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## The Three Kingdom's Way, A Pilgrimage Route



*Launcet church, on Three Kingdoms Way, open air services were held here until the 1830s*

### Why Pilgrimage?

Most people feel the need for pilgrimage at some point in their lives, the urge to get away from the cares and concerns of everyday life, to walk in the landscape with minds focused only on experiencing God's work. Pilgrimage has no purpose except to walk and contemplate and develop a spiritual life, but what can be more important than this?

In the past many people in England went on pilgrimage and the countryside was set up for it. Pilgrimage fell into disrepute in the Protestant Age, but the need didn't go away and is strongly reviving now. The modern pilgrim typically goes to Santiago de Compostella route, nearly half a million went last year, and this route is prepared with rest points along the way, but there is no need to go out of Britain. Our island is criss crossed with footpaths and rich with both mystery and meaning in its landscape and has a church every two or three miles connecting all into a holy network, all footpaths lead eventually to the church. What is missing are places to stay overnight and here churches, the very places that help make the country holy, can step into the gap. Churches can make pilgrimage possible by providing shelter in the form of overnight floor space, access to water and a toilet. Anything more is luxury.

Using churches as overnight sanctuary is a different but still worshipful way of bringing people to God.



*Clifford Mesne church, a refuge for one pilgrim and perfect sanctuary with an excellent toilet outside, small sink in the vestry behind the organ and a place to lay out a bedroll*

## Why this Route

The route negotiates north/south around the east edge of the Forest of Dean, about fifty miles as the crow flies, though almost twice this on the ground, from Malvern to Chepstow. The way follows footpaths that the pilgrim can choose from an OS map and winds from church to church. Much of it could be done on the Wysis Way (though in my experience this path disappears quite frequently) and the Offa's Dyke path. The route is ancient, it runs between two early (i.e. 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century) Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and two dioceses that mirror the kingdoms, i.e. between the Hecani/Magonsaete kingdom and Herefordshire Diocese and Hwicci kingdom and Worcester Diocese. By 1000 AD, the area had become three kingdoms: Archenfield which had split from and was the south part of the Hecani/Magonsaete kingdom, the Magonsaete to the north and the Hwicci, to the east.

When the Roman administration and army left Britain in 410 AD, many people were Christian and religious places of worship, baptism and burial had been set up, but then followed centuries of Anglo-Saxon and Viking invasions. These people were pagan but were converted to Christianity from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It is very likely that pockets of Christianity survived in the Forest of Dean from Roman times, and some of these places may have been on church sites of today.



*Abenhall Church is set in an elevated place within a 'llan' an enclosed circle. Though the church is medieval its location suggests it began as a Celtic, i.e. British, pre-Anglo-Saxon, place of worship.*

The people of England and Wales in the centuries between the Romans and the Norman invasion of 1066 were a war like people, tribal, they lived under war lord kings, but it was also a religious age, an age of saints, hermits and the conversion and baptism of people to Christianity.

Over the centuries small tribal kingdoms amalgamated and were governed by an established law. The church was central to this process, state and church grew together and kingdoms and dioceses had broadly the same boundaries. The first Bishop of Hereford, Putta, established his church at Hereford in the late 7<sup>th</sup> C. The Hereford Diocese covered the tribe of the West Hecani Anglo Saxon people, later called the Magonsaete, and the eastern boundary of it was the Wyre Forest, the Malverns and the Leadon, south of Donnington.

North of the Severn were the Wreocensaetan, the tribe of the area of the Wrekin and Wroxeter, who formed a part of the large mother diocese of the overlord Mercian kings at Lichfield.

East of the Severn were the Hwicce. Bishop Bosel was the first known bishop here installed around the same time as Bishop Putta and governed the diocese of the Hwicce tribe, that is Worcestershire and parts of south Gloucestershire of today.

At the time of the Tribal Hidage, thought to date to King Offa of Mercia (757-796 AD) the kingdoms of the Magonsaete and Hwicce were both assessed at 7,000 hides, both therefore equal but smaller kingdoms than, and in homage to, Mercia, the large central England kingdom. King Offa built the famous Dyke much of which survives today (and is crossed on this pilgrimage route), dividing Mercia from Wales.

The kingdom boundaries changed over the following centuries with numerous battles and allegiances. By Domesday (1086), the Forest of Dean lay in Archenfield which was a buffer state between Wales on the west and England on the east, neither Welsh (though there were many Welsh speakers within it) nor English (and there were many English living there).

The original tribal boundaries, dating back to the earliest records of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and no doubt before are preserved today in the Diocesan boundaries and this pilgrimage follows the eastern edge.

Walking along the boundaries of the kingdoms you are walking the way of early saints, soldiers and administrators, who set up churches to bring the word of God, and hope of salvation to people scattered across the land, working the soils, mining, building and bringing up families, and occasionally facing wars and invasions from Wales on their west.

## The Route

I did this route in seven days but it could easily be done in five.

The way begins at Malvern and follows the north to south spine of the Malvern Hills with fantastic views over Worcestershire to the east and Herefordshire to the west, going through the huge Iron Age hillfort of **British Camp** as far as **Midsummer Hill**, a second magnificent hill fort and curiously close to the first. The route drops steeply off the summit, to cross the main road and goes by footpath through woods to **Whiteleaved Oak** and the meeting of the three counties and three kingdoms. The name by the way does not mean white or leaved or oak, but derives from *Gatelite* written as such in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and interpreted as 'Goat's slope'. I turned NW to Eastnor church and my first overnight rest, a village not to be missed, especially if there is a cricket match scheduled, county level teams regularly play here. Refreshments between 9.30 and 4.30 can be found in The Wood Shed by Eastnor Castle.

The route continues over lovely ways to **Bromsberrow church**, with its prominent hill, surely this must always have been a landmark and the reason the church and manor were later placed here. Then over the motorway, through the sandy soils of Bromsberrow Heath and market gardening country for two or three miles into the region around Dymock, made famous for walking by the **Dymock poets** who lived, wrote and walked here in the years around the First World War.

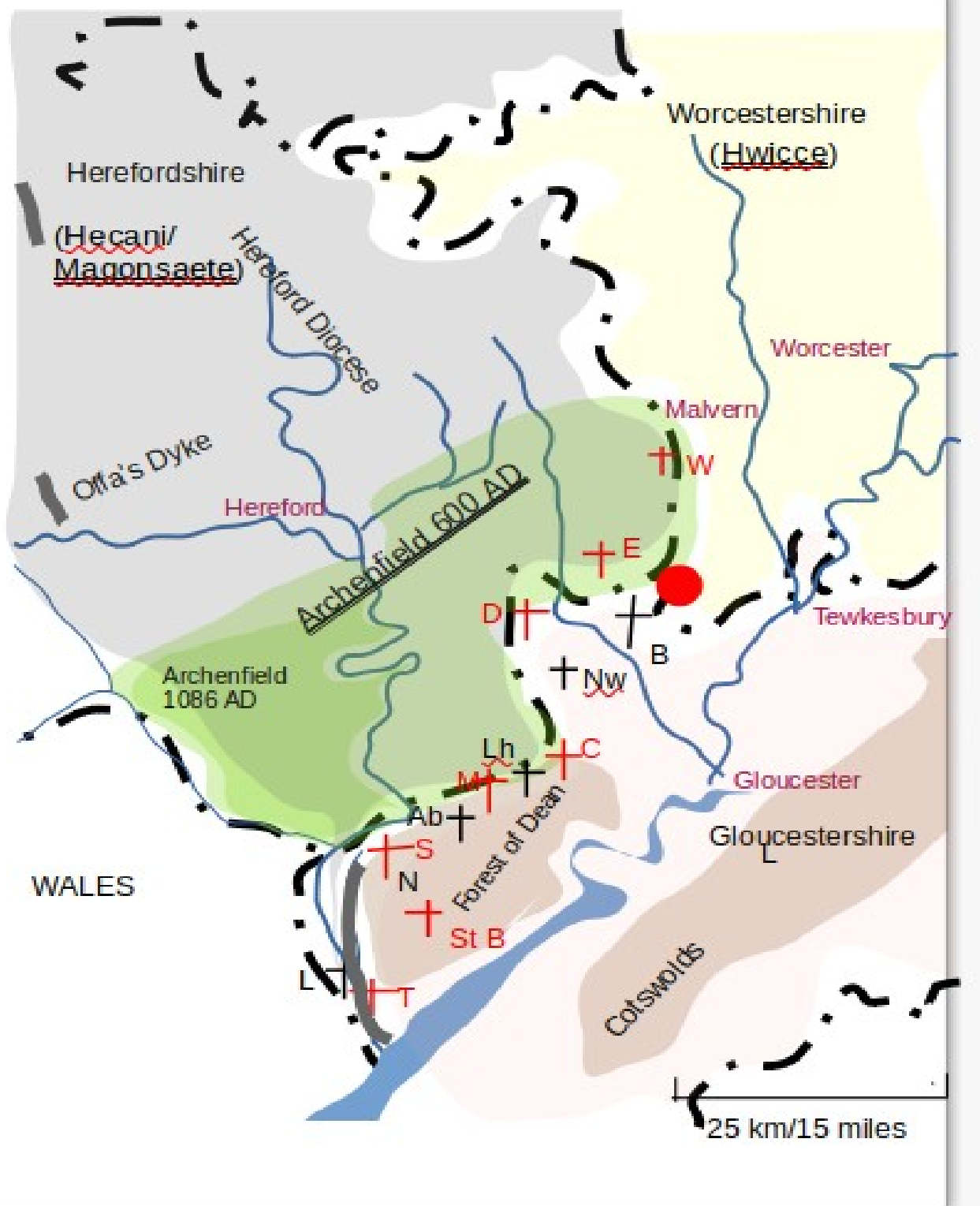
Next day I walked out of Dymock to Newent (many shops, cafes and pubs here), the landscape in the lowlands is agricultural and used for market gardening, I went via the Newent canal, and then began the slow climb towards **May Hill**, a famous landscape and beauty spot with sudden views to the Severn Estuary. I stayed at Clifford Mesne church, the grounds of which were full of wild flowers. I only learnt later this was where Winifred Foley (1914 - 2006), who described so vividly the life of people living in the Forest of Dean in her book *A Child of the Forest*, lived here for many years. She loved the Forest and must have loved living here.



*View from British Camp at the north end of the pilgrimage, an Iron Age hillfort, the boundary between Herefordshire and Worcestershire (and the Magonsaete and Hwicce) runs through the middle*



*Clifford Mesne Church, the grounds are full of wild flowers*



Plan of the Three Kingdoms Way. Red oval White Leaved Oak; red crosses churches I stayed overnight; W Wyche, E Eastnor, D Dymock, C Clifford Mesne, M Mitcheldean, S Staunton, St B St Briavels, T Tutshill. Black crosses some interesting churches en route B Bromsberrow, Nw Newent, N Newland, Lh Longhope, L Launcet; grey line Offa's Dyke, Dash dot line, county boundaries, grey shading Hereford Diocese

After May Hill the route enters **Forest of Dean** territory, with its very steep hills, meadows, old roads as footpaths, and my first sign of the rootlings of **wild boar**, this just as I reached Mitcheldean and my fourth night of pilgrimage, a magnificent church and one not to be missed.



*Looking back on the route; Mitcheldean spire centre, May Hill rhs, Malverns lhs in distance*

The next day was a long one for me, I got lost on **Forestry** paths, trying to find the Wysis Way, I passed old rail tracks and **coal** mines and using the compass eventually made my way to Staunton church, so conveniently situated on a track out of the Forest and with a large Welcome sign at the church door, how pleased I was to see it. There is a pub in **Staunton**, though I was too tired to venture out that night.

The paths were much easier from Staunton, I went via Newland – the Cathedral of the Forest, and then met up with the **Offa's Dyke** path which I largely followed to St Briavels. Highlights of this part of the pilgrimage were the **lime trees**, in full flower, smelling and looking wonderful. St Briavels has a **castle**, YHA (closed inexplicably the night I was there), a shop (9 to 5, closed Sat afternoon and Sun) and a pub (too busy to serve food but they sold me bread and cheese).

From St Briavels still largely on the Offa's Dyke path which overlooks the river Wye and is an easy way as well signed, I went via **Launcet** nature reserve and church, a very special place for the pilgrim, to Tutshill church, which is right by the path and almost in Chepstow, sandwiched between the Wye and the Severn with the whiff of sea in the air, and many interesting things around and about it, worth staying to see and explore.

I ended my journey by the estuary of the river Severn where Offa's Dyke ends right on the cliff edge.

## The Churches

All the churches along the route are interesting and important and have something to offer the pilgrim in reinforcing and reminding the walker that God is present in all creation. The churches were a place of quiet and prayer for me and a help the pilgrim focus on their spiritual journey.

Most, of the churches, if not all, could take overnight pilgrims, if they were willing. Those in bold in the list below I stayed in (in July 2024) and all made me very welcome, however, this was a one off journey, and the route is not a permanent established way. It could be (see below).

Some of the churches *en route*

- Wyche Free Church; toilet, water, church room
- Colwall; water, toilet (Ale House)
- **Eastnor**; toilet, water, (the Woodshed cafe open 9.30 to 4.00)
- Bromsberrow, water (no toilet)
- **Dymock**, water, kettle, outside toilet (pub next door open Wed to Sun, small village shop)
- Newent, water, toilet, town facilities
- **Clifford Mesnes** toilet, water
- Longhope, water, toilet (Longhope bakery one mile away, shop hours)
- **Mitcheldean**, water, toilet, kitchen (town shops and facilities)
- Abenhall
- **Staunton**, water, kettle, toilet (pub in village)
- Newland, water, toilet (pub in village)
- **St Briavels**, water, toilet (pub in village, shop 9 – 5, Sat afternoon and Sun Closed, YHA, usually full but sells drinks and snacks, but all closed the w/end I was there (July 5<sup>th</sup> 2024)
- **Tutshill**, water, toilet, church room

## Do Not Miss



*The hamlet of **Whiteleaved Oak**; the point where the three counties of Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire meet. Sadly the name does not mean a white oak tree, it derives from Old English for a slope with goats. This rugged point is an ancient boundary between kingdoms dating back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century or before*





*Newland Church, 'the Cathedral of the Forest'*



*Slimeroad Pill; The point where Offa's Dyke ends opposite Chepstow*

## **Final Thoughts**

Did the pilgrimage achieve its aim, well of course not in that there is no end or final thoughts, for the whole of life is a pilgrimage and the spiritual journey just continues. The walk however was a

break from normal life, from the cares, routine, relationships and habits that make up life and was an opportunity to reassess all of those things and see them with fresh eyes, and come away with new resolutions. I also felt physically well and relaxed and enjoyed it all. Thank you to all the churches that made it possible.

## Suggested Rules for Pilgrims

- Please leave facilities as you found them
- Please be respectful of the holy place, its environs and neighbours
- If you can afford it please make a donation towards the upkeep of the church and improvement of the pilgrim resources
- Remember the church and its mission in your prayers

## Developing the Route

If the church community wanted to develop the route, as a different but still worshipful way of using the church, a number of issues need to be addressed, none are difficult. They include:

- **Name:** Firstly a name for the route is needed, I thought the Three Kingdoms Way but other people may have better and/or more appropriate suggestions
- **Website:** The pilgrim route needs its own dedicated website, they are quite easy to establish, I use Google websites, a domain name costs no more than £10/year
- **Booking in System:** I think this is necessary, if people are interested in walking the route and staying in churches, they should provide a name, email and/or phone number, and give warning of their arrival; This could be done via the website. The administrator would have to warn church wardens/key holders of the arrival of pilgrims
- **Charging:** to me it doesn't seem right to charge, but donations can be given and even encouraged. If you charge, people will have expectations, pilgrimage is not a holiday, luxury is not expected, pilgrimage is about simplicity and stripping away.
- **Leaflet, Credential, Booklet:** Creating a pilgrim credential is an excellent idea, but needs an artist/designer and researcher.
- **Prayers and Resources:** Pilgrims may feel weary, distracted, disappointed in themselves, prayers and meditation help both in the pilgrim credential/booklet, on the website and in the church, advice on how to pray, how to walk in a prayerful way, all would be welcome.
- **Health and Safety:** Walk around your church as though you have never been there, and warn of any potential hazards, an example is given from Abbey Dore church at <https://www.churchwalkingpilgrimages.org/if-you-are-a-church/risk-church-notice>
- **Locking at night:** it is advisable pilgrims lock themselves in the church at night but of course they must be able to get out and the church warden must be able to get in. Normally there is a way, i.e. a second key, a side door
- **Enhancement of facilities:** The pilgrimage project could be used to apply for funding from various sources in in order to improve church facilities and outreach.
- **Other things:** Please add

## Volunteers

If churches along the route wanted to develop the route and expand the idea, volunteers would be needed to take on some of the roles listed above.

I am happy to give some time to it.

**Background Information from:**

Hillaby, Joseph, 1976, The Origins of the Diocese of Hereford, Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists Field Club pp 16-27

Copplestone-Crow, Bruce, 1989, Herefordshire Place Names.