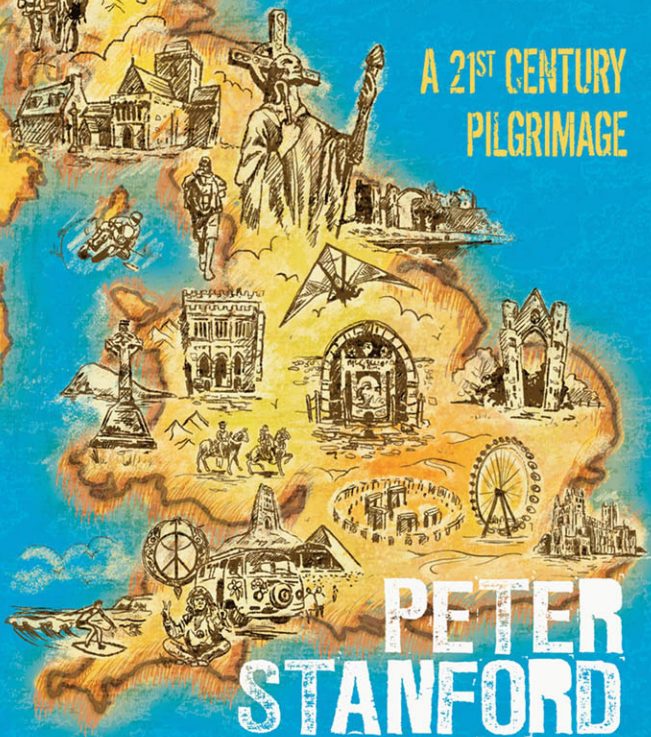


EXTRA MILE

A 21ST CENTURY
PILGRIMAGE



PETER
STANFORD

The Extra Mile

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The Extra Mile

*A Twenty-first-century
Pilgrimage*

PETER STANFORD



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*To Kit and Orla –
my companions on my travels*

Introduction

Waterden church stands alone in the middle of a field. There isn't even a path up to it, just a gap in the hedgerow and a trail across the grass. It is a Norfolk village church without a village. Parts of its just-about-watertight fabric are believed to date back to the Domesday Book of 1086 which makes mention of a church at Waterden, but whatever parish it served then or since moved away long ago. The former rectory in incongruous Victorian Gothic stands well apart from it, all but hidden behind a screen of trees. Otherwise there is not a single building in sight, only farmland rolling down the hill towards the track of an old Roman road (this part of north Norfolk belies the county's reputation for being flat), big skies and wild flowers in the overgrown graveyard.

Whenever I am in the vicinity of Waterden, I make a pilgrimage there. I use the word 'pilgrimage' deliberately. This is not just a ramble into the countryside, or the opportunity to inflict on my children (who often come along) a lecture on Jesus or ecclesiastical architecture. Waterden is, for me, a sacred spot; a verdict I reached instinctively long before I tried to analyse what it really meant.

When I did, I came up with three factors. First, what draws me back time and again is the silence. I did once attend a magical Christmas Eve service, when candlelight illuminated the frosty breath of singers (there's no electricity and no heating), but otherwise I've never met anyone else there, or thereabouts, though a notice in the porch refers to the occasional Evensong, and the yellowing visitors' book shows signs of life.

Then there is the mystery. What happened to the parish? To the Money-Hills whose graves are below the chancel floor? North Norfolk is full of once-thriving villages that have been taken over by second-homers and lie deserted during the week and in winter, but here at Waterden even the houses have gone. And the fabric of the church itself belies interpretation. Though small, it contains jumbled-up fragments of Saxon, Norman and Early English styles, as well as seventeenth-century mullions. It's like an architectural Rubik's cube. There is also the outline of a lost south aisle (to accommodate whom?), numerous blocked-up windows, and the ruins of a bell tower with walls that are surely too thin ever to have supported even a roof. Which may be why it collapsed. Not that anyone would have been here to notice.

You could reasonably argue that mystery and silence can be found in many places that would not merit the label 'sacred'. What clinches it for me, though, is that when about and around this hauntingly beautiful church, I am aware of an unformed presence, hovering at the edge of my senses. It is nothing as crass as ghosts, or unquiet spirits, wandering the graveyard, but just as illogical in our sceptical, scientific and secular age. The complete disconnection of Waterden with the modern world gives me a sense when here of walking in the footsteps of people of faith in ages past, of joining a human chain that draws me towards . . . well, towards their faith. It is, I accept, a hard one to put into words without sounding pious.

Too many religiously minded individuals, not all of them clerics, try repeatedly to 'prove' the existence of God. It is, as far as I can see, a futile exercise. God is beyond proof. That is the point of faith. It is implied in the very word, certainly in the way I use it.

Attempting, week in, week out, to provide 'evidence' that there is a God has the opposite effect to what is intended by these no doubt sincere preachers. It turns off more people than it attracts. It is one of the reasons why there has been such an exodus of late from the mainstream Christian churches. The time-honoured 'proofs' no longer wash.

Yet that doesn't mean, as is sometimes suggested, that religion itself no longer has a purpose, or indeed a pull. People may be put off by the dogmatism and introspection of religious institutions. They may be more ready than ever before to subscribe uncritically to the assertion that religion simply causes wars and conflicts. But that does not mean that they have ceased to yearn for there to be something other, something beyond the narrow confines of the here and now, of this life, of the consumerism, of the relativist values of this world, of its rough and random justice. How, though, to explore that yearning, when to enter a church, mosque, temple or synagogue is – in their minds at least – to side with one camp or another, and to invite being lectured and judged?

A survey in 2009 by Christian Research showed that, as a result of the global economic downturn, three-quarters of the population of Britain had been prompted to reassess their core values. The brutal unveiling in many lives of the shortcomings of capitalism and materialism in terms of homes and jobs lost had caused them to reconsider the alternatives. High on any list of such options would be religions with their shared ethic of justice, equality and concern for the marginalized. Yet, Christian Research reported, only three per cent of these 'non-religious seekers' had contemplated going to a church. Only one per cent had actually given it a try, and none of them was planning to repeat the experience.

Where else then might they look? Or where are they looking? Christian Research mentions volunteering and hobbies. Other sources point to a surge in popularity of retreat centres or 'taster' weekends and weeks at monasteries. The sales success of Sara Maitland's recent *Book of Silence*, an account of her embracing the life of a hermit in rural Galloway, placed in the context of the long history within religions of rejecting the world, is surely another indicator that something, somewhere, is moving.

Waterden church set me off thinking about gauging that movement in sacred spots, the places where spirituality has been concentrated in ages past, and where traces of it may

remain still. Usually they are called holy places, but what exactly does 'holy' mean? This is how the writer and poet, William Anderson, put it in a 1983 survey of the sacred landscape of Britain: 'When we speak of a place as being holy, we say something about its innate and acquired atmosphere, its emotional nature.' It is good, as far as it goes, but somehow sounds too passive, that we go to these holy places with no baggage and they work their magic on us. Surely it is a two-way process? We project our longings onto them too.

I listened recently to the 92-year-old former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Denis Healey, on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, saying that at his great age he reads only poetry. I knew at once what he meant. Poetry has that knack of saying eloquently what too often goes unsaid – because it is so hard to define – in the books and films and blogs and newspaper columns that swamp us. So I turn unapologetically to T. S. Eliot and *The Four Quartets* to express this urge towards sacred spots/holy places so much better than I could ever do. 'Little Gidding' was inspired by Eliot's 1936 visit to the church and buildings in Huntingdonshire that housed a now-defunct seventeenth-century high-minded Anglican community.

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of
the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

That idea of people setting off, not to verify but simply to kneel where prayer was once valid, is the starting point for this book and the pilgrimage it describes. The notion of aspects of the landscape giving us an insight into the creator God is, of course, a cliché. Sunrise, sunset, mountains, sea, rivers, great cathedrals, fields of corn blowing in the breeze, have all been invoked in prayers and hymns as lifting the veil on God's proximity. Much as we are taught to sneer at and avoid the cliché, it is worth remembering that the reason certain ideas and images become clichés in the first place is precisely because they hit upon a truth that many recognize. The problems come when the cliché is repeated too emphatically. So, as one of those rare clerics who is also a scientist remarked recently, the wonder of the universe does not prove God, but it certainly poses questions.

Britain has arguably as many holy places per square mile as any other island in the world. Some of these locations where heaven and earth are said to have touched have been hallowed by an unbroken tradition of prayer going back millennia. Others have a more fragmented story and testify to the changing religious climate here over the centuries. Some are well known, others less so. Some continue to operate as shrines, others simply as historical places of interest. Most have, woven into their legend, an element of unsolved mystery.

What they all have in common, though, as I discovered as I worked my way round them, is that something is stirring there. Numbers of visitors in most are up, as are numbers of visitors who come not just as tourists, or to sample a slice of the past, but to participate. These are non-religious seekers, curious as to whether the history of witness to faith at these holy places has anything to say to current times and current concerns. So that search for something other than the promises of money and material plenty that have been shown so hollow can be detected at these ancient sites; but it is a story that is below the radar of news headlines, and certainly doesn't register in the church-going statistics as they tumble remorselessly in most denominations.

To investigate it, I became convinced I needed to go the extra mile to uncover what these seekers were finding at sacred spots. Pilgrimage has always carried connotations of hard physical slog, and most of the places featured in this journey were indeed hard to get to. Several were to be found on islands where the tides managed to introduce an element of risk as to whether I would ever arrive on their shores safely. Or be able to leave. And then there were my inhibitions to overcome. It has become easier in the current climate to keep quiet about faith if you have one, especially if you want to explore it. As Tony Blair remarked, on becoming a Catholic after resigning as Prime Minister, he hadn't spoken about God when in office in case people assumed he was a 'nutter'. So to join a pilgrimage, to stand at Stonehenge at dawn with Druids in extraordinary costumes while lorry-drivers on the nearby roads looked on and tooted their horns in laughter, or to join a procession carrying a cross over the mud-flats to Lindisfarne with onlookers staring in blank incomprehension, requires if not courage, then at least a willingness to risk going against the cultural grain.

The eight locations covered in this book are very much a personal selection. There were many others that would have served equally well: the shrine church of the fourteenth-century mystic, Julian of Norwich; the restored sections of the ancient Canterbury Pilgrims' Way, immortalized by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* in the fourteenth century; 'Cerne Man', the giant figure cut out of a chalky hillside in Dorset, and a site of fertility rites dating back to Roman times and perhaps beyond; Pennant Melangell, in rural Montgomeryshire, a pre-Reformation place of pilgrimage where the twelfth-century shrine was later buried in the walls and only uncovered at the end of the last century; or the sea caves of Fife, with their ancient devotional carvings in the rock.

Those that made it onto my itinerary recommended themselves for several reasons beyond mere whim. One was that, put together, their individual stories more or less made up a snapshot of the history of faith in Britain, something increas-

ingly lost as anything religious is pushed to the margins of the curriculum. Some have indeed played their part in key moments of that history.

I tried to time my arrival to coincide with the presence of pilgrimages, festivals, missions and exhibitions because they seemed to offer a chance to listen to the people who were visiting, to explore with them the spiritual map that had brought them there. The chapters of this book follow the chronology of my visits. They start with the summer solstice at Stonehenge in June 2008 and end with Beltane celebrations in Glastonbury in May 2009, almost a full liturgical cycle.

For the most part I have tried to observe and describe the various ceremonies I attended, rather than participate in them. This is not, I should say as emphatically as I can, a book that has any ambitions to hold up any one faith alternative above another. Evangelizing has never been my bag. I am happy to be as I wish to be and show the same respect for others' convictions that I would want them to show mine. That is, after all, the so-called 'golden rule' at the heart of all religions. But I have never been that good at boundaries and, on occasion, as you will read, I have stepped over the line and joined in with a ceremony. My motivation was not to make any sort of commitment to what was going on, or even to put the claims being made for it to the test, but rather to follow the logic of pilgrimage, that it requires an input, an openness, and even a childlike curiosity.

One of my first jobs was at the *Catholic Herald* newspaper. A weekly task was to sub-edit the then editor's column, called 'People and Places'. It was not a sought-after role, but the formula People and Places has kept coming back to me throughout this journey. Each chapter is a combination of the two components. The exact balance depends on how my time at the particular location panned out, but this is as much an account of other pilgrims as it is of history, or my reflections. In some spots, the people spoke to me more than the location. In others it was the other way round.

Inevitably, our backgrounds shape how we react to what we

encounter, so I should be upfront about my own starting point. I am not a non-religious seeker, to use the jargon. I did well enough subbing 'People and Places' columns to end up as editor of the *Catholic Herald* for four years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and thereafter have continued to write, talk and broadcast on (among other things) the role of religion in our society, and sometimes specifically on Catholicism, the faith of my upbringing and still my given denominational attachment.

One of the benefits of that work over two decades is that it has exposed me to many other creeds and spiritual approaches, from animists in Angola and Candomble in Brazil, through to fundamentalist Islam in the East End of London. While I continue, in my own religious search, to work with what I was given – i.e. Catholicism – I hope that this exposure means my eyes are not too narrowly focused. Indeed, acutely aware as I am of the many institutional shortcomings of Catholicism, I could never absolutely rule out the possibility of seeking a transfer, though nothing has come my way thus far that appears, in an institutional sense, any less flawed. However, the search for spirituality, for the divine, for transcendence, that sense of life penetrated by the eternal, that there is more to this life than shows up under microscopes, is not limited by the confines of denominations, certainly not in relation to holy places that have been claimed by a procession of churches and cults down the ages.

The logic of most faiths is that, in everyday life, the sacred is always just beyond our reach. We aspire, we hope, we yearn, we want to believe, but it escapes our grasp. Yet some report touching it, albeit fleetingly, in moments of transcendence in their lives. They arrive we know not when. For me it was on my mother's deathbed when, heavily sedated, from out of nowhere she began singing. She had never been much of a singer, but now her voice was strong and pure. 'It's the drugs,' the nurse told me, but if drugs could turn a woman who tended to mouth the words of songs in church into Lesley Garrett, then we would all be taking them.

Holy places, too, carry with them that potential of transcendence, stepping out of time and out of character. And pilgrimages, I came to realize on my travels, are not just walking tourism. There is an interplay going on between the inner and the outer. For their premise is that the sacred is not always absolutely immaterial. The pilgrimage is, after all, seeking the spiritual through something material – the stories of those who have passed along the same road before, or straightforward, tangible geography and buildings. That is why pilgrims head for Bethlehem – to stand in the place where Jesus was born. Moreover, the very act of going on pilgrimage might be seen as making the body do what the soul desires, giving those spiritual yearnings a practical, material basis. In so doing, it runs counter to the powerful idea, found in most mainstream religions, that the spiritual is within us, and therefore utterly immaterial, rather than in the world, but that is so daunting. We don't know where to start. We do know, however, how to walk, how to go from here to there.

So was I swept up or swept away in any of the places I went to? In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Princess Marya Bolkonskoya feeds the Russian pilgrims who pass by her home. 'Often as she listened to the pilgrims' tales she was so fired by their simple speech, natural to them, but to her full of deep meaning, that several times she was on the point of abandoning everything and running away from home.' Did I follow her example? You will have to read on to find out.

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1

Stonehenge

I single to Stonehenge, over the plain and some prodigious great hills . . . came thither, and find them as prodigious as any tales I ever heard of them, and worth going this journey to see.

Samuel Pepys (1668)

There is a smoky, reddish glow to the dark grey sky outside the car window as we head over Salisbury Plain. It doesn't look like the middle of the night. Or anything like I imagine the middle of the night to be in the depths of countryside – namely a bluey-black blanket that smothers every detail, including hands held directly in front of faces. Yet my watch is unambiguous. It is 3.30 a.m. This is night time.

My companions on this journey are old hands at these early hours. They're Druids, worshippers at the shrine of nature and its awesome powers, and therefore regular nocturnal pilgrims on the solstices and equinoxes, connoisseurs of sunrises and sunsets. 'Shouldn't it still be dark?' I ask, childlike, but too disconcerted to keep quiet any longer. What if we have set off too late and are going to miss the sunrise at Stonehenge on Old Midsummer's Day?

'Don't worry,' says Phil, also known as Bear, his craft name, the rough equivalent among pagans of the saints' names Christians take on at confirmation. Phil is a computer programmer in his late thirties. He's a loner, he confides, not a joiner of things. He is staring intently at the road ahead, his brow creased under a Crocodile Dundee hat. 'We've cut it fine a few times,' he admits, sitting ever further forward in

the driving seat, taking corners on the empty road slightly too fast for comfort, 'but sun-up isn't until 4.48 today.'

The road ducks in and out of the valley of the Avon – the Wiltshire Avon that flows southwards into the English Channel. As we climb up from among the willow and sedge that line its banks, Salisbury Plain is covered with a white mist that hovers just above the fields. It makes me feel as if I am looking out of an aircraft window. 'It all used to be ancient forest here,' explains Theo, Phil's wife, a charity worker. They are physical opposites – he's tall, craggy, held-in; she's smaller, rounder, and with dancing, engaging eyes. She's also known as Changeling – from a time, she explains, before she found Druidry, when her spiritual quest was directing her towards faeries. She is perched on the back seat in a wrap-round purple cape and flowing full-length skirt. 'Trees are very important to Druids – the ancient British trees like ash, oak and blackthorn.'

'But, some people dispute that it was still a forest when Stonehenge was built,' Phil interjects. Another contrast: he is precise where Theo is elaborate. She fills the silences. He lets them be. I'm more like Theo and, anyway, these are the first of Britain's estimated 10,000 Druids I've ever knowingly met, so I have enough curiosity to avoid any lulls in the conversation. Do people treat you differently when you tell them you are Druids? 'Not generally,' reflects Theo. 'The people I work with know if I'm taking a day off for a Druid meeting or ceremony.' She pauses. 'But in my last job a few odd things were said. And according to others I have been fortunate.'

Druids do seem to have a bit of an image problem. In the popular imagination, they are almost indistinguishable from witches and the Wicker Man of Christopher Lee's cult 1973 horror flick. Eighteenth-century writers regularly charged them with offering human sacrifice, and that mud is still sticking. 'For some Druids', Theo goes on, 'there is the equivalent of "coming out", admitting to colleagues and family that they are Druids.'

Druidry is a belief system based not on a book or a written text, but claims roots in an ancient and instinctive connection

to the earth and to pagan practices that date back beyond Christianity (though this is disputed – a subject we will return to). ‘What I like about it,’ muses Theo, ignoring the bumps in the road as she sways from side to side as we hurl round corners, ‘is that it is broad and tolerant. It doesn’t do that Christian thing of saying it is a better way than any other. It is just one way that works for me. And it complements other parts of my life – like the yoga I’ve started doing.’

If forests there once were up here, they were cleared many centuries ago, leaving the undulating plateau of Salisbury Plain as featureless coarse grassland, much of it used today as an army training base. ‘You should be able to see it any minute now,’ says Phil. Theo tries to redirect my anxiety about arriving late onto the weather. ‘The idea of hope’, she says soothingly, ‘is always a part of our journeys. We always come in the hope of seeing the sunrise, but it could rain or be obscured by cloud. Hope is essential with nature ceremonies because you never quite know what is going to happen weather-wise. That’s why our rituals are also unpredictable. We adapt to the conditions we find.’

* * *

In the 1970s and 1980s, dawn on the longest day, 21 June, became the cue for a mass invasion of Stonehenge by various hippies, junkies, bikers, travellers, New Agers and assorted seekers, all hanging loose under the banner of a ‘Free Festival’. It grew in size, disorder and disorientation until it all came to a sticky end in 1985 with the ‘Battle of the Beanfield’, when police blocked off access to the stones. Legal arguments ensued until, in a landmark House of Lords ruling of 1999, the site’s owners, English Heritage, agreed that on certain prearranged dates and in negotiation with a ‘round table’ – a users’ committee on which Theo sits – limited access would once again be permitted. It was quite a concession, since for the rest of the year the heart of Stonehenge, a World Heritage Site, is isolated beyond the rope barriers to

protect the stones from the threat of further wear and tear, also known as tourists.

Some 30,000 seekers had turned up this year on 21 June – three days ago – to mark the solstice with a great big party; but this morning’s ritual, Theo and Phil explain, will be something much more spiritual and exclusive, a chance for true believers to cleanse and bring peace to Stonehenge, which they regard as an ancient temple, after the recent invasion by the hoi-polloi. Attendance is strictly by ticket only and is restricted to 200. The Druid Network, a loose association that represents one part of the many-winged family of British Druids, handles admission on a democratic first come, first served basis. I’m being allowed in as Theo and Phil’s guest.

Druids like using phrases drawn from what they call ‘old British’, based loosely on Celtic nomenclature (though this is disputed by some academics). So they are calling today Alban Hefin – in addition to Old Midsummer’s Day – while the gathering at Stonehenge is a Gorsedd of Bards of Cor Gawr – roughly, a meeting of mighty poets.

It looks more like a gathering of the teaching staff from Harry Potter’s Hogwarts as we pull into the car park of the Visitor Centre. The figures moving round in the dry ice of the pre-dawn haze could belong to any epoch, save perhaps the first decade of the twenty-first century. Cloaks are the uniform of choice, floor-length, hooded and invariably with flared sleeves. There is plenty of colour variation, though, from the scholarly black. Some have gone for a logical earthy green or brown, closer to nature and in line with Druid beliefs, but others prefer celestial white. The result is that they merge into the mist like heavenly creatures, floating in a disembodied state with nothing below the knee. Then there are those who, in party mood to welcome the solstice, have just let rip. One woman with a big, open face, a slash of red lipstick and long, white hair, sports a shimmering gold cloak. Another, close to her, shocking pink with gold leaves.

Her foliage is in the printed pattern of the material, but most of the assembled Druids have collected their own twigs and



Greeting the sun at dawn at Stonehenge.

flowers and pinned them to lapels, or wound them in their hair. Staffs are also much in evidence – some regular and straight, others twisted and obviously fashioned from branches. And under the cloaks, I notice, as my eyes and imagination adjust, are the sort of knee-length tunics worn by Robin Hood and his followers (or those imitating them in the TV versions), close-fitting, belted at the waist and good with tights.

I am starting to feel conspicuously under-dressed. The Barbour may be an essential element of the countryside code elsewhere, but not here. Fortunately, though, Druids are, as Theo has already pointed out, a tolerant lot. A middle-aged man in a white cloak over his black ecclesiastical cassock glides up to me, grinning. ‘Matthew brings you a solstice gift,’ he announces, using the third person and presenting me with an after-dinner mint in a bright blue wrapper.

I hover on the edge of various conversations, silently marvelling at the resistance to cold of an elderly, slightly stooped man, his cheeks decorated with stripes of red, blue and white