



# LIKE A TRAMP LIKE A PILGRIM

ON FOOT ACROSS EUROPE TO ROME

**HARRY BUCKNALL**

B L O O M S B U R Y

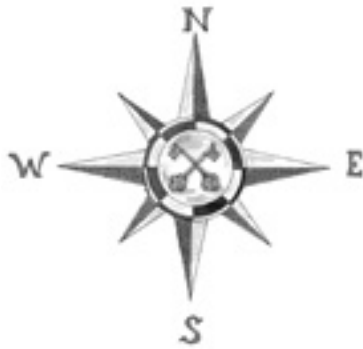
LIKE A TRAMP, LIKE A PILGRIM

## HARRY BUCKNALL

Harry Bucknall was born in London in 1965 and brought up in Dorset. Travel has been an indelible part of his life since early childhood summers spent exploring the Poole Harbour archipelago in a Mirror dinghy. Educated at Harrow and the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, he served as a regular officer in the Coldstream Guards. After, Harry worked in the oil and mining industries and as a consultant in the Middle East. He has also produced theatre on the London Fringe, sat on the Olivier Awards Panel and acted as a reviewer for Arts Council, London. As a freelance travel writer, he has contributed to both the national and international press. Harry's first book, *In the Dolphin's Wake*, about his journey from Venice to Istanbul through the Greek Islands, was published in 2011.

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On Foot, Across Europe to Rome



HARRY BUCKNALL

B L O O M S B U R Y  
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

First published in Great Britain 2014

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Cover by Chris Wormell

Illustrations by Louise Sheeran

Maps and chapter-end designs by Lachlan Campbell

A Continuum book

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square  
London WC1B 3DP

[www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)

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Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781408187258  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk  
NR21 8NN

Also by Harry Bucknall  
Published by Bene Factum  
*In the Dolphin's Wake*



*With my continued thanks to Saint Spyridon of Corfu,  
This book is dedicated to the memory of  
David Parkinson,  
A good friend and a gallant man.*

*It is the road that teaches us...and the road that enriches us...  
Paulo Coelho, *The Pilgrimage*, 1987*



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#### Note

\*

Denotes passage of a day or more in the narrative.

## *Acknowledgements*

EVERY DAY THAT I sit at my desk looking out over the Dorset Downs, I never forget what a great privilege it is to write. Working on *Like a Tramp, Like a Pilgrim* has brought me such joy, not only because of the adventure itself but for all the people I met along the way. This was a journey which started five years ahead of that May morning in 2012 when I set out from St Paul's Cathedral. Countless friendships were made and a number rekindled in the process, in some cases after 30 years or more – the experience was worth it for that alone. But it took the efforts of many, before, during and after the enterprise, to help get the book to completion. The majority appear in the pages that follow; one or two have had their names changed either for my or their own sakes, while a host of others, in the shadows, selflessly leant their shoulder to the wheel on my behalf.

Through two long winters and a glorious summer as I typed my manuscript, these special people, whose kindness and generosity helped bring the pages to life, have rarely been far from my thoughts.

My parents, Robin and Diana, for putting up with my flights of fantasy; my brother, James, for letting me stay hidden away from the distractions of the everyday, and Tessa, his wife, who has lived with every stage of the *Tramp* these past two years; my sister, Kate Benson and James and Azucena Keatley for being the diligent guardians of every draft; my readers, Peter and Anne Williams, Alan Ogden, David Prest and Nicholas Armour who gave so much of their time to challenge, cajole and bully the text into some semblance of form and forewarn of howlers.

Anthony Weldon and Christopher Lee for nurturing the scheme; Phillip Sturrock, for his counsel; Artemis Cooper, George Waud, Barnaby Rogerson, Stephanie Allen, Anthea Gibson Fleming, Ben and Tessa Fisher for their introductions; Mark and Alexandra James for their words of encouragement; Annie Maguire for her timely reminder; William and Bronwyn Marques and Joe Paterson of the Confraternity of Pilgrims to Rome for their invaluable briefings; Edmund Hall, Lucy Dichmont, Philip Noel, Christopher Page, Cassian Roberts, Sergio Gimenez, Graeme Moyle and Martha Bofito for their invaluable assistance in getting me under way; Rose and Andy Keir in the village for looking after my dog, Sam; Canon Mark Oakley, the Reverends Ewen Pinsent and Darren A'Court for their blessings and prayers; Vishal Raghuvanshi, Michael Harm, Sue Quinn and Henrietta Green for their farewell; Captain Billy Matthews at Regimental Headquarters, Coldstream Guards for his jovial support; Keith and Sandra Robinson, Scott Veitch and Guy Cholerton, Edward and Wheezie Cottrell for their hospitality, and Robert Woods of P&O Ferries for getting me across the English Channel.

Generalmajor Carsten Jacobson of the Bundeswehr, Max Arthur and William Horstmann-Craig for their research on Arras; Charles Goodson-Wickes, Charles and Sarah Daireaux, Emmanuel Barboux and Jean-Baptiste de Proyart who helped my passage through France.

Claudio Sebasti for his welcome in Geneva and my dear friend, Raúl Santiago Goñi, for turning up quite unannounced; Mark Ridley for making me so at home in Italy and John Gibbons for advice over the odd brick in Pavia.

The Prince and Grand Master Fra' Matthew Festing, Lucia Virgilio and Rebecca Chalmers of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta for their joyous reception in Rome and clean clothes; Tim Baxter for his poetry; Hugh McKenna for feting my return home; Abbot Timothy Wright, Father Andrew Cole, the late Father Gerard Hughes and Father Matthew Power, who gave spiritual comment on pilgrimage; Monsignor Philip Whitmore of the Venerable English College in Rome for his findings and the Very Reverend Dr Robert Willis, Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, who was so generous and helpful on numerous occasions.

David Anderson, Joan Witts, Alfredo Tavares, Salvatore Cantanzaro, Alfred Kelp, Joaquin Santos, Lucca San Martino, Djaffar Namane, Lukasz Pyra, Chris Pineda, Antonio Silva, Michal Pyra and Tomasz Naporski, who kept the coffee flowing while drafting at the best-kept secret in London; Martin Morrissey for his wisdom; Rosemary Etherton for her subtle harangue whenever she guessed my output was slowing; Nick and Kim Hughes and their leviathan photocopying machine; Alan Titchmarsh for his enquiring and ever-cheery words that meant so much; Justine ‘Fred’s’ Hardy, my eternal muse, for keeping the ship afloat with copious quantities of laughter during the odd squall that inevitably rocked the boat from time to time. Not forgetting Nick Edmiston and his now rather frayed hat, which is still a cut above the rest, and Jools Holland, whose music never fails to make me smile – Chapter 7 refers.

I cannot finish without thanking Robin Baird-Smith, my long-suffering publisher at Bloomsbury, for his gently guiding hand, faith and fun throughout; Nicola Rusk, Joel Simons, Jamie Birkett, Kim Storry, Dawn Booth, Tristan Defew, Adam Smart and Jane Tetzlaff, who gave order to my script in double-quick time; Ros Ellis, Helen Flood and Maria Hammershoy for shouting my name from the rooftops of Bedford Square so expertly; Lachlan Campbell for Venus ‘without’, his marvellous maps and the end chapter designs; Louise Sheeran for such evocative illustrations crafted with her beloved exploding pen; Clive Chalk for his patient photography; Chris Wormell for creating such a wonderful cover and the special *Μιγάλημου* ... never fail to remember that ‘three’ is greater than ‘too’. Always.

Finally, Ernest Brown, please now eat your hat!

HCB, Everley, Dorset  
St. Patrick’s Day,  
17th March, 2014

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## *Waiting for the kettle to boil...*

*'Nothing happens unless first a dream.'*

Carl Sandburg, *Washington Monument by Night*, 1922

WAITING FOR THE KETTLE to boil, I picked up the newspaper; the inside page instantly caught my eye – emblazoned across it was a large medieval map of Europe tracing a route, in red, from Canterbury to Rome, the Via Francigena. It was Tuesday, 31 July 2007.

Minutes earlier, I had just typed the last full stop of *In the Dolphin's Wake*. Satisfied, I leant back in my chair and looked out of the window; the horses grazed in the paddock, Sam, my Jack Russell, was lazing in the sun, the chickens fussed about the hedges and overhead a lark sang. My view.

Then, quite without warning, the sky turned leaden grey, a rush of wind forged up the valley and within seconds the tranquil scene was turned to mayhem as chickens, dog, birds and horses variously scattered in every direction chased by torrents of rain. From the sanctuary of my desk, I watched curiously removed as this turbulent tableau unfolded before me, until, overhead, an explosion of shattering magnitude transformed my look to one of utter disbelief as the cable linking my computer to the outside world momentarily glowed an iridescent blue and, in seeming slow motion, a spark struck at the heart of the machine with the accuracy of a guided missile. The screen went black.

This has not happened, I tried to convince myself – except that it had. Eighty-eight thousand words had, quite literally, just gone up in a puff of smoke. A small cloud dissipated in the beams above. For a moment, I sat there numb. To scream would have been futile, so instead I went downstairs to make myself a cup of coffee.

That map, instantly evocative, led my mind to wander as I traced a finger down its line: a 1,400-mile journey through England, France, Switzerland and Italy until it reached the Eternal City, Rome itself – an adventure of Elizabethan proportion that would carry me off into lands steeped with history, culture and, no doubt, incident and escapade. It was the sense of future that made the idea of pilgrimage so exciting – a chance to shake free once more from the chains of reality: offices, meetings, budgets, in short the everyday bureaucratic theatre that we all get caught up in, which seems so important, yet, more often than not, is so very unimportant. Or was it perhaps the last hurrah of youth? One final carefree outing before I finally gave in to the serious business of middle age and set course for my twilight years.

The Via Francigena, the route that has linked Canterbury to Rome since the earliest of times, is a virtual straight line in a south-easterly direction – as you might expect any journey between two points, especially when, for much of the past two millennia, a round trip, undertaken on foot or horseback, lasted the best part of six months. The Francigena was never an established road as such; it was more a corridor of movement along which merchants traded, armies marched, embassies moved and pilgrims travelled. It is incredible, however, that despite the invasion of Britain by Julius Caesar in 55–54BC, St Augustine's arrival from Rome in AD595 or the thousands of others who must have travelled up and down it for whatever reason, the first recorded itinerary of the Via was made by Sigeric the Serious, King Æthelred the Unready's Archbishop of Canterbury from 990 until his death in 994. Sigeric was luckier than one of his predecessors, Ælfsige (or Elfsy), who froze to death in the Alps while making the same journey.

Forgotten for his significant role in attempting to save the country from repeated invasion by the Danish King, Sweyn Forkbeard, Sigeric is remembered almost solely today for the fact that he just happened, probably out of boredom, to write down the 80 or so places where he stopped on his return to England from Rome after being officially invested with the pallium, the scarf-like vestment worn around the neck and effectively the Archbishop's badge of office, by the

Pope. His account is nothing more than a list – no year, no date, not so much as a remark; indeed, some of the places he recorded confound historians tucked away on the shelves of the British Library in an Anglo-Saxony Miscellany to this day. Nonetheless, it is on this unremarkable document found in the pages of an Anglo-Saxon Miscellany in the depths of the British Library that the present route of the Via Francigena is based.

The popular image of the Christian pilgrim dates back to the Middle Ages, celebrated most notably by Chaucer's fictional story of a band of everyday characters on their way from Southwark to visit the tomb of St Thomas à Becket, England's premier shrine, in *The Canterbury Tales*. To give an idea as to how popular the pilgrimage was around that time, over two million people were believed to have flocked to Rome from all over Europe in 1300 and, in 1450, it was estimated an astonishing 40,000 people a day were pouring into St Peter's Basilica.

St Wilfrid of Hexham was the first named English pilgrim to make the journey, in the mid-seventh century; others included Alfred the Great, sent by his father, and King Canute. The rich would make the journey on horseback, passing from bishop's palace to bishop's palace, while the poor would travel on foot from monasteries and convents to hospitals run by religious orders. Despite the renewed popularity of the Camino de Santiago, never since has the Christian pilgrimage on foot enjoyed such a following as it did in the latter half of the Middle Ages – perhaps due to war, time, the effort required or the inescapable fact that nowadays the Church, in general, plays an ever smaller role in Western society. By comparison, today, less than a handful of Britons walk to Rome every year.

However, pilgrims had been travelling to far-off places well before the Middle Ages, in search of saintly relics – including many fakes too – to pay homage to holy bits of finger, skull and other obscure pieces of this and that which they believed, in visiting, brought them closer to God either by touching or – worse – drinking, in the hope of making a prayer come true, curing sickness and disease or plain bolstering up virtue. To die a saint meant almost immediate dismemberment, as your various parts were scattered across Christendom, like new exhibits at the Royal Academy – a piece of Becket's bone even ended up at

the Venerable English College in Rome. The only others who suffered a similar fate were criminals after execution.

Such was the clamour to get sight of these relics, like the Veil of Veronica – the cloth that the saint is said to have wiped Christ's face with – that people were frequently crushed to death in the mêlée. Pilgrims, effectively religious tourists, were good for business; the enormous numbers of the devout on the move all needed to be housed, fed and watered – revenue from pilgrim dues helped rebuild Canterbury Cathedral after it burnt down in the twelfth century. And, at a time when Christianity was the framework for everything, to go on pilgrimage was to embark on the journey of a lifetime and a much sought-after opportunity to earn, in the process, a few bonus points (in the form of Indulgences) to present at the Gates of Heaven to forego temporal punishment due on sins forgiven. This was all the more important, given that the ghastly prospect of Hell, as peddled from the pulpit every Sunday, was worth avoiding at all costs.

Another compelling reason for anyone to go specifically to Rome was the reward of forgiveness from all sin; this sounded particularly attractive to me – the chance to wipe the slate clean after a not entirely angelic 42 years on this earth had a special appeal all of its own.

But it would be another four years before anything of consequence happened. The idea smouldered away and life rolled along until one day, my publisher, over lunch, dropped into the conversation that 'it would be a pity if that Rome book didn't get written ...', his voice tailing off suggestively. A throw-away comment that resulted in a swift email exchange and, three days later, it was agreed that I would set out for Italy in early April, after Easter, on what was for me, at that stage, a 'romantic adventure'.

At a friend's dinner party later in the week, I announced my news. There was an awkward silence.

'Have you got God?' someone asked.

No, I replied, I was walking to Rome for the hell of it. No cars, no taxis, no buses. I would do it the old way, on foot. But, I added that I didn't believe anyone could embark on an undertaking of

such length and be at the behest of one's own devices for so long without some form of spiritual reflection either.

'What will you do about your luggage?' came another.

The more I explained, the more the consensus around the table was that to travel to Rome by any means other than an aeroplane was, in this day and age, frankly unhinged.

Back at home, I consulted the map again: it was indeed a very long way. The French bit alone was two hands and Italy almost three – never mind the English or Swiss sections. As I was walking to a great capital it seemed meet that I should set out from a great capital, and so I decided to leave from London, adding another five days and nearly 100 miles to my journey. In the last 20 years, I hadn't walked so much as ten miles in one day, let alone 20 miles every day for three months non-stop.

And then there was the business of 'my luggage', which of course would be a rucksack – the cumbersome modern version of the 'scrip' or leather pouch, which held my medieval counterparts' every need, transforming me into an unseemly beast of burden. I had a matter of weeks to get ready. The April departure quickly became early May. The weather, I reassured myself, would be better then.

The more I went about my preparation, the more it became apparent that this was no ordinary endeavour; in fact, it would be a momentous event in my life, as the familiar would be exchanged for the unfamiliar. Almost monastic in its execution, the nature of the undertaking, I fast learnt, was just the same now as I suspected it had been in the Middle Ages or earlier and no less hazardous. My life pared down to a time-liberated and materially limited existence, as I rid myself of my flat, my job, my dog and my possessions, enabled me to embark as unencumbered by the trappings of the everyday as possible, free to wander, free to wonder and free to muse. As custom once dictated, but sense still demanded, I renewed my will and put my jumbled affairs in some sort of order – long-lost tradition in parts of Europe having it that, should I not return within a year and one day, I would be declared dead and my assets dispersed accordingly.

But ridding myself of everyday adjuncts and comforts that could reasonably be taken for granted was painful and loaded with emotion; it felt like I was tearing the skin from my back.

I learnt once again to pack for weight over elegance, a skill long lost since military days; my only nod to fashion being the purchase of a thumbstick while staying with my eldest brother, Charlie, in Northumberland, which I fancied would make me look a bit more authentic, even rugged, and a bottle of Murdock's 'Black Tea Aftershave' – a scented reminder that I was only absconding from the real world temporarily; at least, I would only stink like a tramp by day.

Alice Warrender, Andrew Bruce and Brian Mooney – veterans of the road to Rome – coached me in the intricacies of what would lie ahead. Andrew warned me to watch out for my boots in hostels, Brian discussed wolves in the woods around Radicofani, while Alice could talk of nothing but feet hurting like they had been caught in a vice.

Andrew dragged me off to Cotswold Camping in the most unlikely location of central Knightsbridge. I was handed over to Tamzin Norbu, the son of a Ladakh yak herder and no stranger to the Himalayas. My feet were measured this way and that, I was made to stand up, sit down, walk on the flat, walk around and even walk over a little bridge while the mountain man considered his new charge. And then, from behind a velvet curtain, an enormous pair of boots was produced with some ceremony. Grey and covered with lace-holes and rivets, they looked horrible. I was assured, however, that these monsters would get me to Rome with no problem. 'Nooo problem!' Andrew echoed, beaming with joy as if he had just delivered a baby.

Rucksacks followed in all shapes and sizes – contrary to memory, they were actually quite comfortable; once chosen, my newfound home was duly filled with socks, water bottles, glowy things to make me shine in the dark, blister kits and, finally, a set of reassuringly expensive bright red waterproofs, the latest thing in breathable clothing – 'to make you stand out in the rain so the lorries don't hit you', Andrew hushed at me as I questioned the colour.

Back in Dorset, I was accosted by my old friend Mike Marshall in the Village Shop: 'You'll need a key to take with you as a symbol of your pilgrimage.'

I looked at him quizzically.

‘It’s a key for St Peter, you know, just like they take a scallop shell to Santiago. I’ll make you one.’ A business-like conversation as to design and aesthetics followed and the retired schoolmaster-cum-steam engine builder left with a wave and sloped away to his comprehensively equipped lair of workbenches, tools, lathes and oily rags like Caractacus Potts to a new invention. Two weeks later, I was summoned to Mike’s kitchen where a large steaming mug of tea was thrust into my hand and a package the size of a book, wrapped in ripped sheets, was waiting for me on the table. I opened it, the peppery musk of *Brasso* wafting about me as I unwound the binding to reveal two handsome keys, golden in colour; the robust bow handles were scored with the cross and cut with holes at each diagonal large enough for my finger to fit through. They glistened in the afternoon sun. The shafts were engraved with my name while the bit was castellated and carved on both sides with the crucifix. Keys fit for the Gates of Heaven and, being made by a locomotive man, about the right size too.

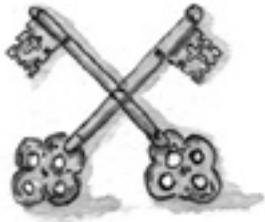
‘Why two?’ I hadn’t the heart to add that they weighed a ton.

‘Well, I figured, you’ll need one for the Vatican and the other to put up in church when you get back. Not every day we have someone in the village walking to Rome after all.’

In the Post Office, Rose stamped the first page of my Pilgrim Passport, a document issued to me by the Confraternity of Pilgrims to Rome – the organization established to help like-minded souls reach St Peter’s – setting me apart from the everyday traveller. The simple card entitled me to the three basic pilgrim privileges: the right to hospitality, safe passage and exemption from the payment of tolls. It would render me a ward of the Church and act as proof of passage as I made my way across Europe. The daily stamp would be my routine from now on at every place I stopped for the night until I reached Vatican City. Unfolded on the wooden counter, the shiny new Passport appeared bare and empty. Andy the taxi man looked on with a sombre face and in his gentle Dorset burr, wished me ‘all the best for your walk then ’Arry. You take care now, and mind you’ m do come back in one piece an’ all.’

And so, unwittingly, once again, I found myself catching up with ancient custom as not only I, but my stick and the enormous

keys were blessed at the altar in church with much hoo ha, like a Knight departing on Crusade. We sang *To be a Pilgrim* and I was sent on my way with the exhortation that God keep me in the palm of his hand until I return. He who would valiant be...



1,411 miles to Rome.





Part 1  
*England*

*...This precious stone set in the silver sea,...*  
William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, c. 1595