

Walk Awhile

Briefing Paper 5

Harbledown and the Black Prince's Well

Introduction

Harbledown village developed around the old Roman road of Watling Street and is the last village that pilgrims pass through before reaching Canterbury. It is also the point where the ancient track way between Winchester and Canterbury shares the route taken by Chaucer's pilgrims who journeyed along Watling Street to Canterbury.

It is believed that Chaucer refers 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"

As Jack Ravensdale says "of all the indications of real places that Chaucer gives in the Tales, that which has given most rise to argument must be Bob-up-and-down. Modern scholars seem satisfied with Harbledown. The village is so hilly that any journey in or through it involves going up and down, and fits in very well with the distances travelled in the various stages of the journey"¹

In 1084 Llanfranc built the St.Nicholas Leper Hospital in the village. Today ten almshouses are situated on the site of the hospital but the entrance to the old hospital can be seen on the right hand side of the road as one walks up the hill and through the village towards Canterbury.

¹ Jack Ravensdale, *the Steps of Chaucer's Pilgrims* 1989. p.110.

Situated below the hill from the almshouses and the church of St Nicholas, tucked slightly away from the road can be found the Well of St. Thomas, which is more often referred to as the Black Prince's Well. It is from this well that Henry II walked barefoot into Canterbury whereupon he was flogged by all the bishops as part of his penance for his role in the death of Beckett. In addition Henry II also made an annual grant to the leper hospital of 40 marks, which is still paid by the City Treasury today.

The Detour to Harbledown and the Black Princes Well

Upon leaving the woods after Bigbury Camp, the NDW turns slightly to the right and emerges onto a lane. Cross the lane onto the pavement opposite and turn left to cross a bridge over the A2 dual carriageway. After crossing the bridge turn immediately right onto the footpath marked NDW and pass a mobile phone mast. The path then ascends some steps cut into the grass made with wooden sleepers. (0.3 km)

As you ascend the steps look for a stile on your left. At this point, climb over the stile to leave the NDW and follow a footpath that will enable you to enter Canterbury via the historic village of Harbledown. After crossing the stile strike out across the field bearing slightly diagonally to the right making for an avenue of trees (planted as a wind break), which are about 50 metres across the field. When you reach the windbreak you will pick up a concrete path to the right of the avenue of trees, which will take you to Harbledown. (0.4 km).

Continue along the concrete path, through a gate and past farm buildings on your right. Just before you reach Harbledown the path turns to the left before joining the main road through the village. Retrace your steps for 10 metres and just before the bend turn off onto an asphalt driveway and climb a short grass bank that leads up to the Black Princes Well, which is set against the fence line.

The Connection with the Black Prince

The Black prince lived between 1330 and 1376 and was Edward Prince of Wales, the oldest son of Edward III. In the brick arch above the brickwork surrounding the spring can be seen the three feathers of the Prince of Wales' arms. He became a national hero during the Hundred Years War with France for his heroic acts and victories. However he did not become King because he died a year before his

Father. He achieved notable victories at the battle of Crecy in 1346 and Poitiers and in 1370 he captured Limoges and was responsible for the massacre of 3000 civilians and the burning of the town.

The two stories that link the Black Prince with the well are that he stopped on his last journey to Canterbury when he was ill to drink from the well. The other story is that on his death bed in London he asked that water be brought to him from the well at Harbledown because it was known for its healing properties.²

The Black Prince's tomb can be seen to on the south side of the Trinity Chapel in Canterbury Cathedral. Above the tomb hang replica pieces of the Prince's armour and the original armour can be seen in a display case on the south quire aisle.

Derek Bright
Walk Awhile
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² Christopher John Wright, *A Guide to the Pilgrims Way* 1993, p293.