

Pilgrims and Travellers: Ancient Routes from Winchester through the Itchen Valley to Alresford.

A talk given to the Worthies Local History Group by Bob Fowler and Brian Tippett

The two speakers worked together to give us some different perspectives on the pilgrim route through the Itchen Valley – one from an academic English Literature background, the other from an engineering background. The basis of the talk was to follow and critically analyse the route Hilaire Belloc took, and wrote about, in the early years of the twentieth century. Hilaire Belloc produced the book, *The Old Road* in which he detailed his ideas on the Pilgrim Way from Winchester to Farnham, the first half of the route from St. Swithun's shrine in Winchester to St. Thomas a Becket's in Canterbury.

Brian told us about the figure of Hilaire Belloc himself – French born, but educated in England and a naturalised Englishman, a prolific writer and great literary figure of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and a Roman Catholic. His driving force in trying to rediscover this route was his desire to recapture the pre-Reformation religious life of England. There was a surge in interest in pilgrimages in the Edwardian era and there were other books on the same subject, including Julia Cartwright's. His book took a more scientific and serious look at this particular route, although the speakers did not believe this had necessarily led him to take the correct ancient pathway.

From Belloc, we moved to the history of pilgrimages themselves. Most people's knowledge of the medieval pilgrim comes from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in which a band of pilgrims of all social classes and varied occupations, travel to Canterbury to see St. Thomas a Becket's tomb. Chaucer was right in the sense that pilgrims travelled for many different reasons (only some of them pious!): to ask a saint to help you, to show your commitment to your faith, to atone for sins, or perhaps as a kind of tourism. Pilgrimages were given ratings, according to difficulty. The saint's beautiful reliquary and/or shrine was often positioned prominently in the church or cathedral, and the bones or remains inside were the focus of the pilgrimages and prayers. St. Swithun's was a popular shrine in Winchester, and after 1170, when Thomas a Becket, Henry II's archbishop, was murdered in Canterbury, St. Thomas' became the most popular in England.

The Itchen Valley was one of the first parts of the path between these two places, but travellers passed through this valley from early, prehistoric times, over many centuries. There were East/West routes from Winchester and North/South routes which forded the River Itchen, although there is a very marshy area just west of Alresford which would have been impassable. The speakers told us about the Harrow Way, an ancient road from East Devon through to London, Canterbury and Dover. Roads from the Itchen Valley came north to meet it. There is also some evidence of a possible Roman road south of Alresford. Post-Roman there is little evidence for travel in the Itchen Valley, although it must have been used in the Saxon period, roads were laid down to assist the peripatetic kings and their courts and retinues.

After around 1200 the marshy area to the west of Alresford was tamed by Bishop de Lucy's new dam and weir, but before this time travellers must have had to head north via Abbotstone to travel onto London.

Bob and Brian then turned to Belloc's route. Belloc had his own logic about the route he thought the Pilgrim's Way went. He thought they always used East to West ridgeways and they chose the valley

because it reduced hill climbing and they would stay on the northern side of the river passing the churches as they did so. The route begins by leaving Winchester from the North Gate, visiting Hyde Abbey, the porch of Kings Worthy church, then essentially following the line of the B3047 through the Itchen Valley. Pilgrims would cross the river at Itchen Stoke, they would pass Ovington, cross the Tichborne and come into Alresford at the South West corner of the town. Belloc and his companion took a route parallel to the current Bypass. They stayed overnight in Alresford (or possibly in an inn called the Cricketers), and were visited the next day by the police – perhaps they had got into a bit of mischief the evening before!

Bob showed the audience a series of old maps, Pattersons 1785 Strip map Winchester to Alresford, Milne's 1791 map and the 1869 Ordnance Survey map, showing an old road to Alton, which turns north at Avington and on to Itchen Down Farm and Abbotstone, now ploughed out and no longer visible.

The speakers concluded that Belloc's route was probably impractical for the pilgrims and they might well have taken the route that turns north, not crossing the river at Itchen Stoke.

Thank you to Erica Wheeler for writing this review