

## **CHESTER/LICHFIELD PILGRIMAGE ROUTE PROJECT**

### **Recovering Pilgrimage for Health in body, mind and soul**

The last twenty years or so has seen a marked rise in the idea and practice of pilgrimage. There have been a large number of publications about sacred sites around the country. Old pilgrimage routes, such as the paths along the North Wales coast to Bardsey are being walked again and new pilgrimage routes, such as St Cuthbert's Way from Melrose to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, have been established.

Now plans are underway to create a new pilgrimage route of approximately 85 miles between the cathedral cities of Chester and Lichfield. Chester attracted pilgrims to the Holy Rood at St John's (the former cathedral) and to St Werburgh's shrine at the present cathedral. Lichfield was a popular destination for pilgrims as the shrine of St Chad, the Saxon saint who brought Christianity from Northumbria to the ancient kingdom of Mercia in the seventh century.

The proposed route from Chester will begin along the Shropshire Union Canal and proceed to Nantwich via Beeston Castle. The route will continue eastwards across the M6 via Apedale to the Saxon Cross at Stoke Minster in Stoke-on-Trent. From thence it will take a southerly direction via the Trentham Estate, Stone and Stafford before joining the Heart of England Way across Cannock Chase to Lichfield.

This project ties in with the new mood of enthusiasm for the active spirituality of pilgrimage in a way that is relevant to the contemporary context.

### **Connecting Medieval and Contemporary Pilgrimage**

Of Lichfield... *"The shrine of St Chad was a wooden coffin in the shape of a little house with an aperture in the side through which the devout can...take out some of the dust, which they put into water and give to sick cattle or men to drink, upon which they are presently eased of their infirmity and restored to health".* (Bede)

Of Stone... *The venerable queen (Ermenild, mother of Wulfad & Rufin) had a finely constructed church built of stones in the same place... After this, a multitude of the infirm and those suffering from diverse weaknesses and of others seeking God ... was accustomed to visit the place and to carry stones thither to the building. Whence that place is called Stanes."* (Hugh Candidus)

Pilgrimage was a major feature of life in medieval England. It is recorded that in the thirteenth century, so many pilgrims were visiting the shrine of St Chad at Lichfield that they disrupted the normal services.

Why did people go on pilgrimage? One of the main reasons, as the quotes above indicate, was to seek healing. Places like Lichfield and Stone became places of pilgrimage because of their association with a saint and because healing miracles were reported to have happened there. Obviously healing for specific ailments was often sought after, but there were also many able bodied pilgrims who would be seeking healing in a broader understanding of the term. Pilgrimage offered a time for reflection and the opportunity to seek resolution of troubling issues in their lives. They journeyed to heal the sickness of the soul and realign their lives with the purposes of God. For others the motivation would have been simply the appeal of something different and more adventurous than the daily grind and sameness of their lives. A pilgrimage was often the only time that a person left the confines of their own locality and had the opportunity to broaden their horizons.

This project will seek to apply these concepts in our present day. As medieval pilgrims journeyed to seek healing, even so modern day pilgrims on this route will have the opportunity to be resourced in various ways so that they can make a journey of discovery and reconnection and find health in body, mind and soul.

Here are some examples of how the project will seek to bring a life enhancing experience to walkers...

- There are frequent reports about the state of the nation's health and especially about obesity and its consequences. The project is partnering with the NHS Change4Life campaign and will link up with other initiatives that promote walking for health.
- When people are unable to make progress with their problems, they often describe themselves as "stuck". Frequently this is expressed in a literal way with the person stuck at home and reluctant to venture out. Most therapeutic models are fairly static (including the archetypal psychiatrist's couch) but a model which the project will explore is that of the walking counsellor, offering a holistic approach to helping people to literally find their way out of their difficulties as they make the journey.
- The Staffordshire Council magazine recently reported the clear improvement of a group of people with mental health issues from Uttoxeter who had climbed Snowdon together. The challenge of embarking on and then completing the pilgrimage route could be offered in a similar way to those seeking to help those with mental health issues.
- In Belgium a project called Oikoten has for some years organized pilgrimages for young offenders as an alternative to a short prison sentence. In the majority of cases, they have had a transformative experience and have resettled into society. See [http://jeffer-london.com/ultreia/eng/ultreia\\_pilgrimage\\_en.html](http://jeffer-london.com/ultreia/eng/ultreia_pilgrimage_en.html) We will explore ways in which this model could be successfully adapted for using in conjunction with the pilgrimage route.

- Mentoring, Life Coaching, Spiritual Direction and Soul Friendship are other ways that people seek guidance and wholeness for their lives. Again these are often practiced in the static context of a home or other meeting place. The project will encourage these activities to take place in the context of walking all or parts of the route.
- In our sceptical age, it is not easy to introduce the area of healing for physical ailments, but there could be creative ways of restoring what took place in the Middle Ages. It would be possible for some to walk and pray on their pilgrimage for a sick relative or friend. There is an organization called "Healing Rooms" that offers prayer in Stafford and Stone. Other churches or groups may be willing to offer their services to pilgrims which would be published in a guide.

### **Other Special Features**

- The footpath will be the first waymarked pilgrimage route in the area.
- The discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard near Lichfield has increased interest in Anglo-Saxon history from the time of St Chad and St Werburgh. The establishment of the route will provide further opportunities to highlight this period of England's history.
- As well as attracting pilgrims from UK and overseas, the project will be socially inclusive, such as seeking to provide special pilgrimage opportunities for those with mental health or addictions issues.
- Early pilgrimage was especially associated with storytelling, such as those told in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The path will include a story trail between Stoke and Stafford centred on Stone, whose foundational story of the Saxon princes Wulfad and Rufin also features St Chad and St Werburgh.
- The footpath will be a rich educational resource, providing a range of cross curricular opportunities and the chance for students to experience pilgrimage for themselves
- Most walking routes attract people aged 45 and over. This route will be set up in an innovative and contemporary fashion to attract a higher proportion of young adults.

### **Spiritual Tourism**

Spiritual or faith based tourism is one of the fastest growing segments in the travel industry. There has been a marked increase in the popularity of pilgrimage routes – in 1984 a mere 2,491 walked the famous Camino to Santiago in Spain but by 2006 the number of pilgrims was 100,377. 25% of the respondents to a survey by the Travel Industry Association are interested in spiritual vacations. This includes the restoration of old pilgrim routes. Creating this pilgrimage route would be likely to appeal to a wide public.

St Cuthbert's Way, a 65 mile footpath between Melrose and Lindisfarne set up in 1996, is an example of a successful pilgrimage route which has definitely had a positive impact on the local economy. In 1997, it received

the award for the greatest contribution to economic and social life from the Eastern Borders Development Association. 50% of B&B bookings in Wooler are from walkers on St Cuthbert's Way. Based on the success of that initiative another route – St Oswald's Way - has recently been opened in Northumbria. This new pilgrimage route will bring similar economic and cultural benefits to the local area, and will include improving access and interpretation of significant historical sites.

### **Plan of Action**

The intention is to open the footpath in 2012. In order to establish the footpath on a firm foundation it will be necessary to do the following...

- Seek funding for the project. The estimated cost to set up the pilgrimage route is £77,000.
- Route Planning & Access Issues - exploring the route using public footpaths wherever possible and negotiating with landowners where necessary.
- Consultation - meeting with a number of potentially interested parties along the route. such as local councils, schools & faith groups. Existing partnerships include both cathedrals, Visit Chester, Staffordshire Tourism, Staffordshire University and British Waterways.
- Research – visiting similar projects such as St Cuthbert's Way and St Olav's Way in Norway.
- Trialling pilgrimages with special groups.
- Producing a guide to the footpath.

### **Website leads for further information**

St Chad:

<http://www.stchadscathedral.org.uk/relics.php>

Legend of Stone Princes and sites on story trail:

<http://www.stchadsstafford.co.uk/page.asp?pid=60>

### **Contact**

The idea for the footpath is the brainchild of experienced long distance walker David Pott. The former head teacher has also been deeply involved in various reconciliation initiatives including leading the Lifeline Expedition, a response to the legacies of the Atlantic slave trade which has received widespread media attention. See [www.lifelineexpedition.co.uk/mota](http://www.lifelineexpedition.co.uk/mota)

For more information contact David Pott at [dlpott@gmail.com](mailto:dlpott@gmail.com) or by mobile phone 07932 790525