

Bedfordshire Pilgrim Paths

Oakley, Pavenham & Stevington Circular Walk



An eight-mile Pilgrimage with a Holy Well

<https://bedfordshirepilgrimages.org.uk/>

Holy Well Pilgrimage

A river, a Holy Well and the Village Cross where John Bunyan's pilgrim shed his burdens. Oakley, Pavenham, Stevington. Eight-mile circular route.

Warning: The path crosses through approximately 15 metres of marsh that is wet all year round. I suggest wearing boots and not shoes because the mud will go up to your ankles. Postpone the walk if there has been a heavy rain.

Introduction

This eight-mile pilgrimage passes three churches and runs along the Great River Ouse before arriving at a Holy Well at the bottom of a cliff below Stevington Church. There is speculation that the Stevington Village Cross is the inspiration for the location where Christian, the pilgrim from John Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress, felt God's grace remove the burden of sin that he carried.

Each stop includes a brief history of the place, a Bible verse and a short reflection. Rev Bill Britt, Vicar of Stotfold & Radwell.

Hasten to the springs, drawn from the wells

In God is the wellspring of life,

A spring that can never fail.

St Augustine of Hippo, (354-430 A.D), Commentary on

After the 40 mile and hour sign and before the blue Pavenham Kitchen sign, turn L and go through metal kissing gate. Follow the farm road/path, keeping river on your left.

Go through three metal kissing gates and eventually turn left onto road and careful cross over two single lane bridges and back to Oakley car park.

Final prayer

God of life, we are thankful for this pilgrimage, a journey that is not measured in distance, but in transformation. We give thanks for this journey and the people we journey with. May we continue to follow in the way that you are leading with hopeful and daring hearts, until we have reached your commonwealth of justice and peace for all. . Alydia Smith, United Church of Canada

Sources:

Brendan O'Malley, Holy Wells, a pilgrim's prayer companion and guide, 2014
The Buildings of England, Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough, Nikolaus Pevsner and Charles O'Brien, 2014.

A History of the English Parish, NJG Pounds, 2004

A History of The Church in England, J R H Moorman, 1952

Britain's Pilgrim Places, British Pilgrimage Trust Nick Mayhew-Smith and Guy Haywood,, 2020.

Grounded: How connection with nature can improve our mental and physical wellbeing, Ruth Allen, 2021.

Stevington: The Natural History of a Bedfordshire Parish, Jacqueline Gooding and Roger Day 2015

St Mary the Virgin Stevington: History and Architecture, Peter Hart, 2019.

Sacred Earth Sacred Soul, John Philip Newell, 2021

Travel with John Bunyan, John Pestell, 2005.

Stevington. The Village History, Stevington Historical Trust, 2001

burden of sin rolling off the back of his character named Christian. It is the place where the pilgrim encountered divine forgiveness.

There is no record of Bunyan coming to Stevington, but he did secretly preach a mile away near the river in Holmes Wood.

By 1860 the Bedford architect James Tacy wing, noted cross no longer crowned the octagonal shaft. He said "Is it desirable in this Protestant country ... to restore, if dilapidated, these striking symbols of our faith? To advocate either side would introduce controversy."

Plus ça change.

Reflection

John Bunyan's pilgrim carried a heavy burden of his back which slowed his journey to the Celestial City. Then he saw the cross and the backpack tumbled off his back and disappeared into an open grave or sepulcher. In the cross he saw the love of God made visible, reminding him that Christ took on the burden of our sins through the mystery of the love he showed.

Turn L onto Park Road At the sign "no footpath for 500 yards" cross to pavement on other side and walk on Park Road for some distance, taking care of traffic.

Psalm 42

In the Middle Ages pilgrims in England were drawn to Holy wells because they are a symbol of life, a symbol of the soul and were a reminder that water is a symbol of grace "a gift of God, springing forth from our mother, the Earth."

The pilgrimage begins at the cemetery car park next to St Mary's Church in Oakley. If you drive from Bromham, the church is immediately after the Oakley bridges. The post-code MK43 7RU does not take you directly to the Church.

A prayer to begin the pilgrimage:

Heavenly Father, you have shown your love for us by giving us Jesus to be our way to you. Guide us as we begin this journey. Bless us with peace and joy as we travel and bring us home safely. We ask this grace through Jesus, our brother and our Lord.

St Mary's Church is normally closed and contains an uplifting, primitive painting on wood of Jesus sitting on a rainbow, with a Vermilion-red background surrounded by white stars. Christ holds his arms up in a position of prayer over the world, as represented as a white orb at his feet. Blood streams from his hands, side and feet.

Turn R out of carpark onto Church Lane. Follow pavement along stone wall and cross over Lovell Road and turn L on Lovell Road, which becomes Church Lane.

Turn R onto High Street. At the Bedford Arms cross over the road to the pavement.

Turn L onto Pavenham Road.

Shortly after you pass the large, dressed stone sign for Oakley, cross the road and head for Willow Vale field. View the sculptures made from three oak trees by local chainsaw artist Ian Freemantle and children from Oakley Lower School.

Cross back over the road and continue your pilgrimage.

Cross Stafford Bridge over the Great River Ouse and turn left onto path with steps leading to river. At bottom step turn L and stop at car/tractor engine which either sits on the riverbank or is in the river.

Engine stalled in a riverbed

Bible Verse: Proverbs 3:5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

Reflection

Someone once relied on this man-made engine, which

and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Background

An extracts from John Bunyan's book Pilgrim's Progress:

"Now, I saw in my dream that the highway up which Christian was to go was fenced on either side with a wall that was called Salvation. Up this way, therefore, did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back.

He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a tomb. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the tomb, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death." Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. "

There is conjecture that the 14th century cross perched on three high steps of stone located at the crossroads of Stevington is the place where John Bunyan imagined the

the 20th century George MacLeod, who rebuilt Iona Abbey, believed we could also experience the divine by being with and serving others, especially those who suffer.

Village Shop

Exit churchyard onto Church Road. Walk along pavement on right side of road into Stevington.

You will pass the Stevington Church Room inscribed with "1897 Nisi Dominus Frustra," which is derived from Psalm 127.1 "Without the Lord, [it is] in vain" or "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it".

There are toilets, teas & coffees and a village shop. It is open Monday to Fridays 10.00am-12 on and 3.00-5.00pm and Saturday 10.00am-12 noon.

The Village Cross

Bible Verse

Matthew 11.28-30

Jesus said:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,

stopped running a long time ago. We tend to trust in ourselves when our lives are motoring along nicely, but we should never forget to rely on God's strength and not our own. The engine is stuck while the river of God's love is ever flowing.

Return to path and cross over bridge made of three wooden timbers. Go through a metal kissing gate. Follow the path in the field along the river and after a short distance climb down the bank to flat area by the riverside, where there are three white fishing pegs numbered 1, 2 & 3.

Riverbank

Bible Verse: A vision of heaven by the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. (47.7-9, 12)

Then he (God) led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. He said to me, 'This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds,

like the fish of the Great Sea. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.'

Background

The Great River Ouse flows from Buckinghamshire to Norfolk before draining into the North Sea. It's the UK's fifth longest river. Members of the Phoenix Angling Club fish for Roach, Dace, Perch, Pike, Chub and Barbel from this section of the river.

Reflection

For some, part of the attraction of fishing is the solitude of sitting alone on a riverbank.

At times, we need to be alone. In the 4th Century a Christian named Anthony went into the Egyptian desert to seek solitude and he became what is known as one of the first Desert Fathers. He is nicknamed the Father of All Monks.

In the desert he would pray, read the scriptures and meditate on them. He once wrote:

"Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the

On either side of the central aisle are two people semi-reclining looking at each other. One is a moustache man. He is looking across at the other figure, probably a man. There are also two carvings of dogs.

On the left side of the church, two men kneel and drink from a cup. They could be drinking Church Ale which may be associated with the grant of land by John Darling to provide Church Ale.

The sale of Church Ales was once a major source of income for churches, particularly at religious festivals such as Whitsun (Pentecost). During the 16th Century the sale of Church ales became profitable and popular (sometimes raucous), until the rise of Puritanism put an end to the practice. By the end of the early 17th century their income was replaced by pew-rents.

Reflection

What are the meanings of these poppyheads? Could they represent different ways of experiencing the divine? In not only studying the Holy Bible, but also experiencing the Risen Christ in our daily interaction with other people and in nature as represented by the dogs?

The 9th century wandering monk and teacher John Scotus Eriugna wrote that God speaks to us through two books: the small book of the Bible and the big book of nature. In

open 10.00am-4.00pm every day. The main body of the church commenced soon after 1280 and was completed around 1400. The beautifully carved angel roof was financed by two Stevington wool merchants, Nicholas and Robert Taylor.

Bible Verses

Romans 1.20

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

2 Timothy 3.16-17

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Matthew 18.20

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Background

The ends of the front pews are topped with eight, 16th Century poppyheads, carved in oak.

On the right is a cleric in his cassock, seated at his desk, studying a book, possibly the bible.

monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness.”

Do you maintain the right balance between solitude and being with others?

Climb back up the bank and continue on the path, keeping the trees on your left and fields on your right.

At a ditch, go through two metal gates at either end of a small wooden bridge and turn L along the path. Follow path, keeping trees on left and field on right for some distance.

Soon after you pass a red brick building, follow the path into woods, where you will pass a Bunyan Trail signpost.

Go through metal gate and follow path.

Go through metal kissing gate and immediately turn R onto farm road.

Cross over Pavenham Road and turn L along the pavement (You will pass Candlesmass Cottage!). Shortly after passing the house “Park Cottage” turn R onto a public footpath, go through wooden gate onto a narrow path hemmed in by

hedges. Eventually you will pass a golf course on your right.

Turn R onto the pavement into a cul de sac. At end turn L onto a public footpath. Continue through a metal kissing gate and you will soon enter the Churchyard.

St Peter's Church Pavenham

Bible Verse: Psalm 90:4-6

For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

Background

This Church is normally closed, but you can rest on a bench or in the church porch.

This is one of only a couple of churches in England that still holds a special service of "grass shrewing" which involves throwing freshly cut grass on the floor inside the church. It's held here on a Sunday in July near St Peter's Day.

The tradition dates back to the Middle Ages, when most

2000 years to treat a variety of ailments including fever, lung disease, spasms, and pain. Drug companies use Butterbur extract for migraine prevention and hay fever treatments.

Reflection

Sit on the stone wall, listen to the trickling of the stream, look out over the Butterburs which gives a vibe of a primordial forest. Listen to the birdsongs and in warmer weather watch the butterflies.

The Holy Well at the base of Stevington Church echoes the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel's vision of heaven, with water gushing from under the threshold of the Temple, eastward from the south side of the altar. This vision symbolizes life, purification, and the outpouring of God's blessings, with the river growing from a trickle into a deep, uncrossable, life-giving river that heals the Dead Sea.

We can catch glimpses of heaven here on earth if we open our hearts and eyes to them.

Follow the path up the hill to the church.

St Mary the Virgin, Stevington

The church has a toilet and a kitchenette. The church is

Butterbar plants, because before refrigerators, large pats of butter were wrapped in their one-metre wide leaves to keep them cool.

They mainly flowers from March to April. Each hyacinth-like spike has a cluster of more than 20 pale pink, small flowers, which attract bees and butterflies.

This spring at the bottom of St Mary's Church provides a perfect microclimate for nature to thrive, according to Jacqueline Gooding and Roger Day."

"For anyone who cares to look in more detail, links can be made between the varied habitats and specific species. The relatively warm water from the springs creates the microclimate in which the liverwort can thrive. The wall above provides sheltered ledges for mosses and the maidenhair spleenwort. The seeps make a wide area wet enough for butterbur to flourish. This provides nectar for insects in late winter and early spring and summer shade for the mosses on the ground; they in turn shelter small invertebrates. The elder trees provide flowers and fruit and places for ivy to achieve its mature form so providing more flowers for insects and fruit for birds. Taking the wider view, the Holywell Marsh can be seen as a nucleus to which visiting birds and insects from the surrounding areas come for water, shelter and some food."

The giant Butterbur plant has been used for more than

churches had earthen floors and the newly cut, sweet-smelling grass would freshen the building. It's related to the church tradition of rush bearing. According to Pevsner, rush matting and basket weaving was Pavenham's main industry from 17th Century to the early 20th century.

Churches in the Middle Ages could become smelly and dirty. Before there were pews the naves were covered with straw and dogs often accompanied their masters to church according to the historian N J G Pounds

Ahead of major church festivals like Easter, young people cleared out the fouled straw, replacing it with fresh hay and rushes. The grass strewing became something of a social occasion. By the 16th century the events turned into raucous parties and the Puritans tried to ban rush-bearing on Sundays, but in 1618 King James I rejected this teaching by publishing "Declaration of Sports", commending rush-bearing, and Morris and maypole dancing as suitable pastimes for Sundays, according to Moorman.

According to local historian Peter Daniel, strewing new-mown hay in the aisles is a token of thanks for the first hay harvest. The custom here in Pavenham arose from Trinity College granting the local Parish Clerk permission to gather grass from the Town Field during haymaking season under the open-field system.

Reflection

How do you personally show thanks to God and those you rely on. How often do you say thank you?

Does your church or local community make an effort to thank the myriad of volunteers who help reduce social isolation and make communities joyful places to live? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a merry day of grass strewing where people just had fun.

Leave the churchyard and watch for traffic and turn L onto Church Road.

Just after an Average Speed Check sign turn R onto public footpath across a farmer's field.

As you near the line of bushes and trees, follow the path through a gap in the hedge and across wobbly railroad tie over a muddy ditch.

Turn L onto path, keeping hedge on left and field on right.

At the end of the field turn R and follow path, keeping hedge on the left and field on the right. At the end of the field, pass a wooden post, keeping electric fence on right.

At the garden with a wooden fence surrounding four fruit trees, turn L at the blue car bonnet.

brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate that faces towards the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Then he (God) led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. He said to me, 'This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.'

Background

The water emerges from the spring at a constant 11 degrees Celsius, which allows long tongues of Great Scented Liverwort to cover the back and sides of the well.

What looks like a field of giant rhubarb is actually a rare species, *Petasites Hybridus*. They are traditionally known as

Siloam and

All: *We praise and thank you for you are a God of ceaseless compassion*

Leader: We remember the water Baptism of the river Jordan and

All: *We praise and thank you for you are a God of transformation*

Leader: Today we worship and adore you God of Provision, compassion and transformation

All: *Let this worship enable us to be responsible stewards of your provision, channels of your compassion and agents of your transformation. Amen.*

Holywell Marsh

Bible Verse

Ezekiel. (47.1-2. 7-9, 12)

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he

Cross over the road and turn L and immediately after the house signed "Thatched cottage" turn R down path.

Go through the metal kissing gate and turn R and go through metal gate and proceed along edge of field through second metal gate.

Cross field diagonally to toward the left, heading toward yellow post, go through metal gate and turn R.

Go through metal kissing gate with sign: "Advisory Notice. This path crosses a marsh which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, which remains wet all year."

Follow the path along the river. (The dry path along the hedge at the top of the hill unfortunately now ends at a private road).

The short, marshy section is where the brambles meet the river. There may be timbers to help you across the 16 metres of mud.

The Marsh (The Slough of Despond)

Bible verse: Psalm 40:1-3

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,

and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the Lord.

Background

At one time Christians who were neither Church of England nor Roman Catholic were called nonconformists.

In 1664 the nonconformist preacher John Bunyan began writing "Pilgrim's Progress" while he was in prison in Bedford for conducting unauthorized religious services.

At one time it was the second most popular book in England after the Bible and tells the story of a good man named Christian and his pilgrimage through life. He journeys to rid himself of his terrible burden, the weight of his sins, symbolized by a large, heavy backpack.

He is in deep despair and has lost hope in a marsh:

"This miry Slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore is it called the Slough of Despond: for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of

Written by the Student Christian Movement of India for World Water Day 2013:

Leader: Dear brothers and sisters, as many rivers merge together into the sea, we have come together to worship our God the fountain of living water. As we worship God in spirit and in truth, let our hearts overflow with praise, let us be cleanse by the waters of God's grace and forgiveness. Let us be refreshed and restored by Jesus Christ who promises us the waters of life through his resurrection.

Prayer of Adoration and Thanksgiving

With hearts welling up in praise for God the fountain of all goodness, let us adore the Lord. God of the deep ocean and the tiny brook, we praise you and adore you for the gift of water that sustains all life. At this time of worship we remember with thanksgiving the manifold manifestations of your grace through the gift of water:

Leader: We remember the waters of Masah and Meribah and

All: *We praise and thank you for you are the God of gracious provision*

Leader: We remember the healing waters of the pool of

Reflection

Ruth Allen, who writes about how nature can improve mental and physical wellbeing, said this:

“Ancient biblical tradition suggests that water wells, springs, oases, are also places of renewal, hospitality, and spiritual vision, where human beings see God and receive God’s blessing.”

Jesus said he is the living water and that we will never be thirsty. This well has never dried up and neither will God’s love for us.

Before the service, dip your finger in water from the Holy Well and make the sign of the cross on your forehead.

Act of Worship

John 7.37-39

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

them get together, and settle in this place; and this is the reason of the badness of this ground.”

Reflection

It is often when we are mired in periods of depression and hopelessness that we find the spiritual gift of grace. In the bog of fear and doubt, God sends a man called Help, who represents God’s grace.

Looking back on your own life, have there been low times when you felt God’s presence?

Go through metal gate and across a metal bridge.

Go through metal kissing gate and follow path ahead.

When you see power lines, head up the hill, keeping trees on left and power lines on right. As your approach these trees, you will pass a wooden Bunyan Trail signpost on your left.

Go through wood and metal kissing gate.

Go through wooden kissing gate and follow left side of field.

Turn L through metal kissing gate, cross over small wooden bridge and turn R

Go through metal kissing gate and follow path straight ahead.

Pass through 4 metal kissing gates and finally a wooden gate that leads to a dry path overlooking the Holywell Marsh which leads to the Holy well.

Holy Well

Bible Verses

Isaiah, 12.3

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

John 4.10

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

Revelation 21.6-7

Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Background

You are at the base of a limestone outcrop, with St Mary’s church on top of the cliff.

There are two springs along the footpath. A smaller upper spring which is at the same level as the path and is a popular watering spot for dogs. And the lower main spring which is surrounded by a protective arch. Neither have ever been known to dry or freeze

According to legend the well was visited by pilgrims during the Middle Ages, although I’ve not come across medieval records. It is said that medieval pilgrims thought that water from the Holy Well would cure eye ailments. More recently it has been used for baptisms in church and some people drink it.

According to Nick Mayhew-Smith, one of the authors of Britain’s Pilgrim Places, nuns used the holy water from Stevington’s well to treat the sick. The nuns, who were based three miles away at Harrold Priory, were given land in the 12th Century next to the church to set up a Hospice or pilgrim’s hospital. (Where the Manor House now stands). “The former hospital is a reminder of why people visited holy wells. As a place of miracles, they were dismissed by reformers as superstition, and their use banned. But they also provided a source of pure water for bathing, which would clean infections, and minerals such as iron content might help eye ailments. Whether or not one believes in their miraculous properties, holy wells were popular with good reason in the days before modern healthcare.”