

## Norfolk Long Distance Paths and Green Pilgrimage

I have been asked to consider Long Distance Paths (LDPs) and *Green Pilgrimage* in Norfolk, in the light of the current Walsingham Way project; and to explore if any of the existing LDPs lend themselves to development as *Green Pilgrimage Routes*. Sections **1.** to **3.** are straight forward. Section **4.** is more speculative. Finally, section **5.** identifies possible areas for future collaboration.

*Because of a multitude of hyperlinks this paper is best read on a digital device.*

### 1. The Walsingham Way

The recovery of [Walsingham](#) as a pilgrimage destination during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, after its suppression in the 16<sup>th</sup>C, was something of a surprise. Today, it is (probably) the most popular pilgrim destination in the U.K. A modern Walsingham Way for cyclists and walkers, approximating to the medieval route while avoiding the noise and danger of busy roads, will be welcome.

**1. i. Deep England Landscapes** - Norwich, has its own [pilgrimage destinations](#) – two cathedrals, Edith Cavell's grave, Mother Julian's cell and the site of the Lollards' Pit to name but four. It is a good starting point for the route (but see **3. i** below) and has sufficient public transport links to allow *green pilgrims* a small carbon footprint. The new Walsingham Way will be *green* in two senses, it will be easy on the environment and leads through the heart of a '*green and pleasant land*' (William Blake).

Blake's poem has the power to move thousands of English hearts when sung at Twickenham before home international matches. It draws on a myth that, the boy, Jesus of Nazareth, in the company with Joseph of Aramathea, walked over English hills and down English lanes. From cathedral city to country town, the route passes through quintessential *Deep England Landscapes* (see **4. iii.** below).

**1. ii. Cultural Route** - Similar *cultural routes*, following medieval pilgrim paths – most famously the [Way of St. James](#) - attract secular, as well as, religious pilgrims. (Find statistics [here](#).) Such routes can stimulate general tourism along their whole length. The cultural interpretation of a route, giving insights into the history and natural history, art, architecture and music, enhances the experience of pilgrims and benefits a wider audience.

**1. iii. Boosting Tourism** - When pilgrims extend their visit, rather than rushing to drive hundreds of miles there and back in the one day, they improve their chances of re-connecting with the rhythms of nature, the faith of former generations; and of

catching a glimpse of the mystery beyond. Pilgrims who prolong their visits, need accommodation, restaurants, cafes and shops. Longer stays boost tourism income! The Walsingham Way should bring benefits all round.

If this is the case, are there other opportunities for *Green Pilgrimage Routes* in Norfolk?

## **2. i. Other Pilgrimage Destinations**

Michael Schmoelz's, recently published, doctoral thesis, [Pilgrimage in Medieval East Anglia](#), identifies many Norfolk medieval shrines. The sheer volume of lesser shrines is surprising. Michael suggests that the high density of pilgrim places, particularly surrounding Norwich, arose from a need for *local pilgrimage destinations*! Holidays in medieval England were just that! Holy days and no more! Few had the luxury of several days to travel from Norwich to Walsingham and back, but Bawburgh, Bixley, Bracondale, Cringleford, Horstead and Hautbois, Lakenham, St.Stephen's, Norwich and Thorpe Hamlet were all within striking distance!

The author has made and led pilgrimages to several of the places listed and many are accessible from existing LDPs – [Bromholme](#) from the **Coastal Path**, [Great Hautbois](#) from the **Bure Valley Path**, Trimingham from the **Paston Way** and [Castle and West Acre](#) from the **Nar Valley Way**. Of these, Bromholme had the highest profile in medieval times but is an unlikely candidate to be developed as a significant pilgrim destination in 21<sup>st</sup> Century! And yet, [The Small Pilgrim Place Network](#) specialises in supporting similar sites.

**2.i. Shorter Pilgrimages ?** - Given that a shortage of time is still a practical concern in 21<sup>st</sup> Century, shorter pilgrimage routes following the pattern of circular walks from LDPs would be helpful.

## **3. Other Walsingham Ways**

There are several possibilities that could enable the rebranding, or partially rebranding, of existing LDPs (and cycle routes) as additional *Walsingham Ways*.

**3.i. From the East** - This would take the least work and entails a minimum of extra costs. Simply add the **Wherryman's Way** to the **Walsingham Way** and extend the route to the coast at Great Yarmouth. Like Norwich, Great Yarmouth has good public transport links. So, the carbon footprint remains appropriately low, while adding another dimension of *green* as the path traverses the Broads National Park.

The **Wherryman's Way** runs through, or close to, several nature reserves including: [The Berney Arms and Breydon Water Nature Reserve](#), Ted Ellis' [Wheatfen Broad Reserve](#), the [Mid-Yare National Nature Reserve](#) and [Surlingham Church Marsh](#); and includes some significant ecclesiastical heritage: the churches at [Reedham](#) and [Loddon](#), established in 7<sup>th</sup> century by St.Felix; Langley Abbey; and, a little church with the most wonderful Romanesque archway, the Churches Conservation Trust church at [Heckingham](#).

(Alternatively a route from Norwich to Great Yarmouth, on the **Wherryman's Way** and then on to Burgh Castle – the base from which St.Fursey evangelised Norfolk in 7<sup>th</sup> Century - [The St.Fursey Way](#) ?)

**3. ii. Wells to Walsingham** – In the medieval past, many pilgrims would have arrived by sea. Wells is the nearest port. Today's pilgrims like to visit the seaside (see **4. iii.** below). [Wells to Walsingham on foot, returning on the light railway](#), makes a great round trip ! (see **2. i.**)

**3. iii. From the south** - a way could be developed using the **Peddars' Way** and **North Coast Path**, into Wells where it connects with **3. ii.**

**3. iv. From the west**, a route from Kings Lynn to Castle Acre, using the **Nar Valley Way**, joining the **Peddars Way** and continuing as per **3. iii.**

However, extending the **Coastal Path** from Lynn to Hunstanton would be best of all!

**3. v. An Alternative Route from Norwich** could also be included. In medieval times, when the lowland routes were wet and boggy, a drier, longer, roundabout route, over sandy soil will have been attractive. A case could have been made for going north from Norwich, perhaps crossing the River Bure at Horstead to Hautbois – there was a hostel/hospital at Haurbois and Michael Schmoelz lists both as pilgrim destinations in their own right. This route continues through Felmingham to the Cromer Ridge (in essence [Faden's "Old Cromer Road"](#)) and thence west to Walsingham. No LDP covers this; but there is a route that approximates to it; from Norwich to Aylsham on the **Marriott's Way**, to Cromer on the **Weavers Way** and then west along the **Coastal Path**.

The paper might conclude here, save for the emergence of a new paradigm of pilgrimage!

#### **4. Pilgrimage as '*moving through nature*'**

The National Ecosystems Assessment 2011 (NEA) is a scholarly assessment of the value of ecosystems. It is [Chapter 16](#) - sections NEA 16.3.6.1, 16.3.6.2 and 16.3.6.3. - that, without using the phrase, shed light on *Green Pilgrimage*. The report notes the revival of pilgrimage in the UK, seen in an increase in footfall at cathedrals and great churches, but also in Coastal and Marine habitats (especially the islands of Bardsey, Iona and Lindisfarne). However, the paucity of quantitative research into pilgrimage in rural settings in the U.K. led the authors to include research findings from the Way of St. James. (I followed their lead in section **1. ii.** of this paper). The NEA's analysis identified, '*moving through nature*' as an emerging theme. Pilgrims on the Way of St. James rated this more important than the destination! To "get out in nature" headed a list of 12 motivations for making the pilgrimage." (NEA page 673).

Returning to my argument in section **1. iii.**, a day trip, visiting the built environment of the shrines at Walsingham or Santiago de Compostela, could easily miss out '*moving through nature*' and would be the poorer for that!

**4.i. Supporting evidence** - I know of no further quantitative research published since the NEA was prepared, but there is much that supports their conclusion.

**4. i. i.** The following organisations promote pilgrimage in terms of *moving through* - <http://britishpilgrimage.org/>, <http://www.journeying.co.uk/>, and <http://www.viabeata.co.uk/>.

**4. i. ii.** A similar approach also forms the bedrock of my own practice, as this [pilgrimage to Walsingham](#) illustrates.

**4. i. iii.** A recent seminar on [Landscape and Spirituality](#) held during the Broads' Outdoor Festival 2017. It revealed that encounters with nature were common ground for secular and religious participants.

**4. ii. Marine and Coastal habitats and liminality** - The Assessment's Key Findings (NEA page 637, para 3), make specific mention of the importance of Marine and Coastal habitats to a reviving pilgrimage tradition. The destinations the NEA identifies are all early monastic sites.

Following the traditions of the Desert Fathers, so called, "liminal places" were often chosen as bases by the pilgrim monks who brought the Christian faith to Great Britain and Ireland. Islands, promontories that jut out into the sea, caves and wells that reach

into the earth, high places that reach to the skies, river crossings, places of the dead and pre-Christian religious sites all provided a *gateway/threshold* (Latin - *limina*) into another dimension. Celtic Christianity defines such features in the landscape as *thin places*. Secular pilgrims often find such *thin places* as awe inspiring as their religious companions!

The NEA's examples - Iona, Lindisfarne and Bardsey - are all set in rocky coastal landscapes, unlike East Anglia's low-lying coasts and marshes. None-the-less, Norfolk has similar early Christian, island and coastal sites: Felix is remembered as the founder of the churches at [Reedham](#), Loddon and Babbingley (which were coastal in 7<sup>th</sup> C); St Fursey's base was Burgh Castle, like Reedham and Loddon on the shores of the Great Estuary; and Withburger has connections with Holkham. Further, St. Benet's Abbey, on Cow Holme can be compared with St. Aidan's monastery on Lindisfarne: both were established on tidal islands connected to the mainland by a causeway; both were said to have been abandoned and, then, re-established as Benedictine foundations after the Viking raids; both, in the experience of the author, are *thin places*; but the habitats surrounding them and the landscapes in which they are set are very different!

**4. iii. Habitats and Landscapes** - The NEA's main focus is on habitats, mine is on landscapes. Landscapes are formed as much by human activity as by nature. Trackways, Roman roads, turnpikes, canals, railways, modern roads; ceremonial and defensive earthworks, churches, castles and wayside inns; towns, villages and hamlets; deforestation, field systems, reclaimed marshes and broads all contribute to the mix. In spite of the NEA's preference for habitats, the category *Deep England Landscape* (see **1. i**) is suggested by the section that explores landscape and nationality (NEA 16.3.2.4 page 667 and in a paragraph at the beginning of page 674). In my experience, traversing a landscape formed over millennia, the pilgrim moves through *nature and history!*

**4. iv. Walsingham and the Sea** - Unlike Iona, Lindisfarne and Bardsey, Walsingham does not have a Coastal or Marine habitat (NEA 16.3.6.3). So much is obvious, but Walsingham does have links to the sea that go beyond the babbling brook that runs through the village.

**4. iv. i.** Our Lady of Walsingham is also known as *Stella Maris* - *Star of the Sea* ! She was the medieval *go-to* saint for those threatened by ship wreck and pilgrims arriving by sea would have disembarked at Wells before going on to the shrine.

**4. iv. ii.** Today's tourist industry naturally sees the nearby coast as something that adds to the *offer* and many pilgrims already enjoy a visit to the seaside! To cap the argument,

**4. iv. iii** my alternative *Walsingham Ways* (see **3. ii.** and following) use the coastal path and, once one has *taken on board* (pardon the pun!) the importance of the sea in the formation of English national identity (NEA page 667, para 4) and an understanding that the (liminal) path is as important as the destination, then the link is strong!

**4. v. Liminality and pilgrimage** – Pilgrimage is a liminal state (Betwixt & Between : Victor Turner) in which the pilgrim quests after a spiritual gain. There is a *before* and an *after*, for the duration of the pilgrimage, the pilgrim is excused the normal responsibilities of life.

Where a path proves more important than the destination, when it was "better" *for the pilgrim* "to travel than to arrive" (Robert Louis Stevenson), changing perceptions of what is liminal may provide an explanation. The experience of walking the edge - through wild places, along ridge ways, or a coastal path – are likely to bring an urban pilgrim (who may doubt the authenticity of the relics at the destination) nearer to *thin/liminal places/gateways/thresholds*, than a built environment in which they are very much at home. In the medieval world, monumental buildings were, in themselves, awe inspiring! They were few and far between, limited to church buildings and great men's palaces, but today great shopping malls (cathedrals of a consumer society!?) are common place. Much has changed.

**4. vi. Liminality and Norfolk LDPs** – A harmonious conjunction of elements plays an important role in creating a sense of liminality; *earth* and *air*, at high places; *earth*, *air* and *water*, on a marsh beneath a wide East Anglian sky. Sometimes the element of *fire/light* is overlooked, until the *liminal/magical* times of sunrise and sunset. In historical places the additional categories *then* and *now* and *life* and *death* come into play. So, [Thurne Mill at sunset](#), on the **Weavers Way**, beside the River Thurne becomes an icon illustrating the Broads Tourism strap-line *Britain's Magic Waterland* !

Norfolk's LDPs lead walkers/pilgrims through wetlands and marshes, along coasts and rivers, beneath wide-cloud-scudding-skies and through heritage rich landscapes. And, magically, there are some places on the **Coastal Path** where the sun sets into the western sea!

**4. vii. Liminality and the church in the landscape** – The practice of prayer at sunrise and sunset is common to many religions. Christianity imagines earth and heaven joined as one in the act of worship. Which makes a churchyard at evening time a particularly *thin/liminal place/gateway/threshold*, as is echoed in [Gray's Elegy in a Country Graveyard](#)! Attend a church service - maybe the regular [choral evensong, sung in Norwich Cathedral](#) (a tradition that goes back to before the Reformation), or [somewhere more humble](#) – to get the full effect!

Many of Norfolk's churches and shrines were deliberately sited in or adjacent to liminal places, including cemeteries – e.g. [North Elmham](#) and pre-Christian holy places - e.g. [Walsingham](#) (See Hogget, Morris and Williamson). Throughout the Broads National Park there are churches built in *high places*, overlooking rivers and marshes, some of which have a pre-Christian history – e.g. [Belaugh](#), [Haddiscoe](#), [Horning](#), [Ranworth](#). The same can be seen elsewhere in the county: the church at Downham Market is on a rise overlooking the Fens; St.John the Baptist, Old Lakenham on a steep escarpment above the Tas Valley. In both cases, the growth of towns around the churches masks their place in the landscape.

One can observe the pattern being repeated in [our own day](#). A seasonal example on the **North Norfolk Coastal Path**, occurs when the churches in Sheringham turn [Beeston Bump](#) into a *Calvary* on [Good Friday](#), by going in procession to set up a cross on the summit.

Churches and wayside shrines that first owed their position to liminal *features in the landscape*; themselves, become *features in the landscape* !

## **5. Collaboration beyond the Walsingham Way/s**

Regardless of whether any LDPs beyond the Walsingham Way, or Ways, are officially labelled as *Green Pilgrimage* routes, Norfolk is blessed with many significant landscapes through which *green pilgrims* move and *churches in the landscape* are an important feature.

**5. i. Partnership** – In researching this paper, I have been:

**5. i. i. Impressed, by the high quality of Norfolk Trails** support of Norfolk Tourism. Their Long Distance Paths and associated Circular Walks are well way-marked and well maintained. Their guides to the walks are clear and easy to understand and their Twitter presence outstanding.

**5. i. ii. Optimistic about Norwich Diocese'** improving support for Norfolk Tourism. The 630 medieval churches in its care are one of the county's unique selling points (USPs) and I am encouraged to see churches being valued by [Norfolk Tourism](#). It was not always the case! As I write, preparatory work is underway to float off the [Exploring Norfolk Churches](#) section of the Diocese's website into a more accessible, stand-alone, tourism focussed site. Alongside these improvements the Diocese can now supply embeddable, interactive maps, showing all the heritage churches, to third-party sites, or alternatively provide a live data feed if that would be more suitable.

**5. i. iii.** Proud to note that **Norwich Cathedral** has become Norfolk's **number one attraction on Trip Advisor** - without compromising its role as Mother Church of the Diocese and a house of prayer. Norwich Cathedral have also been at the forefront of commending and promoting pilgrimage in the region - enabling the [East Anglian Pilgrimage Network](#), pioneering [The Edith Cavell Trail](#) and hosting a [Seminar on Landscape and Spirituality](#).

**5. ii. Future Collaboration** - Allowing myself some crystal ball gazing, I imagined how future collaboration might benefit Norfolk Tourism.

**5. ii. i. Sharing data** - Norwich Diocese's data on open churches could be shared with Norfolk Trails. While a reciprocal arrangement showing Norfolk Trails on the Diocese's new tourism website could also be of mutual benefit.

**5. ii. ii. Might Norfolk Trails adopt the following walks?**

<https://pilgrimpathsandplaces.wordpress.com/norfolk-paths-and-places-2/church-walks-in-the-hempnall-group-of-parishes/> ,

<https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/files/8314/2105/5178/buresudechurchtrail.pdf>

**5. ii. iii.** Might we explore the possibility of producing guides to existing **LDPs and Circular Walks as *Green Pilgrimage Routes?*** Particularly for:

**5. ii. iii. i. The Weavers Way** - It passes through a deep, *Deep England Landscape*, and has links to characters woven into the fabric - part of the woof and warp - of English identity.

E.G. John of Gaunt, his speech, in Shakespeare's Richard III, gives us:

*This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,*

*Against the envy of less happier lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.*

The knights, Sir Thomas Erpingham and Simon de Felbrigg, were both among the *happy few* at Agincourt. Another of Shakespeare's speeches, Henry V's before the battle, still stirs English hearts!

Gaunt, Felbrigg and Erpingham all built, or added towers to, churches along the Weavers Way. As did Sir John Falstaff (see Henry IV), who built an aisle and was buried in St. Benet's Abbey.

Add in, Anne Boleyn, born at Blickling and the brave lifeboat man, Coxen Blogg of Cromer, and you have a rich mix. (I have made a tentative start at <https://pilgrimpathsandplaces.wordpress.com/weavers-way-spiritual-tasting-notes/>)

**5. ii. iii. ii. The Coastal Path** also has possibilities – liminal and littoral environments were, and remain, great spiritual resources.

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18<sup>th</sup> January 2018