

A revival in pilgrimage is bringing the prospect of environmental and ecumenical opportunities to Canterbury and beyond

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A simple stone set just to the side of the main door into Canterbury Cathedral marks the start of the Via Francigena, an ancient pilgrim pathway which stretches through East Kent heading towards the coast, and then onwards to Rome. First recorded by Sigeric, an Archbishop of Canterbury who recorded his route to the holy city in 990AD, it's one of a number of medieval pathways that crisscross the county of Kent, making their way to, through and from Canterbury.

Although not as well-known as the Camino (also known as the Way of St James to Santiago de Compostela in Spain), the Via Francigena, like many pilgrim paths, is experiencing something of a revival - and not just among people of faith. Research by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) suggests that more than 330 million people – that's a third of tourists worldwide - are going on pilgrimage each year to key religious sites around the world. The Camino itself has grown from fewer than 5,000 pilgrims in 1991 to more than 277,000 pilgrims last year; it is forecast to grow to 464,000 by 2021.

In the UK too, Scotland in particular is seeing an upward trend in religious tourism. Six new pilgrim routes are currently under development, and the Church of Scotland's General Assembly voted a few weeks ago to revoke its 400-year-old prohibition on pilgrimage.

The growing numbers mean pilgrimage presents challenges as well as opportunities. There are the challenges brought about by the over-commercialisation of a route, but equally opportunities to encourage pilgrims, and the destinations that welcome them, to leave as light a footprint on the earth as

possible.

How to harness the potential positive impact of this growing trend has been the focus of recent activity in Canterbury. As the symbolic centre of the worldwide Anglican Communion, it is perhaps fitting that Canterbury was the location for the launch of a new five-year, €1.18 million European Union funded project to promote 'green' pilgrimage'. It is a project in which the Church of England's Diocese of Canterbury is now a partner, along with the local county council and other pilgrim places in the UK, Norway, Italy and Romania.

Experts from across Europe came to this emblematic city to share their experience of managing pilgrim sites and paths in sustainable ways, and to encourage faith representatives, business leaders and policy makers as to the benefits of sustainable, eco-friendly pilgrimage. These are 'green' values in their broadest sense, which include care for the environment, engagement with local products and services, and tolerance through welcome and hospitality.

Dr Stefano Dominioni, Director of the European Institute of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, which includes several certified pilgrim pathways, said at the meeting that it was critical to make the case to local and regional authorities that investing in these routes brings a number of positive consequences for the environment, as well as opportunities for new jobs or income. But he noted that the benefits of pilgrimage went far beyond the economy, with data confirming the positive exchanges that occurred between visitors and

communities

Indeed the Rt Revd Trevor Willmott, the Anglican Bishop of Dover has said that, 'Pilgrimage is not just about getting from A to B, but about the invitation to accept encounters; encounters with oneself, with others, with God and with the environment.' This openness to encounter others is particularly represented in an ecumenical collaboration between the Church of England's Diocese of Canterbury and the Catholic Shrine of St Augustine in Ramsgate. The relationship has seen the creation of a new pilgrim route called The Way Of St Augustine.

Walkable in either direction between Canterbury and Ramsgate, it mirrors the same journey St. Augustine would have made after having arrived on the shores of Thanet in AD 597 before going on to Canterbury, where he established a church and monastery. This month the Shrine opens its new welcome and visitor centre. As the recipients of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, they have been working hard to improve the visitor experience and to amplify the story of St. Augustine who first brought Christianity to southern England, as well as the fine nineteenth-century Pugin design of the church.

Sharing a mutual belief in the importance of allowing others to experience Christian heritage in a way that benefits not only the pilgrim but the environment and local community, the two Church organisations have worked together to create some novel partnerships around the route. These include involving a local canoe business to offer pilgrims the option to travel part of the route – as St. Augustine would – by boat. Or providing local and affordable accommodation through Champing; camping in a church.

It is hoped that the route will grow from strength to strength, enriching the pilgrim landscape of Kent, and offering more possibilities for those that 'step along the way', to experience local produce and hospitality to the benefit of the wider community.

So if 'green pilgrimage' is already happening in some form, why the need for the EU project at all? Representatives from the Church and local government would point out that participation on routes like the Way of St Augustine, and even to destinations like Walsingham are not nearly as popular as other religious sites found on the continent. However, they could be, given the right infrastructure, investment, and commitment from policy makers, communities and businesses.

What is needed now is learning. With Canterbury's engagement in the European project formalised, a series of exchanges and fact finding initiatives will take place between now and 2021, the purpose being to help areas like Kent discover best practice from others in order to help build sustainable pilgrimage in the UK.

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