

**The Pilgrims' Way Revisited:
The use of the North Downs main
trackway and the Medway crossings
by medieval travellers**

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Introduction

Popular notions that the trackway that skirts the southern edge of the North Downs once served as the principal thoroughfare for pilgrims travelling to Becket's shrine at Canterbury are commonplace. However, by the latter half of the last century, the predominant view amongst those with more than a passing interest in the North Downs trackways, was that whilst there was evidence to suggest that much of the Pilgrims' Way follows the course of an ancient prehistoric trackway, it was far less evident that it had been used as a route of medieval pilgrimage.

A reassessment of how we view the usage of the North Downs trackways and in particular a re-examination of the possibility of their use by medieval travellers enroute to Canterbury or the Channel coast, may help us reappraise the Victorian and Edwardian antiquarians. In doing so, it may allow us to place the work of pilgrimist writers such as Albert Way, Julia Cartwright and Hilaire Belloc in a more realistic context.

Part I deals with options facing medieval travellers in relation to crossing the River Medway. The river valley known as the Medway gap is significant because it serves as a focus for revisiting a number of arguments regarding the convergence of routes from London and the west of the country; the options such routes presented for medieval travellers and their likely responses to these options.

In reassessing the use of the North Downs trackways by medieval travellers, reference is made to more recent research undertaken by Patrick Thornhill regarding the Medway's geological features in relation to the changing characteristics of the Medway crossings over time.¹ In addition the article also takes a number of additional factors into consideration. These include a re-examination of the arguments purporting difficulties of travel using the North Downs trackways east of the Medway and takes into consideration (i) the risk of highway crime and (ii) the difficulties associated with the right to travel and (iii) suspicion of those that travelled in feudal society. Finally the article provides a re-examination of the actual distances involved. The combination of these factors is shown to be a key determinant as to why medieval travellers may have favoured one route rather than another. It is this decision as to which route medieval travellers would choose that the author has termed 'the Paddlesworth choice'.

Part II of this article argues that an assessment needs to be made of the actual numbers of the population eligible to undertake an extended pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. By working backwards from Ben Nilson's and Frank Elliston-Erwood's work regarding offerings at Beckett's shrine combined with working forward from Domesday statistics, taking account of geographic location and social class, a much more realistic estimate of the numbers of medieval travellers that may have chosen to use the North Downs trackways can be arrived at.

¹ Thornhill Patrick, 'The Medway Crossings of the Pilgrims Way'; *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 89, 1974.

Part I - The Paddlesworth Choice

It is generally accepted, as both Ivan Margary and Oliver Rackham do, that prehistoric travellers journeyed along the North Downs trackways and that it was an important main trackway.² Without recourse to maps, way-markers or modern navigation aids, early travellers could follow these trackways along the chalk escarpment on the southern edge of the North Downs. Such paths may have originally been the preserve of wild animals and later followed by ancient man as he hunted in their tracks.³ Today's walker can follow the North Downs Way and anyone who has walked the National Trail will know from experience that at the start of each morning one can survey the day's journey that lies ahead, simply by observing the span of the North Down's ridge stretched out before one.

Ancient trackways such as these followed the chalk ridges or ran along the sides and tops of valleys. According to Valerie Belsey, such tracks probably made up the five principal prehistoric routes across England believed to date from before 2000 BC. These are: (i) the Harroway; (ii) the Ridgeway; (iii) the Icknield Way (iv) the South Downs Ridgeway and (v) the North Downs Ridgeway.⁴ These routes evolved, not only because their geological qualities offered good drainage; firm ground underfoot and relative ease of passage, but also for the very reason that due to their natural and recognisable characteristics they served as obvious navigation aids.

To the south of the chalk escarpment another geographical feature influenced the route taken by early travellers. Here was to be found the vast expanse of the Weald or forest of Kent and Sussex that lay to the south of the North Downs chalk escarpment. For the prehistoric traveller the Weald presented itself as an unknown wilderness. This huge tract of wilderness and woodland followed the southern flank of the North Downs for 90 miles between Lympne in the east of Kent through to Petersfield in east Hampshire. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded that this wood was known as Andredesleag and it continued to be known as Andredswald up until 1018.⁵ The stated size of the Saxon Weald was 120 miles long and 30 miles broad, which according to Peter Brandon would have 'extended it westwards across Hampshire into the New Forest'.⁶

Until recently the prevailing view had been that the Andredswald was a fairly impenetrable forest. Mark Anthony Lower informed his readers in 1870 that Bede described 'the whole of Anderida as all but inaccessible, and the resort of large herds of deer, and of wolves and wild boar',⁷ but current research suggests that the Wealden area was more similar to 'wood pasture than a solid block of impenetrable woodland'.⁸ Nevertheless, the Weald still presented numerous difficulties for the early traveller, which undoubtedly made the geographic and geological features of the chalk scarp an obvious choice of passage for those travelling across southern England from or to the west.

There are four breaches in the North Downs' escarpment, each the product of river erosion that formed the valleys of the Wey, Mole, Medway and the Stour as they cut paths through the soft chalk downland. It is the breach in the downs carved by the river Medway, known as the Medway gap, which presents the largest natural obstacle for any traveller following the trackways running along the chalk scarp between the Surrey Hills and Folkestone.

The description of the North Downs trackways in the plural is deliberate. As Rackham informs us, travellers using such ridgeways could choose between the upper or lower 'ways', depending upon the weather and the season. For this reason these routes along the chalk scarps evolved as both ridge ways and terrace ways, often running in parallel. The Trottiscliffe to Snodland stretch of the Pilgrims' Way, offers both extensive sections of ridge way and terrace way. This stretch passes very close to the ancient Neolithic megaliths known as the Coldrum Stones, which lie about 200 metres to the south of the trackway, just after the village of Trottiscliffe. From here the Pilgrims' Way starts its approach towards

² Margary Ivan – see 'The North Downs Main Trackway and the Pilgrims' Way', *Archaeological Journal* volume CIX; p.40 and Rackham – see *The Illustrated History of the Countryside*; first published 1994, this ed' Phoenix 1997.

³ Belsey Valerie, *The Green Lanes of England*, Green Books Ltd, 1998, p.30. Belsey suggests that the Pilgrims Way and the Icknield Way date back to the time when man the hunter first followed the tracks of wild animals.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.32.

⁵ Brandon Peter, *The Kent and Sussex Weald*, Phillimore 2003; p.43-43.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.44.

⁷ Lower Mark Anthony, *History of Sussex Vol 1*, London John Russell Mith, 1870, p.22.

⁸ Bannister Nicola Dr, *The Cultural Heritage of woodlands in the South East*, South East AONB's Woodlands Programme, October 2007, p.7

the Medway valley, and begins a gradual curve in a north easterly arc following the west bank of the Medway Gap towards Rochester.

The approach into the River Medway is described by Hillaire Belloc in *The Old Road* and is an excellent way to explore the Medway Gap on foot and check out Belloc's favoured river crossing at Snodland.⁹ The first mile due east from the Trosley Country Park car-park follows the upper ridge path, which is marked in gothic typeface as the course of a trackway on current OS Explorer Ordnance Survey maps. After a mile, take a turning right and descend down to the lower terrace way via a hollow-way, eventually emerging at the field line just above the Coldrum Stones. Continue due east along the terrace way at the foot of the escarpment for a further two miles before leaving this lower trackway and turning right across a field following a farm track, towards Paddlesworth Farm.

The track leading from the Pilgrims' Way to Paddlesworth farm is shown on an 1845 tithe map of Paddlesworth as running between Hackett's & Upper Danvil Field and North Field to Paddlesworth Farm. A survey commissioned by Thomas Wotton of his land in 1559 refers to this connecting trackway as the 'Kings Highway'.¹⁰ A further point to note is that Rev. C. H. Fielding in his *Memories of Malling and its Valley* (1893) includes a map that appears to have been drawn by A F Bowker, CE.; F.R.G.S.¹¹ This map is noteworthy because it shows the Paddlesworth Road as directly following the course of the Kings Highway to join the Pilgrims' Way rather than continuing west of Paddlesworth farm to the junction with the Stangate Road and Birling Hill as it does today. As such this suggests that the Paddlesworth Road once served as a continuous thoroughfare linking the Pilgrims' Way with the river crossing at Snodland.

The Pilgrims' Way approach into the Medway valley follows along the foot of the south facing chalk escarpment, at a height that is just a few metres above the cultivated fields of the vale. For the next few miles this track displays all the signs of a classic chalk and flint terrace way. Julia Cartwright, in her book entitled *The Pilgrims' Way from Winchester to Canterbury* (1895), captures the view from the Pilgrims' Way as it approaches the Medway Gap, when she describes how it:

"...continues its course over Wrotham Hill and along the side of the chalk downs. This part of the track is a good bridle road, with low grass banks or else hedges on either side, and commands fine views over the rich Kentish plains, the broad valley of the Medway, and the hills on the opposite shore".¹²

Walking the route today, shelter from the elements is provided by a canopy of foliage that lines the trackway. Ivan Margary, the leading historian of ancient British roads, makes the point that 'the southward facing escarpment causes the terrace way at its foot to be very hot in summer, when movement along the Ridgway would have been preferred'.¹³ Margary also refers to problems associated with the ridge of the downs being capped with deposits of clay-with-flints and as such suggests that the terrace way would be preferable, especially in winter, so as to avoid a summit that became 'very wet and sticky in rainy weather'.¹⁴ Given these considerations the sheltered terrace way in winter has an appeal and logic, with which it is hard fault. Nevertheless for today's walker, in the height of summer the terrace way is cloaked with a welcome cover of foliage providing plenty of shade.

However this section of the trackway may not always have been so shaded. Jusserand informs us in his work 'English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages' that in 1285, Edward I introduced legislation that

⁹ Belloc Hilaire, *The Old Road*; first pub' 1904; this ed' Constable & Co 1921, Illustrated by William Hyde, p.253 (Moreover, Belloc discusses the crossing of the Medway in the Wrotham to Boxley section p.231-255).

¹⁰ British Library Manuscript Add: 42715. Vol. 1. *Surveys*, made 1557-1560 (with later additions at the ends. of some of the sections) in connection with the disgavelling of the estates of Sir Edward Wotton (to whom Thomas Wotton had succeeded at the. time of the survey) in consequence of a private Act of Parliament.

¹¹ Rev. C. H. Fielding, *Memories of Malling and its Valley* (West Malling, 1893); also a modern reprint in 1997). Information regarding the *Wotton Survey* and *Memories of Malling* kindly provided by Dr Andrew Ashbee at the Snodland Museum.

¹² Cartwright Julia, *The Pilgrims' Way – from Winchester to Canterbury*; first published in GB 1895; this ed' 1911 John Murray, illustrated by A H Hallam Murray with 8 colour plates n; Julia Cartwright was also a novelist writing under the name of Mrs. Henry Ady, p.137.

¹³ Margary Ivan D, *The North Downs Main Trackway and the Pilgrims' Way*; Archaeological Journal volume CIX; p.40.

¹⁴ Ibid p.40.

decreed the edges of highways should be clear and there should neither remain ‘coppice nor brushwood nor hollow nor ditch which might serve as a shelter for malefactors’.¹⁵ Today, in the summer months the benefit of the shaded terrace way is very evident and is noticeably missed where there are breaks in the shade or if one has to leave the trackway to strike out across open fields, as at Paddlesworth, with reflective chalky soils underfoot. If the Pilgrims’ Way was used as a medieval thoroughfare to any great extent, then this present protection from the elements may not have always been evident.

A change of dates upon which Thomas Becket’s death was celebrated occurred in the early 13th century. Originally the key date was naturally the anniversary of his martyrdom, which fell in the winter on the 29th December 1170. However following the translation of Becket’s relics on 7th July 1220, it would appear from the work of Dean Stanley that the latter became more frequented.¹⁶ Obviously this date would make the passage by pilgrims to Canterbury much easier than travelling in the winter months. As such any shade along this section would have been welcome. However encouraging mass pilgrimage in July, even once account is taken of the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, seems somewhat at odds with the labour requirements of a primarily medieval rural economy, with second ploughing, sheep shearing and hay making taking place in June and July. This begs the question as to which members of medieval society were actually able to leave the manor to embark on any form of extended pilgrimage.

Those of the opinion that medieval pilgrims seldom used the North Downs trackways, re-assert their arguments with vigour, with regard to the pilgrimage route east of Rochester. Critics of Pilgrims’ Way theories tend toward the view that between the Medway and Canterbury, the Roman road, known by the Middle Ages as Watling Street would have been a traveller’s route of choice.

Certainly, Roman roads remained a key part of England’s road network throughout the middle ages. Hindle, in *Medieval Roads* (1989) informs us that there were 8,000-10,000 miles of Roman road built by AD 150 that provided a basic network and that very few new roads were built in the medieval period. The evidence of the Gough Map includes about 3,000 miles of main roads by 1360.¹⁷ Medieval roads also had a different character than Roman roads, is as much as Hindle states, ‘the road was not a physical entity’. Instead it was a right of way, which would diverge and deviate onto new routes as and when conditions underfoot required.¹⁸

Therefore a recurring theme in the story of the Pilgrims’ Way and pilgrimage is the question as to why medieval pilgrims would choose the North Downs trackways in preference to the Roman roads that made up so much of the medieval road network. As Jusserand reminds us:

“There was in England a very considerable network of roads, the principal of which dated as far back as the Roman times”.¹⁹

The argument in favour of pilgrims using the Roman road network is developed in an essay by E G Crump (1936) in his criticism of both Brayley (1850) and Albert Way’s (1855) enthusiasm for the Pilgrims’ Way. Edward Brayley claimed to have discovered a portion of the trackway crossing the parish of Albury and wrote that ‘the ancient path called the pilgrims way, which led from the city of Winchester to Canterbury, crosses this parish, and is said to have been much used in former times’ (author’s emphasis).²⁰ Crump’s scepticism of Brayley’s assertion turns to open disagreement when he considers Albert Way’s hypothesis, which Crump argues extended what he saw as the misconstrued theory of the North Downs pilgrimage route east of the Medway. Of Albert Way, Crump writes:

“And yet to him, and to no other, is due the great discovery that the Pilgrims’ Way did not go to Strood, but crossed the river Medway and took its course along the slope of the downs to Charing and thence to Canterbury.”²¹

¹⁵ Jusserand J J, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*; first pub’ 1888, this ed’ T Fisher Unwin 1909, *Chapter III Security of the Roads* p.151.

¹⁶ Stanley Arthur P, D.D. (Dean), *Historical Memorials of Canterbury*, published 1912 includes essays written by Dean Stanley in 1854 in 1855 p.210-211.

¹⁷ Mortimer Ian, *The Time Travellers Guide to Medieval England*, Vintage Books 2009, p.125.

¹⁸ Hindle, Brian Paul, *Medieval Roads*, Shire Archaeology 1982, this ed’ 1989, p6-7

¹⁹ Jusserand, *Op cit*, p36

²⁰ Brayley Edward, *Topographical History of Surrey*, quoted by C G Crump; *History*, quarterly June 1936 p.24.

²¹ Crump C G, *History*, quarterly June 1936 p.25.

Crump's view of the theories expressed by both Brayley and Albert Way is very apparent from his comments as follows:

"If he had gone further (referring to Brayley's statement in 1850), and surmised that it had once been used by pilgrims from Winchester to Rochester, whence the pilgrims could easily reach Canterbury, it would have been fantastic, but perhaps not absurd".²²

Whilst Crump falls short of ridiculing of Brayley's contention about the pilgrimage route, it is fairly obvious that he viewed Albert Way's extension of the Pilgrims' Way due east of the Medway and along the North Downs scarp, with incredulity. Robert H Goodsall, who lived close to the trackway at Stede Hill overlooking Harrietsham, which as it happens is situated on that part of the Pilgrims' Way east of the Medway, summarised the theme of the detractors when he wrote:

'... that there is a good deal of evidence of a negative kind to disprove its use by pilgrims, at all events from the Medway crossing to Canterbury'.²³



Terrace-way, Pilgrims' Way near Trottiscliffe approach to Medway Gap

²² *Ibid*, p.25.

²³ Goodsall Robert H, *The Ancient Road to Canterbury – A Progress through Kent*; first published 1960 (subscription edition 1959), this edition 1960, p3.



Paddlesworth Farm, Paddlesworth Road looking towards Snodland

Goodsall, in *The Ancient Road to Canterbury* (1955) concedes that, whilst the part of the trackway lying across the western portion of the county may have been used as a pilgrimage route, he repeats the doubts expressed as to whether pilgrims would have continued along the southern flank of the downs. Whilst suggesting that the trackway east of the Medway may well have been used as a long distance route for the purpose of transporting chalk from the many chalk pits found along the southern flank of the downs, he nevertheless doubts its use as a thoroughfare for pilgrims. Goodsall argues that:

‘from the Surrey Kent boundary to Snodland on the Medway, may have been used by Pilgrims coming from the west of England and the shires, but on reaching the latter point, it is far more likely that they would have continued via the trackway which led to Strood and Rochester, crossed over Rochester bridge and journeyed along Watling Street to Canterbury, so joining the main stream of pilgrims coming from the north’.²⁴

According to Goodsall, one of the reasons why pilgrims would spurn the southern flank of the downs in favour of Watling Street is because the villages along the way lie:

‘well south of the downland foot, often at a distance of a quarter to half a mile, and weary pilgrims, seeking a night’s shelter, would hardly have welcomed the extra toil in reaching them’.²⁵

However there may have been very good reasons why many medieval travellers may have preferred a route that did not pass directly through areas of population. Such reasons may have included problems associated with freedom of movement in a feudal society as well as a greater threat of crime on the main thoroughfares. As Diana Webb notes in *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (2000), ‘whenever they could, pilgrims used well worn tracks which were passable and as secure as possible’.²⁶ Jack Ravensdale (1989), explores the route taken by Chaucer’s pilgrims, primarily along Watling Street, and makes the point that ‘in places, however, there were also ancient, often prehistoric trackways which pilgrims might take when they seemed safer or easier than Watling Street’.²⁷ It is noteworthy that Shakespeare built a sub-plot in *Henry IV* around Falstaff’s plans to rob pilgrims on the Gads Hill approach to Rochester. Chaucer also alludes to the threat of robbery on Watling Street at Boughton Hill. Other commentators

²⁴ *ibid*, p4

²⁵ *ibid* p.4

²⁶ Webb Diana, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, Hambledon and London 2000, p.221.

²⁷ Ravensdale Jack, *In the Steps of Chaucer’s Pilgrims*, Guild Publishing 1989, p.19.

have pointed to the fact that immense pressure could be asserted by sheriffs upon villeins in their roll as tithing men at the local level to ensure that culprits were found in cases of wrong doing. This would often result in the apprehension of strangers whenever a local crime was committed. Ian Mortimer (2009) in his book, 'The Time Travellers Guide to Medieval England' draws on Summerson's 'Structure of Law Enforcement', when he states that:

'If you begin to look at those indicted for serious crime, it soon becomes apparent that many of them are strangers. In some places as many as thirty per cent of all suspected murderers and thieves are described as vagrants'.²⁸

Throughout the middle ages there are numerous attempts by monarchs to enact legislation to prohibit the lower ranks in feudal society from leaving the land and taking to the roads. Jusserand informs us that the Commons of the Good Parliament in 1376 renewed prohibitions against going out of a man's 'own district'.²⁹ In 1388-89 statute was enacted in response to labour shortages and vagabondage, which forbade movement by people who served and laboured without testimonial letters justifying their movements. Diana Webb quotes from a Statute of the Realm, under Richard II, which stated:

'no servant or labourer, be he man or woman, shall depart at the end of his Term out of the Hundred, Rape or Wapentake where he is dwelling, to serve or dwell elsewhere, or by Colour to go from there in Pilgrimage, unless he bring a Letter Patent containing the cause of going and the Time of his return, if he ought to return, under the King's Seal'.³⁰

It would appear that those from the lower ranks in society did face the risk when travelling of being mistaken for peasants out of bond. Jusserand noted that during the 14th century, laws existed to prohibit the villein leaving his masters domain without special licence and argues that 'escaped peasants brought the most numerous recruits to the wandering class'.³¹ The ancient trackway along the North Downs, which passes just above all the spring line villages but not through them, may therefore have offered a safer as well as more discreet alternative for many medieval travellers enroute to Canterbury.

Finally, recent arguments have been put forward to suggest that Duke William's conquest of Kent in 1066 and his army's subsequent passage to London followed the terrace way along the side of the North Downs rather than marching up Watling Street and crossing the Medway at Rochester. The hypothesis for this is based upon an 'unexplained decrease in the fiscal value of certain manors as set out in the Domesday Book'.³² So despite the view that the route presented difficulties for small groups of pilgrims, it would appear to some that it presented less of a problem for an invading army. Similarly, Nigel Nicholson suggests that in AD 43 the Roman Army advanced on a broad front that incorporated the North Downs from the line of Watling Street to the north and the Pilgrims' Way along the southern edge of the Downs.

However, notwithstanding the above arguments, it is clear that there is a body of opinion that holds the view that pilgrims would not have opted for the what has been described as the 'more laborious route' along the Pilgrims' Way as an alternative to using the old Roman Road between Rochester to Canterbury. As such the critics of the North Downs route point to the fact that Watling Street takes a straight continuous course between Rochester and Canterbury, as opposed to deviating south along the Medway Valley; then east along the foot of north downs escarpment; then back up in a north easterly direction along the west bank of the Stour valley, only to rejoin Watling Street within a mile or so of Canterbury.

Even Julia Cartwright, one of the first in the pilgrimist tradition, was prepared to lose a few pilgrims to the Watling Street route when she said some "might, if they pleased, go on to Rochester, three miles higher up, and join the London pilgrims along the Watling Street to Canterbury – the route of Chaucer's pilgrimage".³³

²⁸ Mortimer Ian, *The Time Travellers Guide to Medieval England*: Vintage 2009, p.223. Mortimer's summation of Summerson's findings in 'Structure of Law Enforcement', p.326.

²⁹ Jusserand J J, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*; first pub' 1888, this ed' T Fisher Unwin 1909. p.261.

³⁰ Webb Diana, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*; Hambledon and London 2000, p.231.

³¹ Jusserand J J, *Op cit*.256 -258.

³² Lawson and Killingray (ed), *An Historical Atlas of Kent*; @ Kent Archaeological Society, published by Phillimore 2004, Chapter 14 Guy Banyard p.34.

³³ Cartwright Julia, *The Pilgrims' Way – from Winchester to Canterbury*; first published in GB 1895; this ed' 1911 John Murray, illustrated by A H Hallam Murray with 8 colour plates n; Julia Cartwright was also a novelist writing under the name of Mrs Henry Ady, p.141.

It would appear that Cartwright is in fact merely restating the thoughts of Captain E R James, when he wrote in 1871:

‘But it will be well to state that on arriving at Cuxton, in Kent, the difficulty of crossing the River Medway would induce many to continue their journey about three miles down the river to Rochester, where they would fall into the stream of Pilgrims going to Canterbury by the old Roman Road Watling Street, known as Chaucer’s route from the tabard at Southwark; and this would be the easiest way to those who were wise enough to choose it’.³⁴

The choice of Watling Street or Pilgrims’ Way also concerned Elliston-Erwood in the revised second edition (1923) and largely rewritten version of his original *The Pilgrims’ Road* (1910). In his chapter that addresses pilgrimage and its prevalence Elliston-Erwood notes that:

‘Chaucer’s pilgrims – who form the basis of the popular pilgrim notion – are taken as typical, yet they did not follow the alleged pilgrim route: they came from London along the old Watling Street.’³⁵

Erwood, a one time pilgrimist, before committing a self confessed volte-face with regard to the claims of the Pilgrims’ Way being a key route of medieval pilgrimage, felt compelled to confess to his readers that his early enthusiasm for all things medieval had led him ‘into accepting things that never should have been accepted without much more enquiry than I gave to them’.³⁶

Again in William Coles Finch’s *In Kentish Pilgrim Land* (1925), it is suggested that the way was ‘traversed by large numbers of devout pilgrims because of its historic and religious associations’. But Coles Finch also argues that:

‘by far the greater number from other parts, including London, traversed the Roman road, familiarly known as Watling Street, of Chaucer’s pilgrims’ fame, and kept to it throughout the whole journey to Canterbury, for it was more direct, and offered more comfortable conditions of travel and companionship than did the Pilgrims Way’.³⁷

Whilst Coles Finch, unlike Goodsall or even Cartwright, does not actually suggest that pilgrims from the west of England would have necessarily transferred from the Pilgrims’ Way onto Watling Street, he does imply that the Roman road held distinct advantages in terms of directness and was associated with more comfortable conditions of travel.

Finally, Albert Way’s essay ‘The Pilgrims Path or Path towards the Shrine’, referred to by Dean Stanley in lectures given at Canterbury and published in Stanley’s *Historical Memorials of Canterbury* - Appendix Note D in 1855, made reference to the original ancient track that:

‘...proceeded along the high ground on the west of the river Medway, towards Strood and Watling Street. This might have been reasonable to suppose, the more convenient mode of pursuing the remainder of the journey to Canterbury.’³⁸

Yet, Albert Way goes on to outline a theory that is was ‘more probable that the Pilgrims’ Way crossed the pasture of the Medway, either at Snodland or Lower Halling’, whilst also suggesting that Watling Street for many might present the more convenient route to Canterbury.

Nevertheless these views needs to be considered more closely in the context of alternative Medway crossing points upstream from Rochester as well as key pilgrimage sites, such as Boxley Abbey situated close to the North Downs trackway east of the Medway Gap. Furthermore travellers’ concerns regarding safety and security on Watling Street and the London to Canterbury routes may well have led many to opt for the North Downs route along the ancient trackway for the reasons outlined above. Moreover

³⁴ Captain E R James, ‘*Notes on the Pilgrims’ Way in West Surrey*’ London, Edward Stanford, 1871, p.21

³⁵ Elliston-Erwood FC, *The Pilgrims Road*, first ed’ 1910, this revised ed’ 1923, The Homeland Association, p.31.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.9.

³⁷ Finch William Coles, *In Kentish Pilgrims Land*, First pub 1925, this ed’ 1925, The C W Daniel Company, p.81-82.

³⁸ Stanley Arthur P D.D. (Dean) *Historical Memorials of Canterbury*; first pub 1855, this new edition published 1912 includes essays written by Dean Stanley in 1854 and 1855 and Albert Way’s essay in Note D of Appendix entitled *The Pilgrims Way or Path towards the Shrine of St Thomas of Canterbury* published in 1855.

difficulties associated with the ease of travel; freedom of movement and the practice of hue and cry in medieval society may also have led travellers to opt for the more secluded trackway along the downs, by-passing the spring line villages unless so desired.

Finally, closer examination of the actual distances involved shows that the North Downs trackway was not necessarily a less laborious route compared with Watling Street, as Crump and Goodsall suggest. Those approaching the Medway Gap from the west of the country would have to make their choice of crossing at or around Paddlesworth. The distance from this point, which the author has set where the Pilgrims' Way crosses Birling Hill, to the upper crossing at Snodland is 2.2 miles. The distance from Paddlesworth to Rochester Bridge is 6.2 miles. The journey from Snodland to Canterbury using the North Downs trackway is 33.5 miles, whereas the journey from the Rochester Bridge along Watling Street to Canterbury is 27 miles. Therefore a traveller deciding at Paddlesworth whether to take the Watling Street or the North Downs trackway to Canterbury would have the choice of a 33.2 mile journey via Rochester and Watling Street or a 35.7 mile journey via the Snodland causeway and the North Downs Trackway. The latter route using the Pilgrims' Way is in fact only 2.5 miles longer than the less laborious Watling Street. Distance may not therefore have been the primary consideration when making the Paddlesworth choice. This equates to approximately an additional hours walking or approximately and additional 30 minutes each day.

An estimation of the distance that pilgrims on foot could cover has been made by Diana Webb, in *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (2000), in which she states:

'Although probably less well-shod and well nourished than the modern day recreational walker, the medieval pilgrim may have been hardier and more accustomed to walking in his daily routine, so it does not seem unreasonable to assume that some at least could average between two and three miles an hour over such a path, as a modern day walker will, depending on the state of the going, the energy and fitness level of the individual and the amount of time taken for rest and refreshment'.³⁹

Webb's assessment is based upon walking through the Kings Wood section of the Pilgrims' Way, which is approximately 7 miles from Canterbury. The inclusion of Kings Wood in the Pilgrims' Way story owes much to the Rev. W. Pearson, who in the mid-nineteenth century informed Albert Way that an ancient track known as the Pilgrims' Road ran above and parallel with the Ashford and Canterbury turnpike road.⁴⁰

This stretch of the way is usually rutted and muddy throughout the best part of the year. Observations from organising walking holidays along this section of the Pilgrims' Way over a period of seven years concur with Diana Webb's view of the distance that could be covered by a traveller on foot. Therefore if a medieval traveller walked at a pace of 3 miles an hour for approximately 5 - 6 hours day, they would complete the journey between Paddlesworth and Canterbury in just two days with only one overnight stop. Moreover they would by-pass most of the spring line villages at the bottom of the scarp by keeping to the North Downs trackway.

In giving further consideration to the route taken by pilgrims east of the river Medway it is useful to divide travellers into two distinct groups for the purpose of assessing why some would choose the trackway along the edge of the Downs in preference to Watling Street. In the first group (Group A) are included those travellers that commenced their journey to Canterbury from London as well as all locations north of London. In the second group (Group B) are included those that commenced their journey from locations west of Kent and south of London.

For the latter group (Group B), a decision as to which crossing of the River Medway to take, would need to be made at a point shortly after Trottiscliffe, close to the Coldrum stones, particularly if the Medway was to be crossed within the vicinity of Aylesford or at the southern or upper most crossing point. An assumption that the latter group (Group B) would have followed the edge of the Downs through Surrey and into Kent rather than take the route from Guildford up to London using the Roman road has also been made. On this latter point, it should be noted though that the Guildford to London Roman road route would appear to be C G Crump's preference when he says 'from Guildford they went up to London by Ripley and Kingston, as men go today; and from London they went, like Chaucer's pilgrims, to

³⁹ Webb Diana, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, Hambledon and London 2000, p.222.

⁴⁰ Way Albert, *The Pilgrims Way or Path towards the Shrine of St Thomas of Canterbury* written in 1855; see above, p264.

Canterbury. And that is the road marked on the fourteenth century map in the Bodleian Library, of which Richard Gough published a facsimile in the first volume of this *British Topography* in 1780'.⁴¹

The decision of which river crossing medieval travellers would have adopted needs to take account of (i) the arguments already considered by Belloc in the 'The Old Road' vis-à-vis the crossing points at Aylesford, Snodland, Upper Halling and Cuxton (albeit that Belloc's arguments are primarily concerned with the evolution of a prehistoric ancient trackway) as well as (ii) the arguments of Elliston-Erwood, Crump and Goodsall, the proponents of a direct hike along Watling Street, once the Medway had been crossed (who are considering this in the context of medieval travel). In addition attention should be given to Rochester and the Watling Street crossing for the reason that a bridge of some description existed at Rochester since the time of the roman occupation. It is believed that Rochester's first medieval bridge dates from about 960 and that earlier wooden medieval bridges were replaced by a stone bridge in 1391.

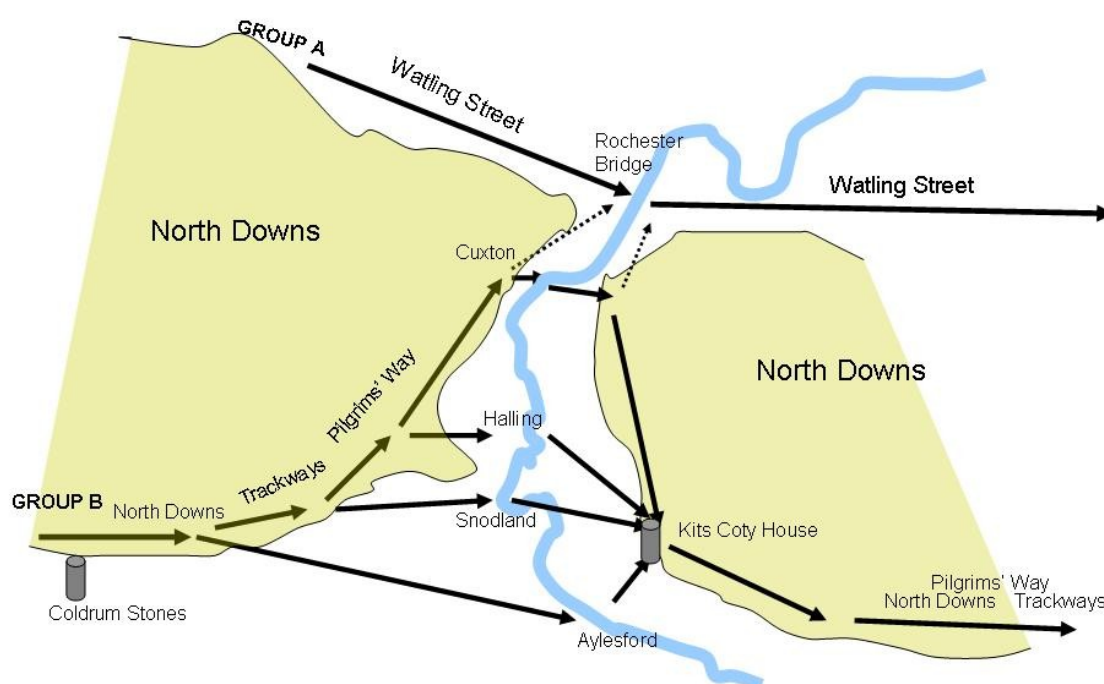


Diagram: Approaches into and crossing points of the Medway Gap

Therefore the question of where to cross the River Medway has a number of facets; at least two time frames (medieval and prehistoric) and deals with travellers approaching the Valley from two different directions, which we have called Group A (Watling Street) and Group B (Pilgrims' Way). Our question also raises considerations about the characteristics of the river and its surrounding terrain in prehistoric period's and how these factors impacted upon the development of the ancient trackway. This latter point is significant because of the need to address not only the development of a pre-historic trackway but how once established it in turn influenced routes adopted in the middle ages.

Whilst due cognisance should be taken of Belloc's discussion of the four likely Medway crossing points, i.e. the Aylesford; Snodland; Halling and Cuxton, Belloc's assessment was in the context of the pre-historic traveller, not the medieval pilgrim. Belloc acknowledges that post-prehistoric travellers such as the Romans had overcome problems associated with the Gault Clay in the Medway Gap, through building a causeway at Aylesford, but discounts the Aylesford crossing for three reasons - which he describes as being insuperable. To paraphrase Belloc's words these reasons are as follows:

- (i) the immense width of the valley and qualifies this by adding that the valley would be an 'immense tract of uncertain wooded way';
- (ii) the belt of Gault Clay that would have to be crossed to reach the ford at Aylesford;

⁴¹ C G Crump, *Op cit*, p.33

- (iii) and finally, pre-historic sites such as Kits Coty lie north of the Aylesford crossing and therefore 'a man crossing at Aylesford would have to turn back upon his general direction'.⁴²

A number of counter arguments can be made in respect of Belloc's reservations regarding a crossing point near Aylesford. Oliver Rackham suggests that even by the time of the Roman occupation the countryside 'can hardly have been much more wooded than it is today'.⁴³ Moreover the upper Medway valley around Aylesford includes Gault Clay mixed with chalk, which would have encouraged Neolithic land cultivation. As Champion noted, the Coldrum stones 'lie on top of well developed lynchets, which must have been formed by hill wash from ploughing that took place before their construction'.⁴⁴ Therefore the cultivation of the land probably pre-dated the construction of the Coldrum Stones. The Coldrum stones are also situated within the border of the Gault Clay belt and therefore there is every likelihood that the area of Neolithic cultivation stretched considerably further east towards a Medway crossing point. Given these considerations there is sufficient reason to doubt whether 'an immense tract of uncertain wooded way' as Belloc suggests, presented such a problem for the pre-historic traveller.

However if Belloc's concern about the gault clay still stands, it is equally applied (as Belloc rightly does) too both the Snodland and Halling crossings. Nevertheless during the summer months the surface would be passable for the same reason, as Belloc himself argues, that the Gault Clay would be hard and dry on the approach to a crossing at Snodland, because it is south facing, and not in the shade of the Holborough knob, as is the case with the approach to a crossing at Halling.

Patrick Thornhill (1974) reviewed The Medway crossings of the Pilgrims Way in an article of the same title, in light of studies undertaken of alluvial deposits in the Medway estuary by J H Evans (1953) and R Kirby (1969) as well as borings taken in the Snodland and Burham area in 1973. Taking account of Evans and Kirby's earlier work, Thornhill states that 'there has been a striking change in the valley floor since prehistoric times'. Essentially, he argues that the studies of Evans and Kirby show that 'through the Mesolithic period (10,000 – 5,000 years ago) the sea-level rose as the northern ice-sheets melted. The river was shrinking, slowing down and dropping its gravel in its own channel, for it could now carry only its finer sediments down to the advancing sea. This gravel filled channel, five or six times as wide as the modern Medway at Snodland was eventually to become the 'buried channel'.

Thornhill also noted that examination of borings taken for the riverside extension of the Snodland Paper Mills, as well as across the river for a new station of the Medway Water Board, showed no signs of a Neolithic peat layer at the base of the alluvium deposits and therefore 'it is reasonable to conclude that the surface of the buried channel at Snodland was not covered with alluvium until well after Neolithic times.' This leads Thornhill to assert that:

'...if the Way be older than the megaliths that cluster around it, which can hardly be denied, it must have been well established before the alluvium was deposited and the marshes created'.⁴⁵

Importantly, he goes on to add that the Neolithic Medway was:

'...was not yet tidal and it flowed among the gravel and the sand banks of the channel, which probably split into a number of interlacing streams that could be forded without difficulty'.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.248

⁴³ Rackham, Oliver; *The Illustrated History of the Countryside*, p.36 this ed' 1997 Phoenix Illustrated

⁴⁴ Champion, Timothy; *The Archaeology of Kent to AD 800* (edited John H Williams); The Boydall Press Kent County Council 2007, p.74.

⁴⁵ Thornhill, Patrick, 'The Medway Crossings of the Pilgrims Way'; *Archaeologia Cantiana* Volume 89 1974, p.94



Top: Medieval bridge at Aylesford
Bottom: Coldrum Stones, Pilgrims' Way near Trottiscliffe



Thornhill suggests that for the Neolithic traveller the river was less of an obstacle than muddy marshland was to later to make it, whereas, when Belloc was considering the Medway crossing, the view that prevailed was that the upper Medway valley consisted of gault clay and marshland.

Finally, Belloc's last point as regards turning back upon oneself to reach Kit's Coty House and Boxley is tenuous. The journey from the Coldrum Stones on the west side of the Medway Gap to Kits Coty House

via Aylesford on the east side of the Medway Gap circumscribes a southerly arc of 6.5 miles in length. Compare this with the Snodland crossing from the same points and the distance is 6.2 miles. Even if topography of the area may have influenced any decision, in spite of the points made above, distance alone can only be considered to be a marginal factor.

Nevertheless, Thornhill makes reference to the fact that the surface of the gravels of the buried channel is sufficiently thick and extensive to be dredged south of Snodland. In conclusion it is Thornhill's view that by Romano-British times, as tides progressively advanced up the Medway valley, wayfarers were forced to use the Snodland rocks crossing rather than the lower Holborough crossing.

Even though Belloc's argument concludes that it is less likely that pre-historic travellers crossed at Aylesford it is interesting to note the number of post Ice Age (last ice-age) archaeological finds in the area in the upper Medway Gap in line with Wrotham and Blue Bell Hill. These finds include 'the largest concentration of Mesolithic' flints at Addington;⁴⁶ an assemblage of early Mesolithic tools found at Ditton (Clark 1932 70-71),⁴⁷ situated one mile west of Aylesford; and axe's made from fine grained rock heads, which Ashbee describes as 'an integral feature of our Neolithic' found at New Hythe.⁴⁸ This certainly suggests that within a broad 6 mile arc passing through the Aylesford area between Coldrum and Kits Coty there is ample evidence of many forms of prehistoric human activity.

Moreover Neolithic burial chambers at Addington and the Chestnuts are on a direct line and mid-way between Wrotham and Aylesford. Again these long barrows have revealed a number of Neolithic finds including potsherds.⁴⁹ Later, important Bronze-Age finds were made at burial sites to the north-west of Aylesford church. Three burial cists made of tufa and sandstone contained a number of bronze items, including a bronze bound bucket and an imported Italian jug and pan.⁵⁰

Gold work in the form gold bracelets was also found at Aylesford, 'enclosed in a box which was alleged to have been thrown into the river'.⁵¹ Paul Ashbee suggests that from Neolithic times onwards there are hints of Kent 'having an especial role in the country's trading activities'.⁵² Champion notes the prehistoric sources of copper and tin found in the Kent area and suggests that trading links with western England amongst other places may have existed.

'South Eastern England has no native source of copper or tin, so all the metalwork found there must be made from imported materials. The copper may have come from western England, Wales or Ireland, or possibly from sources on the continent'.⁵³

This of course fits with but does not necessarily support Grant Allen's tin road theory, which most of the pilgrimist writers give particular credence too.⁵⁴

Therefore given all of the above arguments, it is less inconceivable than Belloc argues, that prehistoric travellers crossed the river as high as the Aylesford area, given the arguments about deforestation pre-Coldrum and the distance in comparison with other routes, combined with Neolithic finds in the vicinity of Aylesford, outlined above.

Legend, according to Francis Watt, writing about the Medway megaliths in 1917, has it that '— an avenue lined with those mammoth blocks ran from Kits Coty House to Coldrum; it led to a rude temple or ancient place of burial. Some have professed to trace this avenue through the Medway which runs by

⁴⁶ Champion, Timothy; *The Archaeology of Kent to AD 800* (edited John H Williams); The Boydall Press Kent County Council 2007, p.73.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.72

⁴⁸ Ashbee, Paul; *Kent in Prehistoric Times*; p.98 Tempus 2005.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.87- 118

⁵⁰ Champion, Op cit, p.124-124; Ashbee, *ibid* p.125

⁵¹ Ashbee, Op cit, p.150, the quote from Ashbee also contains within it a quote from Pretty (1862).

⁵² *ibid*, p.149.

⁵³ Champion, Op cit., p.95.

54

Cartwright *op cit*, p.4-5; Belloc, *op cit*, p.21 and 88, Belloc merely touches on the metals of the Devonian peninsula and the growth of the Sussex Weald iron industry but does not refer to Grant Allen, unlike Cartwright. Grant Allen's Tin Road theory published in *Cornhill Magazine* November 1889 'The Bronze Axe', originally taken as abstract from two chapter from Science in Arcady, by Grant Allen, London, Lawrence and Bullen, chapters 12 *The Bronze Axe*, p212 and chapter 13, *The Isle of Ruim*, p231.

Aylesford'.⁵⁵ If such a line of stones did mark an avenue across the Medway Gap, it is also interesting to note that the Coldrum stones and Kits Coty House stand at the same height above sea level on either side of the Medway Gap. As regards the stones respective heights, the facts cannot be disputed and both megaliths lie at a height 95 metres above present sea-level at a distance of six miles part either side of the Medway Gap. Perhaps an avenue of stones stretching across the valley is somewhat more fanciful. William Coles Finch (1925) also makes reference to an authority, which is James Fergusson, DCL, FCS, who described an avenue of stones on the east bank of the Medway Valley.⁵⁶ Fergusson was referring to a much shorter avenue, approximately three quarters of a mile in length, at the rear of Kits Coty and Little Kits Coty, running from Spring Farm to Hale Farm and states:

'...there exists, or existed, a line of great stones, extending from a place called Spring Farm, in a north easterly direction, for a distance of three quarters of a mile to another spot known as Hale Farm, passing through Tollington, where the greater number of stones are now found'.⁵⁷

Fergusson also refers to the fact that an elderly stonemason recounted to him how he had been employed in his youth to utilise many of the stones and pointed out the position of those he remembered. Therefore, perhaps it is less surprising that Coles Finch informed his readers in 1925 that from his research 'the three quarters of a mile of great stone is no more'. Christopher John Wright, in his guide to the Pilgrims' Way also mentions the tradition of an avenue of stones that stretched between the Coldrum Stones to Kits Coty House. However, rather than at Aylesford, he suggests that the 'river crossing at Snodland would be the natural route between the two'.⁵⁸

Belloc's favoured crossing point is at Snodland, which has also given up a number of prehistoric archaeological finds within the vicinity, including Neolithic pottery.⁵⁹ As Goodsall notes 'the many finds on both banks prove the importance of the area in Roman times'.⁶⁰ Belloc suggested that the river bed at Snodland may have been artificially hardened to create a causeway. However Goodsall states at this spot there is a natural outcrop of greensand (ragstone) which has defied all dredging operations in the past'.⁶¹ Nevertheless it has also been suggested that the 'causeway is a feature in the river bed known as the 'Snodland Rocks' - 'a bar of iron-cemented conglomerate, with large and small flints and pebbly material visible at low tide'.⁶²

In 2005, the BBC South East weather presenter, Kaddy Lee -Preston, with the help of the Kent Fire Service, waded across the River Medway at Snodland. The BBC had consulted local Snodland historian Andrew Ashbee who advised the film makers as to the exact location of the hard base and the fact that it could be crossed at low tide. In 2009 the author was introduced by Andrew Ashbee to Robert Coomber, a local Snodland resident and volunteer worker at the Snodland Museum. He described how as a young man, in the late nineteen forties he had crossed the River Medway on foot to retrieve a pigeon he had shot, which fell onto the far bank. Mr. Coomber crossed at a point at TQ 714615, situated slightly south of the Horseshoe Reach and adjacent to Brookland Lake, with Burham marshes on the opposite bank. He described the river bed's surface as consisting of fist sized rocks that provided for a secure and firm passage underfoot.⁶³

Nigel Nicholson's article in *Current Archeology* 157 makes the point that it is now thought that the Roman army led by Aulus Plautius defeated the British tribes on the west bank of the Medway in AD 43. He suggests that Vespasian led his legion of 5,000 armoured men across the river at Snodland. He also states that the army used the North Kent coastal plain, the North Downs and also the Pilgrims' Way as routes from the Kent coast through to the Medway.

Given that there is only a marginal difference in distance between the Coldrum Stones and Kits Coty on Blue Bell Hill going either by the Snodland crossing or the Aylesford crossing, combined with the

⁵⁵ Watt Francis, *Canterbury Pilgrims and their Ways*; Methuen & Co Ltd, 1917, p.222

⁵⁶ Finch William Coles, *In Kentish Pilgrims Land*, First pub 1925, this ed' 1925, The C W Daniel Company, p.295

⁵⁷ Fergusson James, DCL FRS, *Rude Stone Monuments, their Ages and Uses*; John Murrey, 1872, p.117

⁵⁸ Wright. Christopher John; *A Guide to the Pilgrims' Way and North Downs Way*; A Constable Guide; first published in GB 1971; this edition 1993, p.200.

⁵⁹ Ashbee, *Op cit*, p.115.

⁶⁰ Goodsall, Robert H, *The Ancient Road to Canterbury – A Progress through Kent*; first published 1960 (subscription edition 1959), this edition 1960, p57.

⁶¹ *ibid.* p.57

⁶² Snodland Historical Society web site, <http://www.snodlandhistory.org.uk/index.htm>

⁶³ Interview with Robert Coomber at Snodland Museum, Sunday 15th November 2009.

evidence of human activity in the region it is just as likely that prehistoric travellers crossed at both Snodland and Aylesford.

Moreover these crossing points may well have changed due to seasonal variations in the weather in addition to changes over longer periods of time as discussed above.

Belloc also argues that the existence of churches on either side of the Snodland crossing is a positive factor. This surely is hardly relevant, as Belloc is considering the development of a prehistoric route and not a medieval crossing. Even if he could argue that churches may signify religious sites of a much earlier date, he does not suggest this nor considers if this is even relevant to an earlier society. If anything, the proximity of the churches so close to one another, on either side of the river at Snodland, suggests if anything that crossing in the medieval period was not an everyday task. Anyway, it would appear that key sites (i.e. the megaliths), which may have held some prehistoric spiritual significance are situated at the western and eastern periphery of the Medway Gap. Ivan Margary picks up on this point and states Belloc seems ultimately 'too much swayed by the presence of religious buildings quite unconnected with prehistoric considerations'.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the Norman churches at Snodland and Burham may have held some significance for medieval pilgrims.

Belloc also argues that the Horseshoe reach at Snodland is favored because it is the upper limit of where the sea town (Rochester) has jurisdiction over the lower Medway. He suggests that this is always the traditional crossing point of a river. Again, this factor is of no relevance to the prehistoric traveler and as such does not apply.



Kits Coty House situated on the east bank of the Medway Gap

⁶⁴ Margary Ivan D, *The North Downs Main Trackway and the Pilgrims' Way*; Archaeological Journal volume CIX; p.49.



Kits Coty House

Finally, manorial records for the Manor of the Bishop of Rochester report that on 8th April 1720, John May ‘lately obstructed and diverted the King’s Highway in a field called the twelve acres leading from Snodland to Gravesend’.⁶⁵ Whilst it is beyond the scope of this article to suggest that a direct route existed between Snodland and Gravesend that could have been used by medieval travellers, it is known that Hasted refers to a ferry between Essex and Lillechurch at Higham near Gravesend, which he describes as being used up until the dissolution.⁶⁶

After Snodland, Lower Halling is the next lowest crossing point considered by Belloc apart from Cuxton. Belloc suggests that at Halling the alluvial soil is less broad than at Snodland and ‘no clay intervenes between the chalk and gravel’ and as such ‘the primitive traveller would have dry land all the way down to the river’.⁶⁷ Nevertheless Belloc discounts Halling in favour of Snodland. His reason being that the spur known as the Holborough knob, which jutted out from the chalk escarpment into the valley, left Snodland on the dryer south side of the spur and Halling on the north side of the spur. Today most of the Holborough knob has been cut back through quarrying. As a result of this quarrying the hillside now lines up with the general line of the curve of the west side of the chalk escarpment rather than jutting out toward the river bank. The previous position of the Holborough knob therefore leads Belloc to argue that ‘in such a conformation only the southern bank alone would have any chance of drying’.⁶⁸ However this is somewhat contradictory as Belloc already has testified to the lack of clay between the chalk escarpment and the gravel of the river, making for dryer ground underfoot on the approach to Halling.

The lack of antiquities found at Halling compared with what Belloc describes as numerous finds at Snodland is for Belloc another factor. Belloc also suggests that the Snodland crossing had a ford whereas the river bed is soft at Halling and a ferry crossing would need to be undertaken. Nevertheless, at the time of writing he did not have the benefit of Patrick Thornhill’s research in light of the borings undertaken at Snodland and Halling (see above).

⁶⁵ Manorial Records, *Manor of the Bishop of Rochester - Medway Archives, 1202-1754; Halling with appertances of Cuxton and Holborough. 8th April 1720*

⁶⁶ Hasted, Edward, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 3; 1797*, p.481-498.

⁶⁷ Belloc, *Op cit*, p.249.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p250.

Moreover the notes of Rev. Henry Dampier Phelps, Rector of Snodland 1804-1865, written in the 1840s, suggest both road access and a river crossing at Halling, when he wrote:

‘Many other proofs of the Romans having a Station in this Parish still remain; especially one of their Roads, which now forms our Northern Boundary and runs in a line from the Hills to the River where they crossed and where the Road is again found pointing directly up from the River*.’ (Rev Phelps adds in his footnotes*) ‘In digging on the Wouldham side, to make a sheep wash, it was found that the Bank of the River had been paved to admit of a ferry and facilitate crossing at low water’.⁶⁹

Phelps’ argument for a crossing at Halling, which was served by a roman road, is also supported by reference to map drawn by A.F. Bowker C.E.; F.R.G.S., entitled ‘Malling and its Valley’ published in the Rev. C. F. Fielding’s *Memories of Malling and its Valley* (1893). This shows a straight road running due east from Chapel House, following the line of the Parish boundary, to the river, then continuing in exactly the same line on the east bank and joining up with the Rochester Road leading to Kits Coty.

Edward Hasted (1798) also makes reference to a river crossing at Lower Halling and states:

‘In the northern part of the parish next to Lower Halling, is the hamlet of Holborough, usually called Hoborow, no doubt for Old Borough, a name implying the antiquity of this place. Many are inclined to believe, that the usual passage across the river in the time of the Romans, was from hence to Scarborough on the opposite shore’.⁷⁰

The lowest crossing point Belloc considers is Cuxton, which he discounts despite acknowledging that the ancient trackway continues north along the side of the chalk downs on either side of the river and would appear to converge towards a crossing point at Cuxton, which would necessitate a ferry (see map above). Moreover Belloc states ‘as a constant tradition maintains, the crossing of the river by pilgrims was common’.⁷¹ Notwithstanding this, Belloc is judging this from the viewpoint of prehistoric travelers and argues that to continue down stream until the Cuxton crossing ‘would add five or six miles to his journey’.⁷² He adds that the bottom is soft mud, the width of the river is considerable, the tidal current strong, and of all the points at which the river might have been crossed, it is the most distant from the direct line’.⁷³

Captain E Renouard James, the Ordnance Survey Officer, who is a significant figure in the development of pilgrimist theory, states in his published ‘Notes on the Pilgrims Way’ (1871) that he believed Cuxton to be the point where pilgrims crossed the Medway, unless they chose to go onto Rochester. The author has assumed that Captain E R James comes down in favour of Cuxton because he tracked the course of a North Downs trackway along the west bank of the Medway beyond North Halling towards Cuxton. He does not say in his notes whether medieval travelers would have crossed the river at Cuxton by ford or ferry, but given Thornhill’s conclusions with regard to the changing state of the valley floor since prehistoric times, it would appear that lower crossings should not be discounted. Moreover Ivan Margary, whilst concluding that ‘it would be misleading to point to any one spot as ‘the crossing’’, does however argue that Belloc did not give sufficient consideration to a Cuxton crossing, when he states:

‘But why then should the terrace way continue north? The reason may well be this. Below Halling, near Holborough, the river widens into a tidal estuary, though sheltered, and with firm ground right down to the water on both banks, especially near Cuxton and Borstal. If a raft or boat had to be used in any case, it might well be easier to use this where firm ground gave good landings on either bank, even if this involved a somewhat longer water crossing’.⁷⁴

Whilst it is known that the Romans established a bridge at Rochester, what is not known is if the bridge was constantly maintained following the Roman occupation. A bridge existed in the 13th century, in the form of a wooden structure and according to Stow’s ‘*Annales*’ 1631, this entirely collapsed due to severe

⁶⁹ Phelps, Rev Henry Dampier Rector 1804-1865; *Notes on Snodland Volume III – History, Flora and Fauna*, Published for Snodland Historical Society, Andrew Ashbee, 214 Malling Road 2005, p.13.

⁷⁰ Hasted, Edward: *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 4*; 1798, p. 463-47.

⁷¹ Belloc, *Op cit*, p.244.

⁷² *Ibid*, p.245.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p.245.

⁷⁴ Margary Ivan, *The North Downs Main Trackway and the Pilgrims’ Way*; *Archaeological Journal* volume CIX; p.49.

weather in the winter of 1281.⁷⁵ Crossing the Medway at Rochester was not without its dangers as Diana Webb informs us when she states:

‘...but pilgrims were among those who from time to time were drowned crossing the Medway by ferry when the bridge was broken, which happened no fewer than nineteen times between 1277 and 1381’.⁷⁶

In 1387 the first stone bridge was built, situated 100 yards upstream from the original Roman Bridge. The dangerous state of the old Rochester Bridge prior to the construction of the new bridge at the end of the 14th century may well have been another determining factor as to why some travellers opted for using the crossing higher upstream and then following the North Downs trackway as their chosen route to Canterbury or Dover. However, Sean Jennet makes the counter argument and suggests that in winter months the upstream crossings may have proved the more difficult and this could have influenced medieval travellers (GROUP B) to continue the few additional miles on into Rochester and use the bridge.

‘We have to remember that for the first fifty years of pilgrimage to Canterbury the month of December in which Becket died, was the prime occasion of the veneration of the saint. In that month it was always possible that after days of rain or snow the river would be swollen and perilous, the valley floods, and ferry-boats untempting. At Rochester however there was a bridge, and there a man might cross the Medway in safety’.⁷⁷

Given the importance of Boxley Abbey, it is likely that some pilgrims coming from the London direction may have chosen to leave the Watling Street route after crossing the Medway at Rochester Bridge. Pilgrims would have then followed the terrace-way track, today known as both the Burham Road and the Pilgrims Way, to Kits Coty and onto Boxley Abbey, which lies on the eastern fringe of the Medway Gap and within close proximity to the North Downs trackway. The Abbey was founded in 1146 and remained a prominent Cistercian monastery until the dissolution. Boxley Abbey became a case of notoriety at the time of the reformation when the Rood of Grace and the figure of St Rumbold, which took on life like qualities when presented with offerings by pilgrims, were exposed as mere mechanical tricks operated by the monks. William Coles Finch, in his book entitled ‘In Kentish Pilgrims Land’ informs his readers that ‘no pilgrim of medieval days would leave the Abbey unvisited’.⁷⁸

Having examined all the Medway river crossings it would appear that there is strong case that travellers in Group B, approaching the Medway Gap from the west of England and south of London would have used the crossings up stream such as Aylesford, Snodland or Halling. There is also reason to accept, in view of the popularity of Boxley Abbey as a pilgrimage destination, that some of those in Group A may have crossed at Rochester Bridge or Cuxton and picked up the trackways along the east bank of the Medway to Kits Coty.

⁷⁵ Jusserand, J J, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*; first pub’ 1888, this ed’ T Fisher Unwin 1909 p.65, footnote quoting Stow’s *Annales*, London 1631, p.201.

⁷⁶ Webb Diana, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, Hambledon and London 2000, p.228, making reference to N Yates and J Gibson, *Traffic and Politics: The Construction and Management of Rochester Bridge, AD 43 -1993*, Woodbridge 1994. In the eyre roll of 1292-94 the deaths of *quidam peregrine ignoti* are recorded (p.39 n.98)

⁷⁷ Jennett Sean, *The Pilgrims’ Way – from Winchester to Canterbury*, published Cassell & Co 1971, p.211.

⁷⁸ Finch, William Coles, *In Kentish Pilgrims Land*, First pub 1925, this ed’ 1925, The C W Daniel Company. P.202.



Top: Snodland Rocks, reproduced with kind permission of the Snodland Museum

Bottom: St Benedict's Chapel, Paddlesworth



PART II - Population and Pilgrimage

Much of the criticism of pilgrimist theory with regard to the use of the North Downs trackways as a route of medieval pilgrimage is aimed at what is probably fair to describe as the exaggerated claims of antiquarians writing in the nineteenth century regarding the numbers undertaking the journey. Nevertheless, despite such criticism, these claims have been subject to little in depth scrutiny. By working backwards from the scale of offerings at Beckett's shrine combined with working forward from Domesday statistics, thereby enabling account to be taken of geographic location and social class, this article argues that the evidence suggests a limited scale of extended pilgrimage to Canterbury. As such, not only could the North Downs main trackways sustain the relative low levels of medieval pilgrimage

but for many travellers from the west of the country the route also presented an attractive option in comparison with the decaying, ill maintained and risk laden Roman road network.

Elliston-Erwood, was one of the first critics to suggest the likelihood of there having been far fewer pilgrims than had been claimed by pilgrimist writers. In 1925 he wrote that 'the mediaeval religious pilgrimage is a matter that has been grossly exaggerated in the past'.⁷⁹ His conclusions were based upon his application of a quantitative assessment of the recorded offerings made at Beckett's shrine.

To this end Elliston-Erwood divided the published accounts of offerings to Beckett's shrines by his own suggested average offering of 4 shillings per pilgrim. In so doing he arrived at a figure of 1,000 pilgrims per year. He then estimated across the year and arrived at an average of two pilgrims a day outside of the great festivals. As Elliston-Erwood states:

"Thus pilgrimage is reduced to more reasonable dimensions. Chaucer's pilgrims become more illuminating; and the effect of such travellers on a country road becomes negligible".⁸⁰

For dissenters from the view that the trackway was used by pilgrims, there is an array of targets. As the claims of the pilgrimists, with regard to the numbers using the North Downs trackway increased, so did the ease by which their statements became open to criticism.

It is not too difficult to see how the claims of some pilgrimists appear to build upon one another over time.

In 1767 the antiquarian Owen Manning asked William Bray, a Surrey based solicitor from Shere to help edit his notes for a work on the history of Surrey. Bray was noted in his own right for his antiquarian work and held the position of Treasurer to the Society of Antiquaries between 1803 and 1823. Manning and Bray's three volume *The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey* was researched over 40 years and published between 1804 and 1814. Surrey County Council state that it is 'still acknowledged as one of the finest county histories of its day'.

Manning and Bray's history refers to two sections of road in Surrey that were known as the pilgrims' lane or road. One length is in Reigate and Merstham and the other is in Titsey and Tatsfield. According to Manning and Bray the first is a lane that:

'...in the parish of Merstham retains the name Pilgrims' Lane. It runs in the direction of the chalk hills, and was the course taken by pilgrims from the west who resorted (as indeed from all parts) to Canterbury'.⁸¹

The second reference to the pilgrims' road in Surrey is at Titsey and Tatsfield where according to Manning and Bray the:

'Pilgrims' Road (so called from the passage of pilgrims to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket at Canterbury) which is now perfect, not nine feet wide and still used as a road'.⁸²

However, a staunch critic of the pilgrimist tradition, E G Crump, noted that Manning and Bray only claimed that the route was used by pilgrims from the west. They did not enumerate further about the scale of the route's usage. Crump's essay, published in June 1936, shortly after his death, was steered through to publication by Charles Johnson on his behalf. He asserts his own scepticism about the Pilgrims' Way from the outset and explains to the reader that for some forty years he had 'thoroughly disliked the Pilgrims' Way' and 'believed it to be a fond thing grounded upon no uncertain warranty of history, and so intrinsically absurd that it was not worth criticism'.⁸³ In fact Crump was only stirred into writing about the Pilgrims' Way in reaction to an article that had been published the previous year in *History* (June 1935) by Dr Peter Brieger. In Brieger's article he stated that:

⁷⁹ Elliston-Erwood Frank C, *The Pilgrims' Way, its antiquity and its alleged medieval use* Archaeologia Cantiana Vol 37 1925 p.1.

⁸⁰ Elliston-Erwood Frank C; *The Pilgrims Road*; first published 1910, this edition 1923; The Homeland Association, p.37.

⁸¹ Manning and Bray, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey; Vol II p.253 (1804-14)*; this quote is taken from C G Crump's *The Pilgrims Way* pub' in *History quarterly*, June 1936.

⁸² Ibid, p.408.

⁸³ Crump, C G; *The Pilgrim' Way*; *History Quarterly* June 1936 p.22

‘The religious spirit of the Middle Ages thronged the roads with pilgrims on their way to Rome and the Holy Land. Even more numerous were those who undertook pilgrimages to Holy Places in England itself. The most celebrated of these was the shrine of St Thomas of Canterbury, and the Pilgrims’ Way between Winchester and Canterbury was in consequence by far the best road in England’.⁸⁴

Crump lays out in chronological order what he believes are the exaggerated claims of the pilgrimists and demonstrates how these claims compound over time. He points out that by 1850 Edward Brayley in his *Topographical History of Surrey Volume V*, upon discovering a section of the way in the parish of Albury, informs readers that the ‘the Pilgrims Way, which led from the city of Winchester to Canterbury crosses this parish, and is said to have been much used in former times’ (author’s emphasis).⁸⁵

However the notes of Captain E Renouard James were overlooked by Crump. By 1871 Captain E.R. James, the Ordnance Survey Officer responsible for denoting stretches of trackway running along the North Downs scarp on OS maps as the Pilgrims’ Way, was describing the route as one that had been ‘frequented by crowds of pilgrims’.⁸⁶ In his *Notes on the Pilgrims Way in West Surrey* published as a pamphlet and drawn from his notes for a lecture he gave at the Exhibition to the Bath and West of England and Southern Counties Association held in Shalford Park, Captain James stated that pilgrims using the trackway:

“...came, doubtless, the greatest numbers from the royal; and ecclesiastical city of Winchester, where they assembled from Salisbury and all parts of western England, and thence followed the old Roman road to Farnham.”⁸⁷

Nevertheless despite omitting Captain James’ contribution towards Victorian descriptions of ever growing numbers of medieval pilgrims using the North Downs trackway, Crump does quote a letter from someone he describes as a true believer published in *Notes and Queries*, dated 21st September 1850, in which is described ‘a vast influx of pilgrims’ as using the road. According to the letter’s author the pilgrims started their pilgrimage to Beckett’s shrine from its true commencement at Otford.

Crump goes on to note that by 1895 Julia Cartwright was referring to ‘thousands of pilgrims’. In fact Mrs. Ady states in her opening chapter that:

‘this route it is, which, trodden by thousands of pilgrims during the next three centuries, may still be clearly defined through the greater part of its course, and which in Surrey and Kent bears the historic name of the Pilgrims’ Way’.⁸⁸

Crump reminds us that nine years following the publication of ‘The Pilgrims’ Way from Winchester to Canterbury’, Hilaire Belloc’s ‘The Old Road’ describes how hordes of international pilgrims streamed towards Beckett’s shrine. Belloc lists their places of origin as the south western peninsula of England; Brittany; the Asturias and the western ports from Vigo to Lisbon and says ‘all these sent their hordes to converge on Winchester and thence to find their way to Canterbury’.⁸⁹

By 1925 William Coles Finch, in his *In Kentish Pilgrim Land* informs his readership, based upon a reference by A S Lamprey in a *Guide to Maidstone* that:

⁸⁴ Op cit, p22 quoting from Dr Peter Brieger’s article in *History* June 1935 entitled *Relations in History, Geography and Art*.

⁸⁵ Op cit, p.24

⁸⁶ James, Captain E Renouard, *Notes on the Pilgrims Way in West Surrey*, London, Edward Stanford, 1871, p.6

⁸⁷ James, Captain E Renouard, *Notes on the Pilgrims Way in West Surrey*, London Edward Stanford, 1871, p.7

⁸⁸ Cartwright, Julia, *The Pilgrims’ Way – from Winchester to Canterbury*, first published in GB 1895, this edition re-issued Wildwood House 1982, Julia Cartwright was also a novelist writing under the name of Mrs Henry Ady, p.5.

⁸⁹ Belloc Hilaire, *The Old Road*, first pub’ 1904, this edition Constable & Co 1911, Illustrated by William Hyde p. 91.

‘Along that mysterious road known as the Pilgrims’ Way travelled as many as a hundred thousand pilgrims a year to the shrine of Thomas a Becket’.⁹⁰

It’s of little surprise therefore that the pilgrimist writers came under attack from the likes of Crump; Elliston-Erwood; Captain W H Knocker and Wilfrid Hooper. Perhaps the biggest mistake made by the pilgrimists is that they over egged the pudding. Hooper argued in an article published in Volume 44 of the Surrey Archaeology Collections in 1936, that writers like Belloc and Cartwright accepted the ‘pilgrimist theory as an established historical fact’. But more importantly he notes that:

‘In their train have followed the host of guide-books and popular writers who have expanded and embellished ad libitum as fancy prompted’.⁹¹

Nevertheless a fundamental problem does exist with regard to much of the criticism of the pilgrimist writers in that it has been undertaken with little analysis of the actual numbers of that would have engaged in medieval pilgrimage. Any consideration of the scale of pilgrimage needs to be undertaken with an understanding of the population in terms of class, in as much as how this affected an individual’s right to freedom of travel beyond their own manor. Moreover such analysis would provide a better understanding of the numbers that may have used a particular route, such as the North Downs trackways. Any such analysis also needs to take due cognisance of demographic trends during the period of medieval pilgrimage. However Ronald C Finucane noted that we know very little about the ordinary person and pilgrimage for the reason that little was actually recorded. As Diana Webb states:

‘Among the various types of documentation thus created, the records of offerings at shrines, which naturally survive most often from the larger churches, occupy one extreme of objectivity. Although these are obviously of the greatest value, not least in making possible some idea of the popularity of shrines and alters over a period of time, the ordinary pilgrim as an individual does not feature in them; his penny or his candle is subsumed in the mass’.⁹²

Nevertheless there is evidence that suggests substantial numbers of pilgrims did journey to Canterbury between the 12th and the 16th centuries. Reference to the scale of pilgrimage is mentioned in one of the Paston letters, believed to be written in the year after the fifth jubilee of Becket’s translation. In Sir John Paston’s letter to John Paston, 28th September 1471, he states:

‘As ffor tydyngs, the Kyng and the Qwyen, and moche other pepell, ar ryden and good to Canterbury. Nevyr so moche peple seyn in Pylgrymage hertofoor or at ones, as men seye’.⁹³

To date, one of the only methods of quantifying the numerical scale of pilgrimage to Canterbury has been to examine the shrine accounts and the offerings made at Becket’s shrines. This was undertaken by Ben Nilson’s work, which looked at the Canterbury Cathedral Priory’s receipts between 1198/9 through to 1531/2 for the years when the treasurers’ accounts were maintained.

Taking Nilson’s figures and using the same average minimum and maximum offering figures applied by Elliston-Erwood in his research, we find that the highest number of pilgrims could have been 128,400 in the year of the 1220 jubilee, assuming an average offering as low as 2d per pilgrim across all shrines, including the main shrine; the martyrdom; the corona and the tomb – or as low as 5,355 pilgrims assuming an average offering as high as 4 shillings per pilgrim. Applying this method to other years where the total offerings to all the shrines were recorded, we can calculate possible maximum or minimum numbers of pilgrims using Elliston-Erwood’s minimum or maximum average offerings per pilgrim as the divisor.

The year of the translation of Beckett’s relics in 1220, represented the numerical highpoint, increasing from 74,000 pilgrims in 1200/01 assuming an average of 2d per pilgrim or as few as 3,100 assuming an average of 4 shillings per pilgrim. Between 1320 and 1340 the average number of pilgrims each year decreases to a maximum of 4,800 or a minimum of only 200 pilgrims. Between 1370 and 1379 the

⁹⁰ Finch William Coles, *In Kentish Pilgrims Land*, First pub 1925, this edition 1925, The C W Daniel Company. P.77 makes reference to AS Lamprey, M.A., Cantab’, *Guide to Maidstone*, p.3.

⁹¹ Hooper, Wilfred, ILD, *The Pilgrims’ Way and its supposed pilgrim us*, Surrey Archaeological Collections Volume 44 1936, p.56.

⁹² Webb Diana, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, Hambledon and London 2000, p.181.

⁹³ Gairdner James (ed), *The Paston Letters AD 1422-1509*, New Complete Library Edition, Vol 5, 1904 Constable p.112.

average number of pilgrims each year increases to a maximum of 10,320 or a minimum of 430. By the year of the fourth jubilee in 1420 the maximum number of pilgrims has risen to 68,400 or a minimum of 2,850. In the decade leading up to the dissolution offerings decline and suggest a maximum of 1,639 or a minimum of 68 pilgrims per year. The receipts for offerings are shown in the table below, which is data derived primarily from Ben Nilson's research.

TABLE 1: Recorded combined offerings to the main shrine, tomb, corona and the martyrdom.

Year	Total	No' of pilgrims given 2d av' offering	No' of pilgrims given 4/- av' offering	Notes
1200/01	£620	74,000	3,100	King John's Coronation
Av' 1198-1207	£426	51,120	2,130	Average over period
1219/20	£1071*	128,520	5,355	Year of translation
1320-1340	£40	4,800	200	Average over period
1370-1379	£86	10,320	430	Average over period
1419/20	£570*	68,400	2,850	Jubilee 4th Anniversary
1531/32	£13-13s.3d	1,639	68	

All figures for offerings taken from Ben Nilson's research 'Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England' p.147-155, except those marked * from Elliston-Erwood F C, *The Pilgrims' Way*, its antiquity and its alleged medieval use, *Archaeologia Cantiana* Vol 37 1925.

The above figures offer a means of quantifying the scale of pilgrimage to Becket's shrine between 1198/99 and 1531/32. However such a broad brush approach does not tell us where these pilgrims came from nor does it inform us of the social background of those that made these offerings. Both these questions are relevant to any inquiry regarding the numbers of medieval pilgrims that may have taken the ancient trackway as their chosen route to Canterbury.

Social position within a feudal society is important in as much as there were large numbers of the population that due to their social status could not exercise any choice to go on an extended pilgrimage. It was not only slaves that would have had their freedom of movement restricted. Large numbers of villeins and cottagers were tied to the manor due to their position in the feudal social hierarchy. The question of social position may also offer clues as to the size of offerings over time, within the range of offerings discussed above.

It is well documented that at various times legislation was enacted with a view to restricting who could leave the land. Moreover such legislation would often refer directly to those leaving the manor for the purpose of undertaking pilgrimage. Diana Webb referring to legislation enacted in 1388-89 notes in *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, that:

"The statute include the stipulation that 'all of them that go in pilgrimage as beggars and be able to travail, it shall be done as Servants and Labourers, if they have no Letters testimonial of their pilgrimage'".⁹⁴

The extent to which pilgrimage undertaken by the lower classes was perceived as threatening to the social order was reflected in a directive to the sheriffs of London in 1473, which forbade people from undertaking pilgrimage if they could not perform it without alms. As Webb suggests, the 'thrust, as before was ostensibly against mendicancy and not against pilgrimage undertaken by respectable people with money in their purse'.⁹⁵

An Alternative approach to calculating Pilgrim numbers

In addition to the above methodology of working backwards from offerings as a means of better understanding the scale of pilgrimage, an alternative approach would be to work forwards from the population base using Domesday records. Using Domesday we can make an assessment of the numerical size of the population that would have been eligible to undertake an extended medieval pilgrimage. Furthermore Domesday also allows us to estimate the size of the population and its geographic location. This alternative approach has been undertaken with particular reference to counties situated to the west of the country and south of London, i.e. locations from which travellers may have chosen to use the North Downs ancient trackways as a pilgrimage route to Canterbury. It should be noted at the outset that the author is fully aware of the well-known pitfalls in using Domesday data and in making the various, often

⁹⁴ Webb Diana, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, Hambledon and London 2000, p.231.

⁹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p.232.

heroic, assumptions that are required. All the steps in the calculations are described in detail for the reader to follow.

In undertaking this exercise, the author has over-estimated by inclusion wherever there is doubt, so as to increase the numbers of potential travellers rather than limit numbers. This has been done because the exercise is aimed at demonstrating that far fewer members of the population were able to undertake pilgrimage than may have been previously assumed.

For this reason the whole of the following nine counties have been included, as follows; Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Kent, Somerset, Surrey, Sussex and Wiltshire. In reality, simply due to proximity and location, it would not have been practicable for the populations of large geographic areas of some of these counties to have accessed the North Downs trackways.

Furthermore, adjustments need to be made to the Domesday population figures as Domesday does not provide a census of the population in 1086. As Robert Bartlett points out: 'Domesday book was not intended as a population census. It lists a rural population of 268,863 individuals, but that is certainly not the population of England in 1086, and in order to obtain that figure we have to make some assumptions about what Domesday leaves out'.⁹⁶

The total recorded rural population of Domesday England is 268,863, which as H. C. Darby suggests 'we are left to suppose that each recorded man was the head of a household'.⁹⁷ By using a multiplier, derived through evidence from the 13th century, that suggests a peasant household of 4.7 persons, Bartlett offers a figure for the total rural Domesday population of 1.26 million. The multiplier applied in this exercise is the slightly higher conventional one of 5, as suggested by H.C. Darby's research.⁹⁸

Account should also be taken of what H C Darby suggests is the Domesday exclusion of the northernmost counties. In addition Bartlett notes the exclusion of: the urban populations including Winchester and London; the secular aristocracy and their dependents as well as ecclesiastics and their servants. This brings a total population for Domesday England of 1.5 million. This alternative approach takes account of these adjustments below.

A further adjustment also needs to be made to allow for a possible unreported number of sub-tenants and landless persons, which could account for a further 750,000 people. This brings Bartlett's estimate of England's Domesday population to an approximate total of 2,250,000.

It has been estimated that by 1230 the population had increased to 5.8 million, which represents an increase of 156%. However by the aftermath of the Black Death it is believed that the total population may have decreased to 3.5 million. These changes in population over time should be borne in mind when consideration is given to the use of Domesday data for determining the size of the population that may have been eligible to undertake an extended pilgrimage. However within the scope of this article it is felt that the output figures derived from the 1086 data remain indicative of the scale of pilgrimage, but there is no reason why the final numbers should not be weighted to reflect the above variation in population over time.

Applying Darby's multiplier of 5 to the Domesday population total of 268,863 for the nine counties we arrive at a rural population of nearly half a million.⁹⁹ This total of 447,846 individuals is the sum of the nine Domesday social groups and is divided between villagers / villeins 202,585 (45%); smallholders 143,710 (32%); slaves 66,370 (15%); ancillary 40 (0%); freemen 135 (1%); priests 31; cottagers 11,030 (2%); burgesses 12,960 (3%) and others 10,985 (2%).

⁹⁶ Bartlett, Robert; *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075 – 1225*, p.290-294

⁹⁷ Darby H.C., *Domesday England*, 1977, Cambridge University Press, p.87.

⁹⁸ Domesday population estimates using the conventional multiplier of 5: H.C. Darby, 'Domesday England', *A New Historical Geography of England* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 33, 45, 54.

⁹⁹ Palmer, J. et al. , *Electronic Edition of Domesday Book: Translation, Databases and Scholarly Commentary, 1086* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], September 2007. SN: 5694.

County	Villagers	X 5 ***	Smallholders	X 5	Slaves	X 5	Ancillary	X 5	Freemen *	x 5
CORNWALL	1705	8525	2411	12055	1155	5775	0	0	0	0
DEVON	8428	42140	4868	24340	3316	16580	1	5	0	0
DORSET	2625	13125	2955	14775	1233	6165	3	15	0	0
HAMPSHIRE	3903	19515	4004	20020	1764	8820	0	0	0	0
KENT	6788	33940	3411	17055	1175	5875	4	20	26	130
SOMMERSET	5283	26415	4837	24185	2120	10600	0	0	1	5
SURREY	2389	11945	936	4680	503	2515	0	0	0	0
SUSSEX	5890	29450	2522	12610	413	2065	0	0	0	0
WILTSHIRE	3506	17530	2798	13990	1595	7975	0	0	0	0
Total numbers x 5 ***		202585		143710		66370		40		1350%
Percentage of total population		45%		32%		15%		0%		

free men **	X 5	Priests	Cottagers	X 5	Burgesses	X 5	Other	Population Recorded	Population Total
0	0	0	0	0	68	340	0	0	5339
0	0	1	19	95	263	1315	371	1855	17267
0	0	2	203	1015	164	820	209	1045	7394
0	0	4	0	0	20	100	0	0	9695
0	0	12	309	1545	840	4200	0	0	12565
0	0	3	329	1645	518	2590	208	1040	13299
0	0	0	276	1380	32	160	0	0	4136
0	0	5	783	3915	391	1955	0	0	10004
0	0	4	287	1435	296	1480	1409	7045	9895
Total numbers x 5	0	31		11030		12960		89594	447846
Percent of total pop'	0%			2%		3%			100%

Table showing Domesday population in the nine counties from which medieval travellers may have accessed the North Downs trackways

* Freemen or sokemen, males with socage - *Palmer, J. et al.*, Electronic Edition of Domesday Book: Translation, Databases and Scholarly Commentary, 1086 [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], September 2007. SN: 5694.

** Free men (freedmen) or liberi homine – *Palmer, J. et al.*, Electronic Edition of Domesday Book: Translation, Databases and Scholarly Commentary, 1086 [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], September 2007. SN: 5694.

*** Multiplier of 5 applied to Domesday recorded heads of households to estimate population numbers see H C Darby

A number of social groups can be discounted from those that would have been eligible to leave the manor to go on pilgrimage. Those classifications that have been discounted are slaves and cottagers or cottars. It is generally regarded that cottars formed one of the lowest

groups within the peasantry and as such were considered below most of the villeiny in terms of social status. Of the other 6 social groups from the remaining 7, it has been assumed that most of those from these groups, i.e. small holders, ancillaries, burgesses, freemen, priests and others would have been free to choose to go on pilgrimage. The final and largest social group, the villeins or villeinage were the least likely to be free to leave the manor. This group comprised 45 per cent of the Domesday population.

Jusserand states that the:

‘The villein who, without special licence, left his master’s domain, only entered the common life again after putting himself at his mercy, or, which was less hard, after having passed a year and a day in a free town without leaving it and without the lord having thought of interrupting the prescription’.¹⁰⁰

Bartlett argues that the compulsory provision of labour services to the lord was one of the factors that determined the features of villeinage, when he suggests:

‘One of the most obvious distinctions amongst the peasant tenantry was between those who had to march off to work on the lord’s farm for two or three days a week and those who did not. Although labour services in themselves, particularly the obligation to help with the ploughing and harvestry, did not imply servile status, the heavy burden of weekly work, and in particular the uncertainty of services required, could be taken as a defining feature of villeinage’.¹⁰¹

Therefore if one concludes that ‘most villeins do not travel more than a few miles from their manor, on account of their bond to their lord, but freeman can – and do – travel much further afield’, then it would not be unreasonable to discount a large proportion of villeins from those that would be eligible to undertake pilgrimage.¹⁰² As Jusserand noted it was ‘escaped peasants that brought the most numerous recruits to the wandering class’.¹⁰³ Moreover tensions within English feudal society demonstrated in events such as the peasant’s revolt resulted in the introduction of legislation in 1376 prohibiting the movement of individuals out of a man’s own district.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless some recent approaches to understanding medieval society have looked beyond the feudal structure of the manor. Schofield remarks that:

‘Historians now look for and find peasants in contexts beyond the manor and villages, in markets, in country courts, in military levies, or on pilgrimage’.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore Sumption commenting on the bequests made by pilgrims to the four Canterbury Jubilees in the late middle ages, noted that they ‘drew large crowds of pilgrims but the great and wealthy stayed away’ and states that:

‘declining social status of pilgrims was a general phenomenon of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and its immediate effect was to reduce the income from offerings while increasing the number of visitors who needed free food and board.’¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, no evidence exists to indicate the number from within the villeiny that may have been able to travel on an extended pilgrimage. Therefore in consideration of the arguments that peasants could be found in contexts beyond the manor, the author has only discounted two thirds of the population that fall within the category of villein from being eligible to undertake pilgrimage, but has included one-third or 68,528 villeins.

Bartlett suggests that (i) based upon H C Darby’s estimate, 120,000 should be added to the Domesday population to take account of the urban population; (ii) together with a further 66,000 to account for the secular aristocracy and their household dependents and (iii) 50,000 to account for ecclesiastics and their servants.¹⁰⁷ This is an additional 236,000 over and above Domesday’s total rural population. Bartlett

¹⁰⁰ Jusserand J J, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, first pub’ 1888, this ed’ T Fisher Unwin 1909, p.257-258.

¹⁰¹ Bartlett Robert, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075 – 1225*, p.324.

¹⁰² Mortimer Ian, *A Time Travellers Guide to Medieval England*, Vintage 2009, p.68.

¹⁰³ *Op cit*, Jusserand p.258.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.261.

¹⁰⁵ Schofield Philip R, *Peasant and Community on Medieval England 1200 -15*, Palgrave Macmillan 2003, p.3

¹⁰⁶ Sumption Jonathan, *Pilgrimage*, first pub’ Faber and Faber 1975, this edition 2002, p.165

¹⁰⁷ Darby H C, *Domesday England*, Cambridge University Press, p.89, 1977 and Bartlett Robert, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075-1225*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.291

therefore adjusts the Domesday total by 18.7% (The author has not included Darby's adjustment of 33,000 for the northernmost counties within the 18.7%). All these groups are included within the eligible to undertake pilgrimage category.

Therefore if we add Bartlett's adjustment of 18.7% proportionately to the population for the nine southern and western counties of England of 447,846, i.e. those that could have accessed the North Downs ancient trackways, we arrive at a total of 531,593. From this we need to subtract 135,057 to account for two-thirds of those that fall within the social group of villeins that would be least likely to be eligible to travel away from the manor on pilgrimage. This gives a population eligible to undertake pilgrimage from the 9 southern and western counties of nearly 400,000. From this we also need to discount cottagers and slaves which account for 77,400, which reduce the number eligible to travel on pilgrimage to roughly 320,000.

It's been argued by M M Postan that up to one third of the total population, amounting to 750,000 was landless and therefore excluded from Domesday. In effect Bartlett adds 59.5% to the Domesday rural population total of 1.26 million to account for this¹⁰⁸. 59.5% of the 9 counties Domesday rural population is 266,468. We have to decide whether or not those that fall within the category of landless would have been eligible to undertake pilgrimage. For the benefit of doubt the author has included half of this group (133,234) as eligible to undertake pilgrimage. This brings the total number from the population eligible to undertake pilgrimage from the nine counties of southern and western England in the region of 450,000.

¹⁰⁸ Bartlett Robert, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075 – 1225*, p.324.

Table: Number of people from the population of the 9 southern and western counties likely to commence pilgrimage to Canterbury on any single day

Those eligible to travel from southern and western west counties	450,000	450,000	450,000	450,000
Those within age range for pilgrimage i.e. between 14 and 65 = 55% pop [*]	247,500	247,500	247,500	247,500
Those that choose to go on pilgrimage to Canterbury in lifetime (50%, 30%, 20 %, or 10% of population)	123,750 (50%)	74,250 (30%)	49,500 (20%)	24,750 (10%)
Those that choose that year in which to travel (divide by 29)**	4267	2560	1707	853
Those that commence pilgrimage on any single day in that year (182)***	23	14	9	5

* Based upon 1377 poll tax returns that show 40% of population was 13 years of age or less and 5% of population was over 65 years of age. (Hatcher, *Plague Population* from Mortimer Ian, 2009)

** Assumes one extended pilgrimage taken during an average twenty nine available years to travel based on Crude Expectation Ages for those reaching 15 years of age. Russell Josiah Cox, *British Medieval Population*, University of New Mexico, 1948, p.176.)

*** Assumes choice to commence pilgrimage on any one day across 6 months (182 days) of the year. If commencement day was evenly distributed across whole year (365 days) then average daily numbers would reduce to: 12, 7, 5 or 3 respectively.

Therefore a figure in the region of 450,000 represents the total number of the population eligible to travel on pilgrimage from the nine counties to the south and west of London. From this total we need to discount those that would have been too young or old to undertake an extended pilgrimage. We have to make an assumption that only during a proportion of an individual's lifespan would they be within an age range to undertake an extended pilgrimage. To this end the author has included 55% of the population that was between 15 and 65 years of age, derived from Hatcher's research on the 1377 poll tax returns.¹⁰⁹ Account also needs to be taken of the number of those that would have chosen to take a pilgrimage in their own lifetime. The author has applied factors representing between 50% to 10% of those eligible to travel as a range of those that would have actually chosen to undertake pilgrimage in their own lifetime. Account also needs to be taken that each individual would only undertake a pilgrimage once rather than in each available year within their lifespan. Therefore the author has divided the number of those eligible to undertake an extended pilgrimage by Russell's average lifespan for those reaching the age of fifteen.¹¹⁰ As such the total has been divided by 29. Finally it has been assumed that about half of the days within the year would provide suitable weather conditions to undertake an extended pilgrimage. As such based upon the above loose assumptions when applied to the Domesday population it can be seen that if pilgrimage was undertaken by 50% of the eligible population then on any one day across 6 months of the year one could expect to see 23 pilgrims using the North Downs trackways. If only 10% of the eligible population from the nine southern and western counties undertook a pilgrimage to Canterbury then on any one day across six months of the year one could expect to see 5 pilgrims using the North Downs trackways.

However given that up until 1220, the period of major pilgrimage coincided with the 29th December, the date of Beckett's martyrdom, then until the translation of Beckett's relics on the 7th July 1220, it would appear that pilgrimage was undertaken in the winter months as well. As such the average daily number of pilgrims commencing pilgrimage could be reduced further still if their numbers are spread across the whole year.

Nevertheless, this model does not allow for pilgrims from overseas entering the country at Southampton and using the North Down trackways as a route to Canterbury, rather than sailing to one of the Kent sea ports. It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the number of overseas pilgrims, and their reasons for using the North Downs trackways, although it can be seen that even if overseas pilgrims doubled the traffic, the numbers would still remain relatively small.

The above model overestimates numbers as it based on the assumption that all those undertaking pilgrimage to Canterbury from the nine southern and western counties found the North Downs trackways

¹⁰⁹ Hatcher, *Plague Population* from Mortimer Ian, 2009

¹¹⁰ Russell Josiah Cox, *British Medieval Population*, Table of Crude Expectation Ages 1- 20a, University of New Mexico, 1948, p.176

to be the most suitable route, which for large geographic areas within these counties, would not have been the case. Once consideration is given to the size of, and restrictions of movement, pertaining to the medieval population, it can be seen that the number of pilgrims travelling along the North Downs trackways would have been very small. A scale that was much smaller than the exaggerated claims imagined by the pilgrimists.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion there is less reason than previously supposed that the North Downs trackways could not have served as a viable route, used by medieval travellers as their chosen route to Canterbury. Moreover it can be argued that whilst detractors of the Pilgrims' Way as a pilgrimage route have been eager to point to the exaggerated claims made by Victorian and Edwardian pilgrimists, they have been less inclined to offer any quantitative assessment of the limited scale of mass pilgrimage overall. If this is undertaken then the use of the North Downs' ancient trackways should be reconsidered within the context of much lower levels of pilgrimage traffic. Given this reassessment of numbers it can be argued that the North Downs trackways could easily have sustained the limited numbers of pilgrims travelling from the west.

Moreover, once account is taken of the marginal difference in distance between transferring onto Watling Street or staying on the North Downs trackways to Canterbury, then in terms of the 'Paddlesworth choice', maintaining the well defined route along the escarpment may have appeared more attractive than many commentators have previously thought. In addition the ease of route finding without maps by following the scarp, with its well defined features, was undoubtedly an important factor for the medieval traveller.

Concerns regarding crime and safety as well as the relative seclusion of the trackway, away from but within easy reach of the spring line villages, may also have served as a positive rather than a negative factor for medieval pilgrims. Blink and the villein working in the field would miss the daily pilgrim as he passed by on the distant hillside.

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