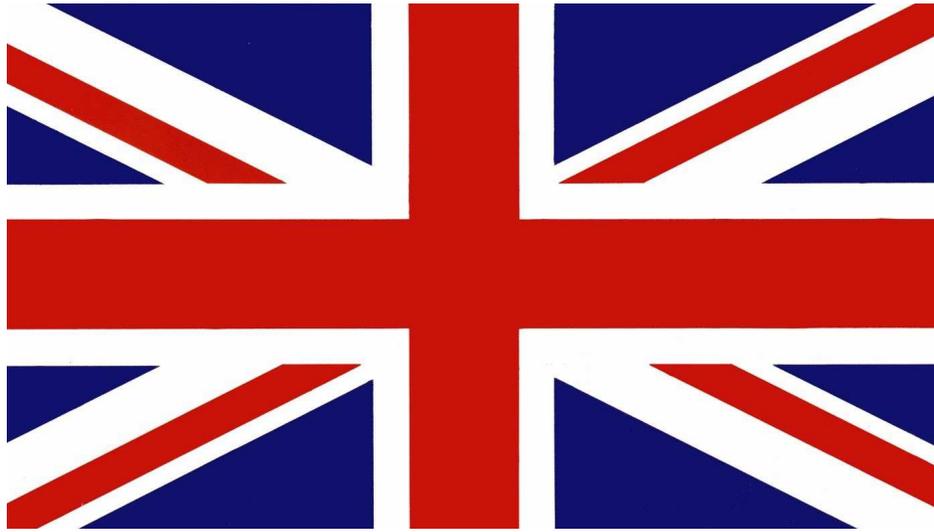
DAY 45: PRESTON TO RAMSGATE



Mixed feelings about coming to our last day; reaching the desired goal but then no more of this richly rewarding journey (well, in Sweden, maybe, but not in this company). We met the day's difficulties with reasonable equanimity, as might be hoped of seasoned pilgrims. Bumpy roads with too much traffic, a brief but vicious rain squall which left us damp for the rest of the day, a locked church at Minster and a lunch that turned problematic for vegan and vegetarian. A narrow, scratchy footpath took us to the cross commemorating St Augustine's landing in Thanet and we didn't respond kindly to its failure to give Romano-British and Celtic Christianity their due.

But the day ended on a high - a guided tour of Pugin's St Augustine' Church and the shrine of that saint. We came away with our knowledge of both church and architectural history enhanced. And then the last celebratory rites at an Italian restaurant overlooking the harbour. It was an evening of appreciative reflection over the last 2 months; for all the many people who have joined us and hosted us, for the places that we've walked through and rested in, for our bodies that have carried us and bags that have carried everything else, and perhaps most of all for each other; this merry band of pilgrims that have become a very close-knit family. So close that we can argue wholeheartedly about which side of the road to walk on when there's a blind corner.

THE CROSSING



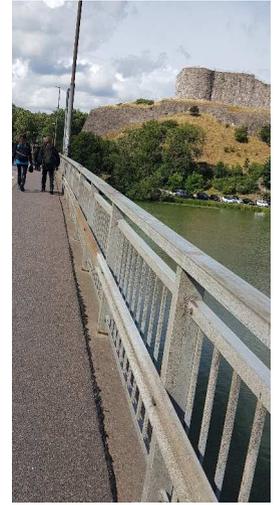
Efforts and hopes went towards finding a boat that we could sail across the sea to Sweden. However the sailing organisation we were in communications with didn't have the confidence to make the necessary bookings due to the uncertainty of the pandemic. Going by land in these times would also have been nigh impossible due to complex border controls to reduce spread of the virus, so the only option was to fly. Hugh did this alone and joined the Swedes in their second week (Bethany couldn't join due to not getting vaccinated in time). The following week shows the pilgrimage in images without words, through photos sent to us by Dagmar Jonsson who was a core pilgrim on the Swedish leg. Hugh's storytelling will continue in Lidköping when he joined the Swedes.



DAY 46: GOTHENBURG TO GUNNAREDSKYRKA



DAY 47: GUNNAREDSKYRKA TO JENNYLUND



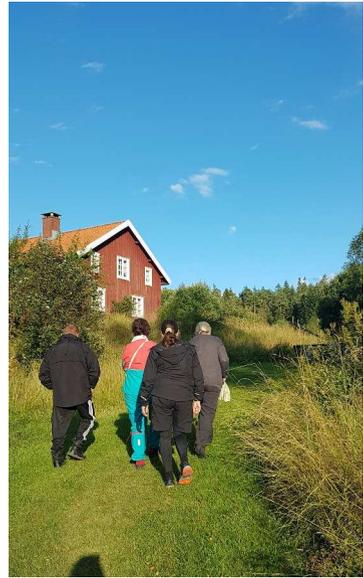
DAY 48: JENNYLUND TO STARRKÄRR



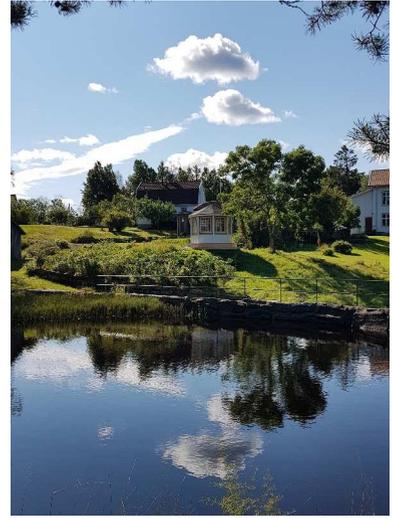
DAY 49: STARRKÄRR TO LÖDÖSE



DAY 50: LÖDÖSE TO JÄRNKLEV



DAY 51: JÄRNKLEV TO SOLLEBRUNN



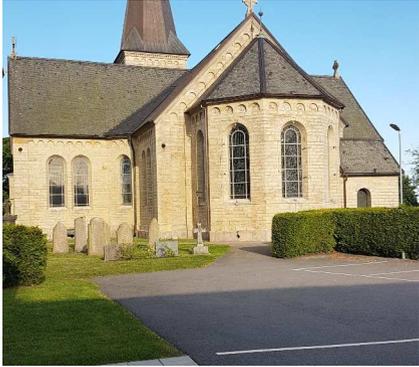
DAY 52: SOLLEBRUNN TO NOSSEBRO



DAY 53: NOSSEBRO TO SALBY



DAY 54: SALBY TO LIDKÖPING



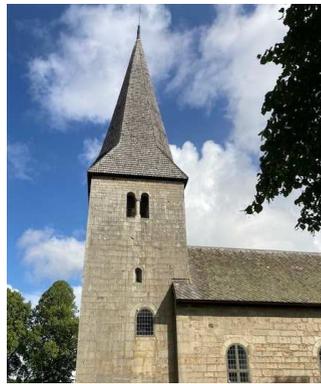
DAY 55: LIDKÖPING TO HUSABY



Mikael, the priest in charge of this bit of the pilgrimage met me after lunch yesterday to let me into St Sigfrid's Church in Lidköping . It's a testament to the ambition of the Swedish Church fifty years ago. The actual church is only a part of a large complex with meeting rooms, offices, games room, playroom, dining room and kitchen, many loos, one shower and a washing machine, a complex designed with a view to what the church might provide for the surrounding area not only in the religious sphere and not only on Sundays. For us pilgrims, besides comfy sofas to sleep on, there was a lot of food in the fridge - much more than the two of us could begin to contemplate eating, but Dagmar and I did what we could and then fell into a long conversation on some deep matters, which bodes well for the next three weeks - she is doing the whole Swedish leg from Gothenburg to Växjö.

I was going to put 'walking the whole Swedish leg' but we in fact drove the first ten kilometres - and the previous couple of days had been cycled. I woke yesterday with a dicky leg so I was thankful for the shorter stretch and the intention was good - to allow us more time in Husaby to see the sites relating to St Sigfrid's baptism of King Olof Skötkonung. That intention was not realised. We had a fine walk in the morning through woods with the sun shining but the heavens opened when we got to Husaby and we were trapped in the Village Hall with the three medieval ladies who met us at the impressive Church. We managed the pilgrim mass there a bit later on and it was very good to remember Sigfrid in that place, but there was no further exploration of Husaby and the springs in one of which Olof may have been baptised. Conversation on the dire state of Sweden followed the evening meal - problems with old people's homes, hospitals, schools, gang crime, immigrants and too much money going to pay administrators in the public sector. Familiar? But still, a good day.

DAY 56: HUSABY TO SKARA



A much better day weather wise began with prayers at the Thousand Years Altar in the grounds of Husaby Church. Here in 2000 there was a big celebration of a millennium of Swedish Christianity. It seemed right to pour on the altar a little of the water we had collected on the English leg of the pilgrimage for presentation in Växjö. We then walked in arable country to the fine 12th century church at Skälvum. We got into sweet-smelling woodland for a while (pine, fir and heather) and reached the remote little Ova church (there's a lot of space in Sweden!) before having a lunch at Mariedal to the pleasant sound of a waterfall.

More woods, and to my delight some deep yellow cantarell mushrooms. They are of the essence of the Swedish summer; I picked a token few to sauté in butter for breakfast tomorrow. We then plunged into the deep valley of the Dala brook, beautiful in the sunlight filtering through the trees onto some rather exotic vegetation. We came out at a classic old mill. Time was getting on (there had been the odd wrong turn) and it was decided not to press on by foot to Skara but to retrieve our support vehicle - it contains our heavy luggage while we walk - so that we could get to Skara early enough to take showers and have the evening meal at a civilised hour. Retrieving the vehicle is itself a time-consuming business but we eventually arrived at our accommodation for the night, another well-appointed church but this time lacking a shower. Showers were provided some distance away at the Skara Diocese offices. Good to see this inter-denominational care for pilgrims! We went clean enough to our food.

DAY 57: SKARA TO VARNHEM



Another satisfying day's walking through fields and woods was topped and tailed by visits to two important places in the ecclesiastical history of West Götaland, Skara Cathedral and the graveyard at Varnhem. The former is a majestic building, its two elegant spires visible at a great distance from certain points in a rather flat landscape. There's been a church on this site since at least the middle of the 11th century and we were conscious that we were just the latest of many thousands of pilgrims to offer prayer here.

Ice cream rather than fika was taken a couple of miles outside the city at the old summer residence of the Bishops of Skara where two cannons remain, rather incongruously, you might think, parked on the lawn. Were they put there perhaps to deter aggression from the neighbouring diocese of Växjö? A brief burst of thundery rain quickened our pace and after looking in at North Ving church we had lunch in the garden of the parish rooms. When the Swedes could be roused from their post-prandial slumbers, we went on past a decayed but rather sinister military installation, the recent fencing of which displayed many notices forbidding (and inciting) photography. Axvall used to be one of the largest military exercises area in Sweden and may become so again.

After more woods and more rain and some impressive glacial formations we walked the last mile into Varnhem, heavy clouds still threatening to our left but the impressive Billingen ridge clear on our right. We were warmly welcomed to Varnhem and a guided visit to the remains of the old 'estate' church (mid 11th century but replacing an older one) followed. It was wonderful to see this place but to learn that excavations of the graveyard indicate that Christianity has been practised in the area since the beginning of the 10th century was, for me, more exciting still, even though it probably entails a demotion of Sigfrid in the evangelistic honours list.

So much of interest today and we haven't yet visited Varnhem's massive Abbey built by the Cistercians in the mid-12th century....

DAY 58: VARNHEM TO GUDHEM



Thirteen people gathered for the regular Wednesday morning Pilgrims' Mass at Varnhem Abbey. After the service we explored the fine building, still very evidently a Cistercian structure, and its monuments to early Swedish nobility and royalty. Radio Skara arrived to do a live piece on the pilgrimage and eventually nine pilgrims, a Skara contingent having arrived, took off through the wood up the Billingen ridge, past the estate of Arn the Knight Templar, famous in film, but fictional. A stiffish climb led to glorious views back towards Skara and far beyond.

We came down to Hornsborga Lake where the cranes dance in the Spring - and were set upon by a reporter from the Skara News with whom we spent a long time explaining the pilgrimage and its purposes. A walk through fields past cows and cherry trees brought us to the nature reserve, a late lunch and a good rest, after which we continued round the lake delighting in the clouds reflected on its surface, in the views, in the evening sunlight.

We did the last stretch into Gudhem by car, neatly avoiding the thundershower that eventually arrived. The rector had supper ready for us and after that took us to the little Abbey museum. We ended the evening with her reading to us from Jan Guillou's about the time Cecilia, Arn's beloved, spent (fictionally) at Gudhem. We fell into our beds - real mattresses!! - tired and very content.

DAY 59: GUDHEM TO FALKÖPING



After Rector Maria presided at the morning mass in the ruins of Gudhem Abbey Church we were set upon again by the press pack, this time the Falköping News. These occasions hold no terrors for us now and we calmly accept the consequences of our celebrity - or should that be 'local-newsworthy oddness'? We strode confidently past the camera en route first for the little church of East Tunhem where a note in Visitors' Book had registered appreciatively the silence and stillness of the place and then for a pilgrim's chapel converted from what was probably a 'likhus' where in the frozen winter months bodies were kept for later burial.

We climbed to a spot high above Hornborga Lake and ate lunch enjoying the splendid view back over our previous day's walking. We continued high up until we reached the edge of Falköping, a railway town set in a valley between two ranges of hills, and more fine views. A long trek across the town took us within sight of Anders, our leader's, house and on to St Olof's Church, newly renovated and brightened by the removal of pews. 10th century Christian burials have been found nearby. And then it was time to say goodbye to Inger who had been with us since Lidköping, Thor and Annki who had joined us at Skara and to our more recent companions, Annelie and Maria. Rector Maria had left us earlier but Marianne, rector of Falköping will be with us again on Saturday.

This stretch had less of the spectacular about it than others and in a sense was rather uneventful. However, invited by a notice in St Olof's to take a bible text out of a pot and ponder it, I drew 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory' - to which the day's journey through paradisaal, sunlit Swedish countryside had indeed borne strong witness.

DAY 60: FALKÖPING TO KYRKESLÄTT



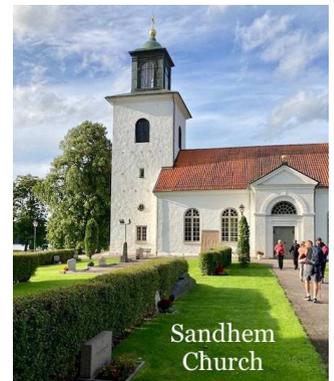
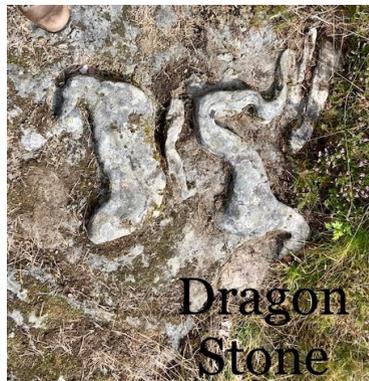
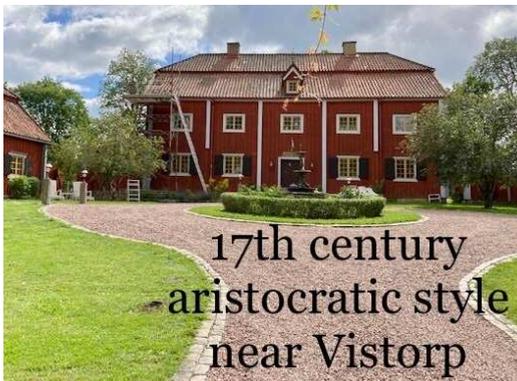
After mass in St Olof's we met up again with Kris, a young acquaintance of Dagmar's a year back. Fortuitously, or perhaps providentially, he had spotted Dagmar while we were walking through Falköping on Thursday and had rushed out to greet her. He had promised to join the pilgrimage and here he was.

With fewer of us than on the last few days we set a fast pace toward Olleberg, a steep climb up which brought us to a cafe with wonderful views and waffles. (Near here another chance/ providential meeting between Benny and Björn sparked ABBA into life.)

It rained on and off until we reached Slöta church when we looked set for a good soaking as we ate lunch. By chance/ providentially a wedding was happening, which meant we could be let into the Parish Rooms to dry out and wait for the rain to stop. Another few kilometres took us to a fork in the road where a choice had to be made. Would it be on onward march or an ice cream and the car? We opted for an ice cream and walking, though - and got only the car (shop closed, temptation of car left at shop overwhelming). We didn't spend all that long in the car which we left at the little church of Vartofta-Åsaka.

An hour or so more took us to Kyrkeslätt where the pilgrimage programme had us staying. On this pilgrimage, however, plans change and the superior amenities of Kyrkans Hus in Falköping meant a return (2 cars involved) to where we had started the day. Oddish for a pilgrimage - but it avoided showering in a pigsty.

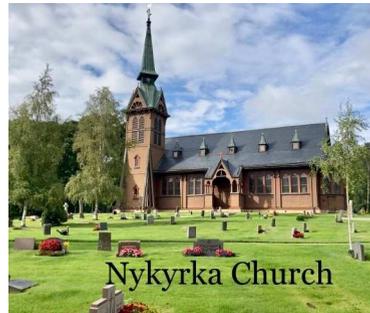
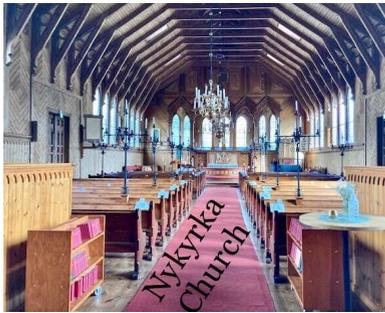
DAY 61: KYRKESLÄTT TO SANDHEM



Our number grew from 8 to 11 in the course of a special day. Ahead of our arrival local villagers Kent and his brother had carefully prepared a splendidly informative walk through a beautiful stretch of country. At spots which on our own we might just have strolled past we were told what had happened there years ago or shown a special geographical feature. A highlight was a visit to Kent's shop - not a place where you buy things but where you can be transported by what's on the shelves back a few decades to when the shop (then an actual shop run by Kent and Hans' parents) featured in one the Änglamark films. This is deep rural Sweden which, one suspects, exerts a nostalgic attraction even as it is today on the tourists who come to visit. Torgil, who joined us later in the day, is making a film set here about life in this part of the world a generation or so ago, the changes to which a fair number of Swedes regret.

We glimpsed life further back still in a visit to an old Manor house where the dining room was decorated with specially commissioned 19th century landscape wall paintings. We found out that the present owner of the house, having spent her early years there, had left it for a life in South America and Africa (her English husband found the Swedish winters hard to take) doing aid work. She joined us for the evening mass at Sandhem and for pizza and shared recollections of South Africa in the palatial church rooms where two of us spent the night.

DAY 62: SANDHEM TO NYKYRKA

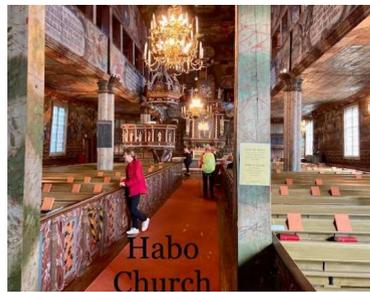


This time, putting on the waterproofs didn't stop the rain into which we set out with Hans, who is in overall charge of the Swedish leg of the pilgrimage. He is one of the strongest supporters of the link between Oxford and Växjö dioceses and it is good to see him again, the last time having been in February 2020 when he was in at the start of the first attempt to walk the St Sigfrid's Way.

With fewer pilgrims gathered, this was to be a stiller, quieter day than yesterday, mostly just us and the forest, the rain diminishing to a gentle mist and not troubling our meditations. The wetness, however, meant that it would be good not to have to sit on the ground for our fika break. Anders has many contacts and a phone established that we could use some benches at a hunting lodge with fine views down over Mullsjö lake. The Swiss people holidaying at the lodge were good enough to bring us coffee. Then on again in silence but for the regular crunch of the gravel under our feet, a swing uphill to a place where fallen trees provided comfortable lunch time seating, a winding path beside a river and suddenly we were at Nykyrka not long into the afternoon.

The support car was fetched and we made an expedition to St Sigfrid's Well at Utvängstorp narrowly avoiding a runaway horse which came galloping at us). Legend has it that here Sigfrid, Moses-like, struck the ground with his staff and brought forth water. We visited the little church where the pulpit dominates the east end and a guardian angel flies over the font. Back at Nykyrka, the canterell mushrooms we'd been collecting over the last few days were softened in a bit of butter. Rather disappointing, I'm sorry to have to report, but the attempt was right and proper.

DAY 63: NYKYRKA/MULLSJÖ TO HABO

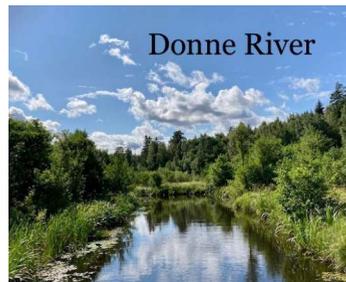


Through the town of Mullsjö, along the lake and up into Habo District and the woods. The fungi, after a couple of night's heavy rain, are, shall we say, rampant. An understated mushroom-picking competition unfolds, sometimes degenerating into an unseemly scrabble for the same prizes. Our shared silence enhances our appreciation of all the growth around us, of what we have been given in a creation which sustains our bodies and delights our senses and our minds. Such an intricately interconnected world (ask a mushroom)!

We have lunch and say prayers at the Allians Church in Furusjö. After a kilometre or so it strikes Hans that he is not wearing his glasses. In an impressively short time he gets back from the church plus glasses to find us trying to bond with curious but suspicious cows. Our afternoon break beside a lake is curtailed by heavy rain and the donning of our protection against it. We come upon a car apparently stuck on the track; it seems its occupants are purveyors of stolen copper wire. We pass on and the police are informed.

The top of the bell tower of Habo church appears over the trees. The church (officially the 5th most precious in Sweden), like its bell tower, is of wood, its astonishing interior covered in painted texts and pictures from the 17th century. Carved figures abound. Time, brandishing his scythe and carrying a skull, surmounts the pulpit whilst Christ, high up behind the altar, offers the Cross that defeats sin and death and opens up eternity for us. We celebrate mass to reinforce the message of the architecture. There's hope for the copper thieves yet.

DAY 64: HABO TO BANKERYD



We gather for Morning Prayer in Habo Church and then set off under a cloudless sky to cross boundaries - between Habo and Bankeryd parishes, Habo and Jönköping districts, the regions of West Götaland and Småland, Skara and Växjö dioceses and probably a few more. Coming over a ridge, we have our first view of Lake Vätter, the second largest lake in Sweden, backed by the green of the forest rising from its further edge.

Klas-Peter tells us about the history of the chapel at Fiskebäck when we break for lunch. Here in May near the border of their territories the bishops of Skara and Växjö jointly inaugurated the North St Sigfrid's Path, which we are walking today. After admiring the boats in Habo harbour we Cross the footbridge over the Donne river into new territory..

Our goal is the Parish Rooms at Bankeryd which we reach mid-afternoon. We have mass in the little chapel (the church is some way off), take showers, drink coffee, say evening prayer, eat an excellent and beautifully presented dinner, share our thoughts on the day, listen to Klas-Peter on Bankeryd as it is now, talk further with the youth worker and Karin the rector, who is also staying overnight. Then it is time for bed - actually, the day having been so full, well past it; the sofas beckon....

DAY 65: BANKERYD TO JÖNKÖPING



Bankeryd's trouble-taking over us extends to making breakfast for us; then, having prayed, as we regularly do when we move off, St Birgitta's prayer, 'Lord, show me your way and make me willing to walk it', we make for Bankeryd Church. There Karin, Bankeryd's rector, gives the first of her meditations on the theme of the pilgrimage, 'Courage to Live'; this is to be the most formally reflective day of the pilgrimage so far. We climb a hill for a magnificent view over Vättern. We celebrate mass and take our fika-break; Klaus-Peter details the topography beneath us.

On our way down we meet a family occupying the seats it was planned we should use for our prayers. They aren't for moving and neither are we. We make them welcome, a pressure to which they politely enough submit. We sing and pray and meditate and then we move on, perhaps leaving a little bewilderment behind.

We reach Järstorp Church, a popular wedding venue, where musicians are practising folk music. We have lunch in the garden of the church rooms until rain forces us inside. Then a long stretch on asphalt before we get to the suburbs of Jönköping and some fine views over the city and Lake Vättern. Streams and waterfalls bring us down into the city centre and to the splendid Sofia Church where we say evening prayer. Then on to Gråshag Church, to which the bells welcome us we sing Härlig är jorden (The earth is glorious), a fine and popular pilgrim hymn. We are later than we should have been but are welcomed with pea soup and pilgrim bread, both delicious.

The day ends with a gathering up of reflections. A little box goes round the circle to be opened by each person before they speak. Inside are words affirming the speaker's value, thus giving confidence - and what is said is well said and well worth the hearing.

DAY 66: JÖNKÖPING TO MÅNSARP

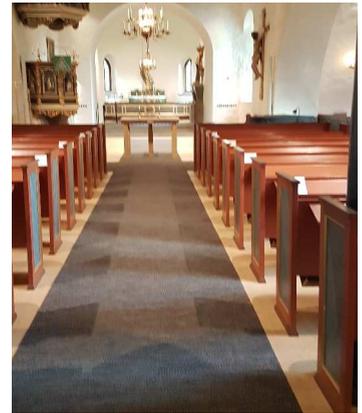


Agne, formerly a pilgrim priest in Skara diocese, is to be our leader for the next two days. Today, since we are now on the Franciscusled, he talks about Francis of Assisi and asks us to reflect on Francis' simple living and his sensitivity to the natural world. How might we live more simply?

We take fika in a classic Swedish summer meadow, spots of yellow dotting the grass. Later, it rains hard and some scouts allow us to take cover in a barn they are using and bring us coffee and biscuits to supplement our lunch. Agne reveals the surprise he has teased us with and takes us to a little chapel, half underground, where stones from the floor of what was a pilgrimage church nearby have been reused; we celebrate mass with our feet on stones which felt the feet of fellow pilgrims centuries ago.

We continue towards Taberg, the highest mountain in Småland, and stand on the site of the Mountain Temple, which in the middle of the last century hosted revivalist meetings with massive attendances (not much to see nowadays). Our path takes us under a high, sheer rock face, along a stream and into Månsarp, where the church bells celebrate our arrival. We say prayers and then visit the Pearl Meadow where one can take a meditative walk among a set of installations illustrating the concepts represented in the Frälsarkrans (Pearls of Life) bracelet. Then a spinach quiche, conversation and a well-earned night's rest.

DAY 67: MÅNSARP TO BYARUM



It's Bernard of Clairvaux's feast day and we are on the way to Cistercian ground at Nydala, (though we won't reach it today). Agne celebrates Bernard's extraordinary achievement in the renewal of monastic life in the 12th century and asks us to consider the values of poverty, chastity and obedience to which monks and nuns down the ages have sworn themselves: which would we find it hardest to embrace? After a period of silence the consensus is that obedience would be the most problematic.

The satisfactions of the Swedish countryside seem particularly rich today; there are many kantareller. Mass is celebrated under a windbreak in the forest - an English blessing is contributed. At the next resting place there's a chance to lie underneath the trees and look up through the branches at the bright blue sky.

Then on to our destination for the day, Byarum and its church, where a small moser annexe affords comfortable accommodation and the fridge is full of good things laid on for us. Evening Prayer with the rector closes the day.

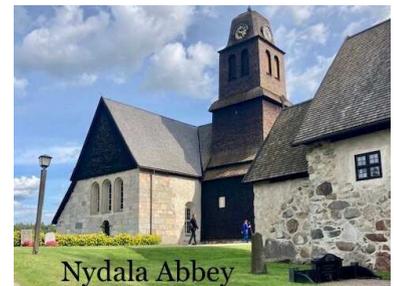
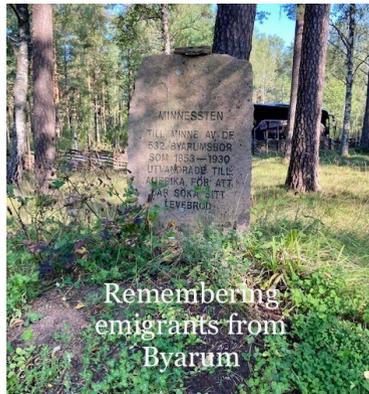
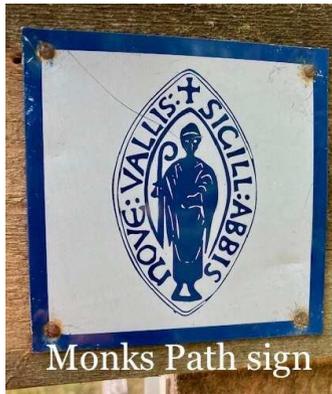
DAY 68: BYARUM TO TALLNÄS



Today our theme is Freedom, one of the seven key words suggested for Swedish pilgrims in writings coming out of the Pilgrim Centre at Vadstena and relating to Cristina's sermon on Sunday on Freedom in Christ. The sun is shining as we leave the St. Francis Path and begin to walk the Monks Path towards Nydala Abbey, a Cistercian foundation. There are reminders of past times: a stone remembering those from Byarum who emigrated to North America, like many others from Småland, in the 19th century, seeking freedom from grinding poverty; notices about disappeared settlements; the story of a boundary dispute between the Nydala monks and a poor farmer, which the farmer lost. And in the present there is the wonderful Swedish countryside: woods and arable land and pasture; old stone in walls, well cared/ for houses and gardens; horses, cows and many butterflies grateful for the clover.

Cristina asks us to reflect on what we are thankful for and we agree that being fit and able to walk through this landscape is cause for thanksgiving. However, Cristina is not well and has to stop and wait for the support car to pick her up. (She and the car catch up with us later on, and she seems to have recovered in some measure.) Our happier lot is to continue freely through all this sunlit beauty in a spirit of thankfulness until we arrive at the Diocesan Centre at Tallnäs, where a hearty and welcome meal awaits us.

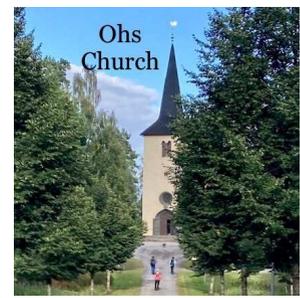
DAY 69: TALLNÄS TO NYDALA



Christina leads Morning Prayer but is unable to walk with us. She has brought Hugo along, however, a musician working for the summer in a nearby parish and he is able to help with our music. The signage for the Monks Path is good, Dagmar has walked this stretch recently; though technically leaderless, we are sure we will reach Nydala Abbey without trouble - and the sun is shining. This stretch feels the most remote so far. We take a break at Monks Hat and continue on to Monks Bridge where, as arranged, we meet Margarita and Tomas, who will walk the rest of the day with us. It's a surprise to see their car here and that of a couple of campers who are taking lunch outside their tent.

Lunch eaten, we cross Monks Bridge. There are some houses, briefly, but then it's back to unpopulated woodland. The Swedes are pleased to find the lingon berries (cranberries?) ripe for picking. We cross a marsh on a long wooden walkway, noting the place where a bridge built by the monks now lies submerged. As we come off the marsh we are greeted by a wooden monk. There's a way to go yet. Heavy machinery is in evidence as we stop for a rest at a deserted house. Further on we pass the depot of a forestry firm where many pine trees await transportation. This, economically, is what these beautiful wild places are about, but there are ecological questions about Swedish forestry practices. And then we are at Nydala. Three of us and three new pilgrims were expected and a seventh has arrived but with a bit of fluster all is sorted out. We attend Mass in the fine Abbey Church (not a lot remains from pre-Reformation times, but the later wood statuary is impressive). A solo recorder resonates beautifully in the vaulting. It's a bit of a scrum in the small kitchen of the caretaker's but eventually all are fed and watered and it's time for bed.

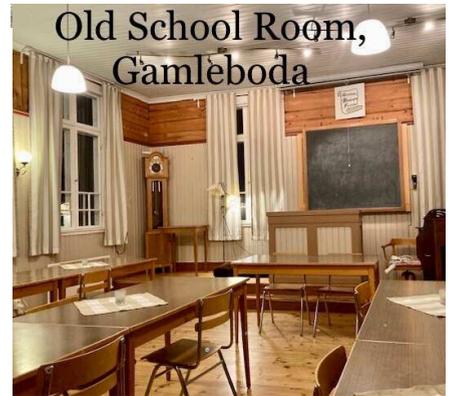
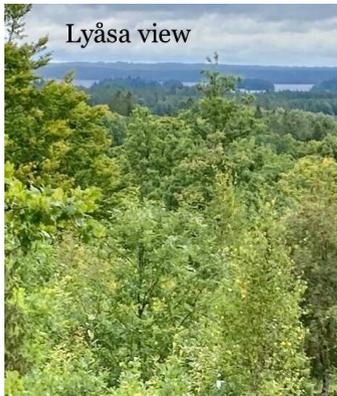
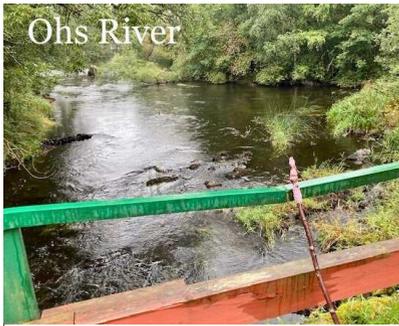
DAY 70: NYDALA TO OHS



Having had a near miss with an adder the previous evening, Jonas found that his early hours as our leader continued to be life-threatening. A couple of candles had been left to burn overnight in the little chapel where the men were quartered. Not a good idea. At about half past one Jonas detected the smell of something burning. It turned out to be coming from pamphlets on which wax had dropped. It was a relatively easy job to extinguish the burning material but a charred patch on the display stand holding the pamphlets indicated how much worse things might have been had Jonas' nose been less sensitive. The deaths by burning of a Swedish pedagogue, an English priest and a retired Swedish policeman would have made the national papers and probably the front pages had Nydala Abbey gone up in flames with them.

Having survived two attempts on his life, Jonas now had to deal with eleven pilgrims and their idiosyncrasies and incapacities. Breakfast proved to be a less brutal occasion than supper the previous evening, which bodes well, and though the rain fell on our presentation parade, when we told one another a bit about ourselves, we moved off in pretty good order along the West St Sigfrid Path. The countryside of deepest Småland was again wonderfully beautiful, especially when the sun appeared, which didn't take long. Significant climbs delivered some wonderful views; the woods were fragrant and rich berry pickings were to be had. However, the stretch was long and some of us rather struggled. It was a relief all round when we finally made it to Ohs Church (originally built to serve the iron works at Ohs and now one of the churches in the Benefice of Voxtorp which is linked with Witney) where we celebrated Mass. We went on to our night's lodging in the old School in which the operation running the railway museum and its trains now has its offices and where we were served the meal we felt we deserved after our 15 mile trek. And Jonas could celebrate his survival.

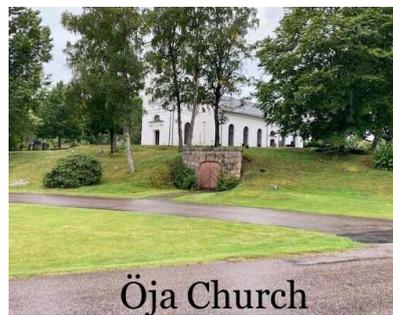
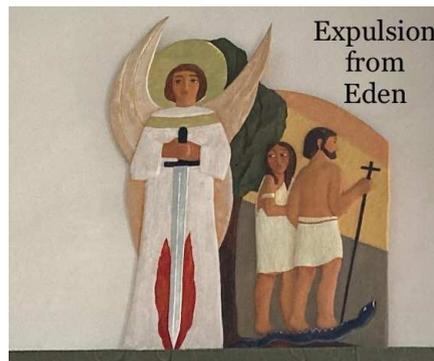
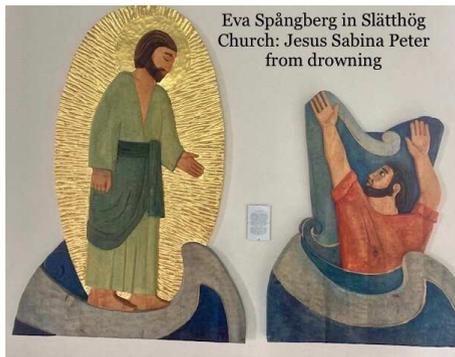
DAY 71: OHS TO GAMLEBODA



One could sum up the day as very much like the previous day, only worse. The employment of that last word, however, would suggest you yourself were having one of your worse days. Never mind the rain, never mind that the sun remained shy all day. Still we had the woods, we still had wonderful views from high places, we had Magnus to tell us about the area and its history, for instance the remote and lovely village of Lyåsa, classic Småland, and the Lyåsa baby who fell off his father's back on a snowy journey to his baptism and apparently rather enjoyed the long sub-zero wait to be rescued. Still we had St Birgitta's prayer to encourage us to walk the way God had set before us.

True, we again had to walk even further today than we would have wanted, much of the way on asphalt; true, no one was ever quite sure how much longer we had to go before we reached our goal; true, one of us had to take a lift towards the end from a car we flagged down. But when we did finally arrive we found a very warm welcome at the Old School, now the Village Hall, antique but well-appointed. Our celebration of mass was followed at the same table by a very satisfying meal specially cooked for us. We had come through adversity and it's probably not too romantic to say that our solidarity has been strengthened. Very much like the previous day, only better.

DAY 72: GAMLEBODA TO ÖJA



It's cycling today. Or it will be when we get the bikes. The hire company has forgotten our booking, so we wait an hour or so and eventually our transport arrives. So does the rain. Which is no surprise. In the annual contest for the rainiest place in Sweden, Växjö generally comes in first or second. We visit Slätthög Church to look at works of Eva Spångberg, a celebrated Småland artist, and continue in the rain through Moheda to Alvesta, a big railway junction, where we have lunch at a popular and crowded cafe, glad to be able to remove, temporarily at least, our sodden outer clothing. The food, too, is welcome. Gunnel pronounces her jacket 'nearly a little dry' and we are again into the wet.

It doesn't take us long to get to the Öja church centre after having covered about 20 miles from Gamleboda but it takes us an unconscionable time to get in. There has been a mess-up over turning the alarm off which means that Jonas' swipe card won't work however many gormless attempts we make to swipe away and punch in the code. Klas-Peter seeks refuge from the cold in the mercifully open church. Eventually, someone in Växjö does something that permits us entry to the centre. Our joy, however, is dampened by the news that whatever was done in Växjö means we'll have to evacuate the building just before 11.00pm so that the alarm can be re-instated. It should only take a few minutes, we hear - and take pinch of salt. Hans, defeated earlier in this mission, drops off our bags and stays to discuss pilgrimage matters. He then chauffeurs us to a seriously good restaurant where, after a fine meal we exchange thanks and congratulations: we have achieved something rather grand - at least we will have if we survive tomorrow, an index we have achieved something rather grand - at least we will have if we survive tomorrow, and, indeed, tonight. We are just going out and, should the alarm reset fail, we may be some time.

DAY 73: ÖJA TO VÄXJÖ



Well, we weren't locked out for long and a reasonable night's sleep ensued ahead of the pilgrimage's final day. It was good to be joined by Anders Blom, our leader for previous stages in Skara diocese, and by Fredrik Modéus, Bishop of Växjö. The way lay mostly through woods. Jonas used the Frälsarkrans bracelet for starting points for our meditations during the day.

We had lunch at a burial site from the Bronze Age and then climbed an ascent to look over Växjö city. This being Växjö, the skies were dim with mist and rain but it was just possible to make out the Cathedral's two spires a few miles to the east. After the medieval church of Berglunda we went through birch forest to the edge of Växjö and on to the lake from which, so the legend tells us, the heads of his nephews, murdered by locals who didn't think much of Christianity, were retrieved by Sigfrid, guided by a miraculous light from heaven. After that the heathens had no chance, one suspects. The bells rang for us as we walked down the lake towards the Cathedral. As we arrived we broke into a hymn much used by Swedish pilgrims, *Härlig är jorden* (The Earth is glorious, God's Heaven is glorious). Bunyan's wonderful words on Mr Valiant-for-Truth's death came to mind, as they had done earlier in Oxfordshire.

Then, said he, 'I am going to my Father's, and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword, I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill, to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought his battles, who now will be my rewarder.' When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside, into which, as he went, he said, 'Death, where is thy sting?' And as he went down deeper, he said, 'Grave, where is thy victory?' So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

Not that our case was quite the same, yet still.... An interview for the Småland Post duly given, we entered the Cathedral for a quiet service at which Bishop Fredrik asked us to consider what we would take with us, and how our future might be, after the pilgrimage. The right questions to ask.

And that marks the end of this very long and winding pilgrimage.

The St Sigfrid's Way was inaugurated by many feet, many hands and many hearts

Thank you so much to all those who hosted us, walked with us, ate with us, prayed with us and followed our journey online.

St Sigfrid's Way is officially open, now it's your turn!

May all our journeys be mutual blessings of generosity, openness and connection.

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