

Walk Awhile

Briefing Paper 12

A short history of the Pilgrims' Way

Introduction

This brief provides a short history of the ancient trackway that runs across southern England from Winchester in the west to Canterbury in the east, which has become popularly known as the 'Pilgrims' Way'. The trackway is 120 miles (192 km) in length and two thirds of the old trackway is still identifiable today.

A national trail running along the old trackway was first proposed by the Ramblers Association in their evidence to the Scott Committee. In 1978 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Donald Coggan officially opened the North Downs Way National Trail. It is one of the few trails that coincides or runs close to the ancient trackway between Winchester and Canterbury. The National Trail is 131 miles in length and traces the North Downs ridge between Farnham and Dover via Canterbury. At Boughton Lees the North Downs Way splits into the 57-mile Canterbury loop. From here, one can either follow the loop clockwise along stretches of the ancient trackway to Dover via Canterbury and the Stour valley or one can take the loop anti-clockwise to Wye and onto Dover via Folkestone.

The old trackway was both a ridge walk and a terrace-way as it followed the North Downs escarpment. For the most part the ancient trackway keeps to the lower southern slopes, away from the exposed ridge of the Downs and just above the woods of the Weald and the claggy clay found on the lower ground. Much of the North Downs Way National Trail follows the more picturesque route along the ridge of the Downs. Nevertheless there are many stretches where the old trackway and the North Downs Way converge, especially along sections where the 'Pilgrims Way' has not been incorporated into a metalled lane.

The ancient track way before Pilgrims

In Valerie Beesley's book, entitled *The Green Lanes of England*, she suggests that the earliest trackway along the North Downs escarpment dates back to when man hunted along the tracks used by wild animals.¹ Curtis and Walker suggest that 'perhaps, as JRL Anderson claims for the Ridgeway, paths along the North Downs first came into use thousands of years ago when Palaeolithic, pre-Ice age hunter, climbed onto the hills to find their quarry'².

The economic reasons why an east-west route developed have been summarised by Christopher John Wright³. Following the separation of England with mainland Europe about 5000 years ago, the Straits of Dover became the main entry point into England. The principal supplies of minerals such as tin, lead and iron were to be found in the west of the country and southern England had the best cultivated land. As such natural trade routes developed between the west and east of southern England and the chalk slopes of the North Downs presented the best passable route.

Certainly by the pre-Roman Iron Age, there is evidence to suggest that the trackway along the North Downs was a main trade route. Frank Jessop states 'an indication of the main trade routes is given by the finds of coins belonging to this period. Most of the single coins that have been found were either on the line of the North Downs trackway, near the Thanet coast, or along the banks of the Thames'⁴. As Jessop states, the North Downs escarpment was an obvious line for a trackway and took advantage of the contours and avoided the sticky Gault clay. He goes on to say that 'nowadays it is usually, but misleadingly referred to as the Pilgrims Way' (*Frank W Jessop, Kent History Illustrated, p.15, 1966*).

Pilgrimage to Becket's shrine

John Christopher Wright suggests that the great pilgrimage, which arose immediately after the murder of Archbishop Becket in 1170, saved the old road. He argues that Winchester had already started to decline as the capital of England as London grew in importance. Moreover fewer metals were coming up from the West Country and iron from Sussex had taken its place.⁵

¹ Valerie Beesley, *The Green Lanes of England*, p.30, Green Books 1998

² Neil Curtis and Jim Walker, *National Trail Guide to the North Downs Way*, p.21, Ordnance Survey 1992

³ Christopher John Wright, p.12 *A guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way*, Constable 1993

⁴ Frank W Jessop, *Kent History Illustrated*, p.15, 1966

⁵ Christopher John Wright, p.17-18 *A guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way*, Constable 1993

By the eighteenth century the usage of the term 'Pilgrims' Way' was being applied to a number of ancient or prehistoric trackways in the south of England that had previously been used by pilgrims journeying to Becket's shrine⁶. Although these routes radiated from Canterbury they did not include the route taken by Chaucers' pilgrims but were instead prehistoric trackways, used by pilgrims travelling from the continent via Dover or Southampton⁷ in addition to the main route of medieval pilgrimage between Winchester and Canterbury.

By the time Hilaire Bellec wrote what has been described as the first authoritative account of the Pilgrims Way, in his book entitled *The Old Road*, in 1904, the name Pilgrims Way was being applied in particular to the ancient trackway running along the edge of the North Downs between Winchester and Canterbury. Nevertheless, Neil Curtis and Jim Walker make the point that prior to the 1860s, there is no evidence to suggest that this east-west route was ever designated the name Pilgrims Way. They argue that it was an Ordnance Survey Officer who first designated parts of the trackway as the Pilgrims Way.⁸

The Pilgrims Way and Geoffrey Chaucer

In 1898 Henry Littlehales published a book entitled '*Some Notes on the Road from London to Canterbury in the Middle Ages*', in which he plotted the route he believed Chaucers' Pilgrims to have taken. This followed the line of the old Roman Road, Watling Street (A2) between London and Canterbury.⁹ In fact the only section of the Southwark to Canterbury route that ever attracted the word Pilgrim in its name was a short section of road called Pilgrims Road, found on the final approach to Canterbury¹⁰.

Nevertheless, the North Downs Way does coincide with some of the places that Chaucer's pilgrims visited. Undoubtedly Chaucer's pilgrims would have come through Rochester, through which the North Downs Way passes today. It has been suggested that pilgrims in Chaucer's time would have stayed at the Crown Inn but there is no evidence to support this. The ancient trackway along the North Downs did not deviate into Rochester and it is most likely thought that travellers crossed the

⁶ Jack Ravensdale, *In the Steps, Guild* 1989 p.20

⁷ Jack Ravensdale, *In the Steps* p.20

⁸ Neil Curtis and Jim Walker, *National Trail Guide to the North Downs Way*, p.20, Ordnance Survey 1992

⁹ Jack Ravensdale, *In the Steps of Chaucers Pilgrims*, p16, 1989

¹⁰ Jack Ravensdale, *In the Steps of Chaucers Pilgrims*, p63 1989

River Medway a few miles further up river, either at Cuxton, Aylesford, Halling or Snodland. However Chaucer's pilgrims would have arrived at Rochester following a route close to Watling Street.

Just before the North Downs Way reaches Canterbury it passes through Harbledown. A detour can be made to the church of St Nicholas from which Henry II walked barefoot into Canterbury whereupon he was flogged by all the bishops as part of his penance. It is believed that Chaucer is referring to Harbledown as Bob-up-and-down in the Manciple's Tale where it states:

"Wite ye nat wher ther stant a litel toun
Which that y-cleped is Bob-up-and down,
Under the Blee, in Caunterbury waye"

Originally Becket's death was commemorated on its anniversary, which was the 29th December. However, following his translation to sainthood in 1220 the main feast was moved to 7th July, which made for much better conditions. In fact Ravensdale points out that the old Roman road may have been very difficult to pass along, especially in the valley bottoms, in the middle of winter.

When Chaucer died on 25th October 1400, the Canterbury Tales remained unfinished. It is believed he started work on the Canterbury Tales in 1387 and worked on them until his death. He planned to write 120 tales but on his death had completed little more than 20 tales¹¹. Canterbury Tales was one of the first literary works to be printed in everyday English and Terry Jones argues in his book *Chaucers Knight* that Chaucer was an important ironic satirist of the period. Jones also argues that Chaucer was far more political than has been previously thought and has put forward the conspiratorial theory that Chaucer disappears just one year after Henry IV seizes the English throne¹².

Chaucer started to write the Canterbury Tales 212 years after the murder of Thomas a' Becket in 1170 and was writing at a time when the pilgrimage had reached its height.¹³ . Not only had pilgrimages reached a high point but also by the time that Chaucer was writing, pilgrimages for some had become associated with leisure rather than a form of penance. As such puritan groups such as the Lollards were critical of the medieval pilgrimage because they viewed it as a waste of money and

¹¹ Peter Levi, *Canterbury Tales Translation, Oxford, 1986 p.xx*

¹² William Cook, *Pilgrims Progress, an article published in New Statesman p.38 1st April 200*

¹³ Christopher John Wright, *p.12 A guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way, Constable 1993*

an excuse for sinful living along the way¹⁴. In the sixteenth century the shrine of Thomas a' Becket was destroyed by Henry VIII and pilgrimages to Canterbury effectively came to an end¹⁵.

The post pilgrimage trackway

Nevertheless, even if pilgrimages ceased in the sixteenth century, during the following two centuries the terrace way along the side of the North Downs escarpment continued to be used by travellers avoiding new toll roads¹⁶.

The second influence that Christopher John Wright cites for the continuance of the old trackway is the fact that it followed the chalk slopes of the Downs and as such was never cultivated. This allowed the traveller who would not have been permitted to trespass on tilled land to use the track as a legal thoroughfare. Moreover many chalk pits were dug along the way due to the abundance of chalk. The chalk was burnt and made into lime, which was then transported along sections of the old trackway.

Today the trackway, where it coincides with the North Downs Way continues, under the protection of the local authorities with the support of the Countryside Agency, as a National Trail. The route of the National Trail passes close to some of the most densely populated areas in England. Nevertheless it is still possible to walk for hours along sections of the Pilgrims Way without seeing another person, allowing time to simply reflect on the history of this ancient trackway.

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¹⁴ Catherine Richardson, *Chaucer A Beginner's Guide*, p.22, Hodder & Stoughton 2001

¹⁵ Valerie Beesley, *The Green Lanes of England*, p.57, Green Books 1998

¹⁶ Christopher John Wright, p.12 *A guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way*, Constable 1993