

FORTH AN SYNS

– OR WALKING THE SAINTS' WAY ACROSS CORNWALL

This is the story of a great walk. It combines beautiful countryside with refreshing stops at pubs and churches and you have the pleasure of walking in the footsteps of pilgrims and perhaps saints.

Our Camino started in Padstow, near my house on the north coast of Cornwall. It was the Wednesday of Easter Week 2010 and we were four people: my wife Teresa and I, Anthony a friend from teenage days, and Elizabeth his wife. And here we found our first saint.

Overlooking Padstow harbour is the 13th Century parish church of St Petroc. Petroc was a Welshman, educated in Ireland, who brought a group of followers across to Cornwall by coracle in about 530AD. They landed in the estuary near Padstow and taught the Gospels; they converted the native Celts and are said to have performed numerous miracles over the next thirty-odd years.

We followed the first Saints' Way signpost out of St Petroc's south porch, through the lych gate and thence out of town along streets lined by Victorian villas until, quite quickly, it was open country. The Saints' Way soon passes Dennis Hill (from dinas meaning a hill fort) where a granite obelisk commemorates Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 and continues past a former tide mill in Little Petherick Creek.



Tidal power is not a new idea. A hundred years ago water was impounded at high tide by an enclosing wall and then drove a mill wheel as it poured out through sluice gates. As the creek narrowed, we struggled down the muddy hillside to creek level and came to Little Petherick Church. This tiny church is literally cut into the side of a steep rocky hillside. Originally mediaeval, it was rebuilt by the Victorians and houses a splendidly ornate gilded rood screen. It is dedicated to St Petroc Minor – not a younger brother at boarding school, but simply indicating a lesser church with the same dedication.

In Little Petherick, the Saints' Way crosses the narrow, steep and very busy A389, the main road into Padstow, and heads off through fields and along narrow lanes through Mellingley, a tiny village dominated by a huge 6-storey watermill. We continued across country, observing in the distance (but well worth the detour we then made) St Issey Church and village.

At this point, as we were sitting in the Ring-o-Bells pub opposite St Issey (actually St Ida) church with our detour drink, I should explain that the 'Saints' Way' - Forth an Syns in Cornish - is a 30-mile route linking Padstow with Fowey. It is something of a tourism industry construct to describe it as a Pilgrimage Route; however there was undoubtedly a significant trade route between these two ports with safe harbours, respectively on the north and south coasts of Cornwall. Their use saved travellers and traders from having to negotiate the tricky bit around Lands End by open boat. There is some hard evidence, and rather more myth, pointing to it forming part of a pilgrimage route but, in fact, you could link any handful of Cornish villages and find that you had a "saints' way"; so it is not unreasonable to apply such a name to this route. The Saints' Way was to be the first leg of our Camino and I was carrying a small lump of slate from the headland near my house (which I am happy to say I have since carried to Santiago de Compostela and deposited on a window ledge of the Cathedral, Teresa's stone is on Cruz de Ferro).

In the "Dark Ages" Cornwall was very much the cross-roads of the Celtic Fringes of Europe - Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and Galicia - Celtic people travelled and traded between themselves and also with the outside world; for instance the Phoenicians traded tin with the Cornish from earliest times.

Celtic Christianity was thriving in Cornwall during the 6th Century AD, well before St Augustine was sent to Britain by the Pope, to impose some Roman order and discipline. It has survived to this day, through the patron saints of countless churches. Because Cornwall was something of a traffic island for the travellers and traders between Ireland, Wales and Brittany many saints are shared between these places. My own village saint, St Carantoc, appears also in Brittany as Carantec village (near the Roscoff car ferry terminal) in Wales as Carranog, and in Ireland as Cairnech.

Our lunchtime drink finished, we returned to the official Way and reached the A39, a busy trunk road. Once safely across it, we walked steadily uphill along the edges of fields to the top of St Breock Downs and a windfarm (yes, just like the windmills of Galicia!), this is the highest point on the Saints' Way, at 216 metres. This is a point to stop and take a long look round, as you draw breath. St Breock church is hidden from view in a deep valley somewhere to the north of us but the panoramic view of north Cornwall and the sea beyond is spectacular. From here onwards the Way loses its "north coast" feel as it heads inland, through lush and beautiful farming country towards Withiel. This is a tiny village of granite cottages with a beautiful tall church, St Clement, which dates from the 13th and 14th Century. It has interesting Georgian glass and, like most Cornish churches, is very well cared for.

From Withiel, variously by field path and lane, we reached Lanivet, which was an important parish in Celtic times. Nearby is St Benet's Abbey, which was a hospital of the Order of St John of Jerusalem (a St John's Cross is built into the outside wall) and which would have offered shelter to mediaeval pilgrims. Lanivet church was the only one on our walk to be locked. John Betjeman attributes it to St Nivet, Dr Pevsner either to St Nivet or to St Ive; and quite inexplicably, the Truro Diocese website appears not to know its' saints name!



Lanivet is about half-way across the width of Cornwall and we followed the Way steadily uphill, southwards, out of town and through a tunnel under the A30 dual-carriageway. Continuing to climb increasingly higher, we found the wayside cross of St Ingunger, one of many ancient granite Celtic crosses along the route, and continued upwards to Helman Tor.

At 209 metres high, Helman Tor is a rugged granite outcrop with some of those improbably balanced, rounded boulders that the Cornish refer to as Logan stones. Again, the panoramic views were breathtaking, we could see Roughtor and



Brown Willy, the highpoints of Bodmin moor behind us, but there in front was the south coast too, which definitely gave us the feeling of being in the home straight – of this part of our Camino, at least.

The track beyond Helman Tor, despite being along an elevated ridge, was incredibly muddy. We were obliged to copy what countless previous walkers had done and actually balance along the tops of the stone walls, known confusingly by the locals as “hedges”, to avoid becoming bogged down! But we eventually arrived in Lanlivery.



Another large and beautiful church in a tiny village, St Brevita has the third tallest tower in the Diocese. Equally interesting to us was the Crown Inn opposite. This originates from 1130 and was one of the stops for drovers taking their stock overland to boats sailing out of Fowey.

At the Crown Inn, and with another drink, I can report that Cornwall Council has provided the Saints' Way with a system of waymarks. These are variously brown (and thus sometimes camouflaged) fingerposts or low wooden posts with a coloured Celtic cross cut in. These are fairly well maintained, though with nothing like the visibility and ubiquity of the bright yellow arrows and scallop shell markers along the Camino Frances. There are sometimes gaps offering opportunities to navigate in error, and despite carrying the 1:25,000 O.S. map, the official walkers' guide and a GPS machine with a faulty battery, we did experience the deep and enriched mud of a dairy farm yard.

Much refreshed by the Crown Inn we continued through beautiful countryside, now up a bit, now down a bit, through settlements called No Man's Land (where we crossed the busy A390) and Milltown. Through the trees to the east we glimpsed the church of St Winnow, beautiful and isolated, 90 metres below us on the edge of the Fowey River.

Once you have seen the Fowey River, you are on the home run of the Saints' Way. Some more downs and ups brought us to the village of Golant. This village is the site of Castle Dore, associated with King Mark, uncle of Tristan and betrothed to Isolde. We came upon Golant's church first as just the tower pinnacles on the horizon, and then gradually the tower came into view followed by the body of the church. The church is dedicated to St Samson, a 6th Century Irishman who was travelling this route from Ireland to Brittany, where he eventually became Bishop of Dol.



En route, he is said to have converted many pagans, killed a serpent and established a monastery here.

An interesting feature of this lovely church is the pulpit, into which the joiner has incorporated several historic bench ends including a carving of St James. Just next to the south porch there is a holy well, said to have served the original hermit's cell.

But Golant is a waterside village and the Way runs steeply downhill to the banks of the Fowey River. A railway line has enclosed a small area for boat moorings and the Fisherman's Arms is a good place for more R&R, overlooking the water.

Those familiar with the Camino Frances will know that there are no field gates, no kissing gates, no stiles or any other barriers to progress. The Cornish follow the opposite approach and we became quite familiar with the several different ways of twisting ones knee whilst balancing on rickety railings, gates and stiles. This came to a head shortly after Lanlivery when a vicious and obdurate sheep retreated before our progress, taking up a defensive stance in front of a stile. The stand-off didn't actually last very long and the sheep made a run for it in the face of cries of "mint sauce" and vigorous waving of our walking poles.

Much refreshed at the Fisherman's Arms we walked on southwards, along the tree-lined bank of the river to Sawmills Creek. Virtually inaccessible by vehicle, this 17th Century watermill has emitted loud pop music on each of the several occasions I have walked past it. I have since discovered that it is a recording studio and has been used by many bands with which our daughters are familiar! Historically though, it was a smuggling centre where imported goods were unloaded, to avoid paying the harbour dues in Fowey.

We huffed and puffed up the long steep climb from Sawmills Creek; beside a stream with waterfalls and through woodland carpeted with wild garlic. Finally, at the top of the hill, at a place called Penventinue, the path turns left, then becomes increasingly well-paved, and finally leads downhill into Fowey.

But not before one encounters the Ghost Road. There is a 2-way road running along the valley. It has white line road markings and traffic signs; but there is no traffic; there are no connections between this ghost road and the real road into Fowey; yes, a veritable ghost road. Fortunately, the OS 1:25,000 supplied the answer, which is that this is the former railway line between Par and Fowey. Both places are ports for the export of china clay – the big industry in these parts – and this has been converted into a private through-route for kaolin-filled juggernauts delivering to the docks.

Fowey is one of those picture-postcard seaside villages, with quaint narrow streets where the smell of the sea mingles with exhaust fumes from the traffic jams. Halfway along the main street, is the former Customs House. There, as a canopy above the main door, is a large scallop shell, commemorating this as the site of a mediaeval rest house for pilgrims and as the point from which hundreds of pilgrims are recorded as embarking en route to Santiago de Compostela in the 14th and 15th Centuries. But that is not the end of the Saints' Way.

The last few yards brought us to Fowey church, St Fimbarrus, huge and glorious, cool and numinous. The Roman church tried to impose St Nicholas (a patron saint of pilgrims) on Fowey as an alternative patron.



The village resisted this and the church remains dedicated to St Fimbarrus.

It seemed most fitting that we celebrated our successful completion of this first leg of our Camino with a Cornish cream tea.



Before ending I should come clean with you on a few practical facts. This walk is approximately 30 miles, which can be exceeded easily if you succumb to detours to worthwhile churches and villages such as St Issey, Luxulyan or Lostwithiel. We completed it over three successive days and, as I have a house nearby, a shuttle system of cars at the beginning and end of each day allowed us to sleep in our own beds with the benefit of hot showers and laundry. The alternative option of mini-cabs for shuttling about can be expensive in Cornwall, but our driver on the last day did give value, explaining the virtues of his beloved West Ham football team. Another admission is that whilst we started as four, one of the group left after the first day, needing to return to work, and another developed a gammy knee at the Crown Inn, Lanlivery, and withdrew temporarily. However that knee has now recovered sufficiently to have completed the Saints' Way a few weeks later and, on the day after that, to have undertaken the St Michael's Way (between St Ives and Marazion). And three of us have now completed our Camino by walking from Leon to Santiago. Santiago – a fitting end to our adventure that started in North Cornwall..

Robert Shaw 2010

Photography by Shaws and Sterns