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Just what every pilgrim needs: A 607-page guide to Britain's sacred places



[William Cash](#)



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Britain's Pilgrim Places

By Nick Mayhew-Smith and Guy Hayward

British Pilgrimage Trust (forthcoming), 607pp, £19.99

Britain's Pilgrim Places is a very welcome and highly original reference book on Britain's sacred heritage. Whilst designed to appeal to those of all religious backgrounds – the authors' watchwords are "open to all" and "bring your own beliefs" – this is a book that ultimately celebrates the Christian history of Britain in a way that is eclectic, humbling and enlightening.

The focus, rightly, is on identifying the most significant legends, history and architecture, from the ruined tower of St Michael's Church on Glastonbury Tor (built on a pagan monumental mound), to Iona Abbey, the "mother" of Celtic Christianity. It also ingeniously connects these sites via the routes of ancient pilgrimage. You can, for instance, take a one-month pilgrimage to St Andrews from Iona along the St Columba Way.

It doesn't matter that many of these routes are not ancient as such, but created by the

inventiveness of the authors – or rediscovered, like the 250-mile “Old Way” running from Southampton to Canterbury. My only niggle is that this wonderful 607-page tome does not fit in the glove-box of my car.

Published by the British Pilgrimage Trust, this beautifully illustrated and authoritative guide book – with starred rankings and an informed printed voice – is a worthy travelling companion to the only other book that I religiously carry around in my car: a 1993 copy of the Rev Henry Thorold’s Collins Guide to the Ruined Abbeys of England and Wales. Thorold also wrote five Shell county guides and the Collins guide to Cathedrals, Abbeys and Priories, his architectural inspection of living places of worship.

But this sacred site guide goes much further than Thorold ever did, as it is also a pilgrims’ walking guide to Britain. Physical exercise was not something that the eccentric Thorold was known for: in a diary entry, James Lees Milne described him as having a “stomach like George IV”. Playing the part of eccentric scholar and clergyman, he drove around England in an old silver Bentley, the back seats doubling as a small library of maps and reference books.

What marked out Thorold’s “holy” Britain guidebooks was partly the tone: he wasn’t afraid of affronting religious sensibilities through sometimes harsh personal judgments. But the reason they stood out as being the best of the limited genre available was that he was a master of describing and subtly decoding the religious mood of a site, and gauging whether he felt it had retained its “spirit of place” – in short, whether he thought it worth visiting. As the artist John Piper wrote: “Driving about in one of his counties I often think, ‘What does Henry say about this place?’”

It is to the credit of the authors of this new guide to pilgrims’ Britain that they have followed in the Thorold tradition, helped by an excellent introduction by Simon Jenkins, himself a follower in the church-crawling tradition as the author of Britain’s Thousand Best Churches. (Jenkins is now at work on a similar guide to Europe’s cathedrals.)

This new guide, an updated version of Britain’s Holiest Places, will rapidly become the traveller’s bible, not only for those afflicted by “ruin lust”, but for anybody who itches to know more about the remaining stones of an ancient abbey, romantic ruin, church, shrine, martyr’s monument, saintly well, tub font, stained glass windows, holy caves and more.

The guide is comprehensive, with entries as far-flung as the hermitage site of St Cadoc on a remote island in the Bristol Channel, and with useful fact boxes giving directions, website details and even GPS coordinates. Having just walked the St Swithin’s Way through Hampshire, where it is easy to get lost when there is half a mile or more

between the green council wayfarer signs, the GPS routing should be a major advance for the modern pilgrim. The only problem is when your phone dies. Take spare batteries.

Just as Thorold was a man of multiple parts (including being a noted gourmand-genealogist) and loved to track down remote or inaccessible shrines and sights, so Dr Guy Hayward – who mapped the pilgrim routes – brings his own quirky spiritual passion to the book. When not working for the British Pilgrimage Trust, which he co-founded, Guy is part of a satirical cabaret double act called Bounder & Cad, along with another former choral scholar from Cambridge.

Where the trust may part company with Thorold, however, is in how this survey of Britain's holy places embraces the idea of "non-specific pilgrimage". "Bring your own beliefs" is, after all, the trust's motto. This is in line with other recent pilgrimage-themed books such as the excellent *We Are Pilgrims* by Victoria Preston: its subtitle is "Journeys in Search of Ourselves" – as opposed to in search of God.

We have come a long way since the days when Henry VIII banned the practise of holy pilgrimage – often a form of medieval festival tourism. But Simon Jenkins's Introduction to the book is surely being misleading, or guilty of what psychologists call "confirmation bias", when he says that medieval pilgrims made "little reference" to religion or purpose on their shrine trips.

Jenkins declares himself a cathedral-loving atheist, a phrase reminiscent of Graham Greene's awkward relationship to Catholicism. But Greene also believed in saintly miracles, having personally experienced the healing powers of Padre Pio: an encounter with the great Franciscan saint helped cure Greene of the mental anguish he suffered from his love affair with Catherine Walston, which inspired the tortured religiosity of *The End of the Affair*.

The novelist refused to meet Pio, as he didn't want his life to change by meeting a living saint. In general, he found superstition or magic more "rational" than theological matters such as the doctrine of the Trinity. "I like the so-called primitive manifestations of the faith," he once said. Greene, who walked 350 miles across Liberia in 1935 without a proper map, would certainly have loved this book.

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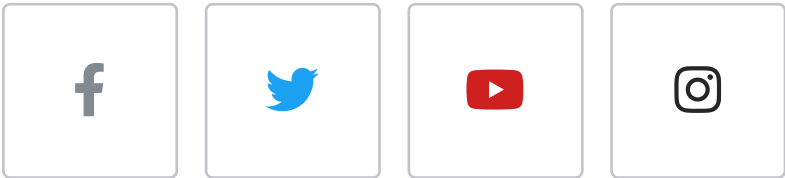
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