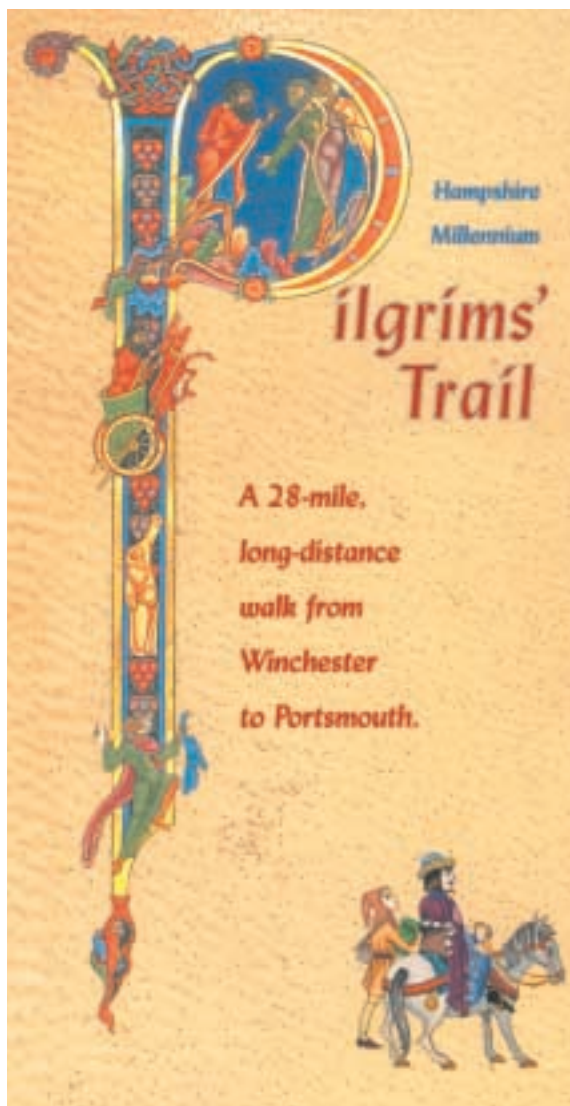


TO BE A PILGRIM



The first group of modern pilgrims make their way across the Bay de Seine towards Mont Saint Michel



Tourism to religious destinations is on the increase. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (UK) has published a report in which it estimates that there were about 31 million visits to cathedrals and churches in the UK in 1999. Overseas, annual pilgrimage to holy places has been with us for centuries. Destinations such as Lourdes and Mecca continue to draw millions of pilgrims from around the globe. Pilgrimage today, like most forms of international travel, relies upon modern transport. But one recently launched initiative is offering tourists the chance to get out of their cars, put on their walking boots and tread in the steps of pilgrims from a bygone age. **Nicola Horsey** (Defence Heritage and Tourism Manager) and **Andrew Bateman** (Assistant Tourism Manager) of Hampshire County Council report on the highly acclaimed Hampshire Millennium Pilgrims' Trail.

Pilgrimages from England to Mont Saint Michel in Normandy originally took place as a consequence of the cult of Saint Michael that was widespread in the British Isles from the ninth century. The Norman sanctuary of Mont Saint Michel attracted pilgrims from all over Europe, and most British pilgrims stopped at the Mont on their way to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. Winchester, in Hampshire, was an important medieval city and a place of pilgrimage in its own right, with its shrine to Saint Swithun. During the middle ages, many pilgrims would have made a journey from Canterbury via Winchester and Portsmouth to Barfleur in Normandy, and on to the Mont. Recreating these ancient pilgrimage routes and enabling modern pilgrims to walk them for personal enjoyment, whilst developing cultural and economic benefits, is now the overriding aim of several interconnected projects being promoted by Hampshire County Council.



Service funds and staff time commitments from a range of County Council departments.

The County Record Office carried out its research into the pilgrimage route network within a relatively short space of time, enabling the route to be established on the ground, and the trail guide to be published on time. Newly designed waymarking that incorporated a silhouette of Mont Saint Michel and the ancient pilgrimage symbols of a shell and walking stick were used on both the Hampshire and Normandy sections of the route. Owing to national conventions, the waymarks are blue in Normandy and green in Hampshire. We believe it is the first time a common waymarking symbol has been used both sides of the Channel.

The route pack has been widely recognised as an outstanding publication. Produced by the County Council's Corporate Graphics Unit and using medieval images from The British Library, Cambridge University Library and Winchester Cathedral in conjunction with medieval style artwork and maps, it is altogether different to the majority of long distance path guides. The guide is detailed enough to enable walkers to follow the trail without needing to refer to an Ordnance Survey map. It is also weatherproof! A French translation of the route guide was produced, and proved so popular that a second print run was needed. In Normandy, meanwhile, a dedicated guide to the French section of the route was published by the Association 'Les Chemins du Mont Saint Michel', and this is stocked by Hampshire County Council's Information Centres.

Launching the Trail

Ylva French Communications were contracted to develop and coordinate a national media campaign to launch the trail. They worked closely with the County Council's own Press Office, who dealt with the local press. The media interest in the initiative during the build-up to its launch was extraordinary. At the time of the launch, journalists on both sides of the Channel were hosted and major articles and photographs appeared in *The Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Sunday Express* and *The Times*. Local newspapers ran numerous articles over several months. The press were clearly enthused by the transnational trail, its historically rich environment, and its reference to one of the



first forms of mass tourism. We have estimated that over £100,000 worth of coverage was generated in the UK and approximately the same again in France.

The launch was built around an inaugural pilgrimage from Winchester to Mont Saint Michel (15 to 29 September 1999). Hampshire County Council recruited nearly 100 people to take part in an 11-mile walk along the Pilgrims' Trail from Winchester to Bishop's Waltham. Fourteen members of this group signed up to complete the whole 155-mile walk over a 14-day period, which included joining up with the French inaugural walk. Badged as our 'core pilgrims', this small group of local residents, plus two French walkers and one Canadian, have become walking ambassadors for the county over the past three years. Drawn from a range of backgrounds, some were keen walkers and members of local ramblers' groups, while others were fresh to the pursuit. However, those lacking in experience certainly compensated with their grit and determination to complete what was likely to be one of the greatest challenges of their lives.

The launch started with a pilgrims' breakfast in the Great Hall, Winchester. The Bishop of Winchester blessed the gathering, which included representatives of Le Conseil de Basse-Normandie, before groups of pilgrims made their way to Winchester Cathedral for a welcome address and second blessing from the Dean of the Cathedral. Local TV, radio and newspapers were all there for the launch. An opportunity was provided for a stamping of the Pilgrims' Record, a card within the route pack that enables each walker to collect ink stamp marks from places visited along the route. Souvenirs and mementos were an important part of medieval pilgrimages; many early pilgrims wore a shell symbol and carried a lead ampullae filled with holy water. Bishop's Waltham Parish Council hosted a welcome reception for everyone at the end of the day, within the grounds of the ruins of the Bishop's Palace. It was a fitting end to what had been a memorable and exceptionally successful day.

Our 'core pilgrims', however, had only just started their journey and faced another two days of walking before completing the Hampshire section to Portsmouth. The Bishop of Portsmouth blessed the group during a service at the Royal Garrison Church in Portsmouth before they departed for Normandy, with the help of P&O Portsmouth, to join the start of the inaugural walk of the



In the Middle Ages, many British pilgrims stopped in Winchester (far left) en route to European destinations including Santiago de Compostela in Spain (right). Now, a new generation of pilgrims can enjoy the delights of these ancient routes on both sides of the English Channel

French section. A large group of mainly French walkers set off from Barfleur on 19 September towards Mont Saint Michel, with what seemed to be whole villages turning out to cheer the group on their way. This support from local communities was repeated all the way to the Mont in an extraordinary fashion. Saint Michael's Day (29 September) heralded the arrival of the group at Mont Saint Michel and involved a memorable walk for over 300 people across the sands of the Bay de Seine to the Mont for a final welcome reception. One of our participants commented, 'The experience of crossing the sands was something I'll never forget – you think of the memories as being kept safely in an imaginary bottle and every so often you uncork it and savour the experiences all over again.'

The launch was a great success. The image of the County Council had been enhanced through the quality of the product and the substantial, highly positive press coverage. The cooperative activity we had undertaken with our French colleagues, however, had proved quite complex, due in the main to the number of French organisations involved and the relationships between them. This, to some degree, when combined with the short space of time available, had prevented the development of a joint publication. It should be noted that having a French-speaking project coordinator within the Hampshire County Council team was invaluable. It is unlikely that the outcomes would have been as positive without such an individual. With the benefit of hindsight we might also have changed the route slightly to incorporate some key attractions such as the Hospital of Saint Cross, Britain's oldest charitable organisation, which dates back to 1132 and has pilgrimage links. These would have added value to the product, but time was not on our side when the route was finalised. We had to make some decisions quickly and without as much consultation as we would have liked.

Monitoring progress

Well over 3,000 route packs have been sold since the trail was launched. Each pack includes an evaluation form, and the forms completed and returned by users to date suggest a high level of satisfaction with both the trail and the pack. Some of the respondents have suggested that the trail maps and written

directions could be made easier to follow in some areas, and we intend to act upon these comments in due course. When the pack is reprinted, we plan to incorporate as many of the suggested improvements as possible, so that standards are continually raised and user expectations are met. The feedback also suggested that a significant percentage of users are walking the whole trail to Mont Saint Michel, a view that is backed up by the quantity of guides sold for the French section of the route. A recent article in *Rambler* that featured the whole route produced a huge increase in the number of requests for the French publication, leading to our stockists selling out!

Whilst we haven't undertaken a full economic impact assessment of the Pilgrims' Trail, anecdotal evidence suggests that a large number of rambling clubs have organised walks along the Pilgrims' Trail, and a number have completed the whole route through Normandy. In addition, pubs along the route have commented on how many people come in 'clutching those nice little packs'.

Within the County Council, the success of the Pilgrims' Trail and the cross-departmental project team has spawned the recently launched 34-mile Saint Swithun's Way. This trail runs north east from Winchester Cathedral to Farnham, providing a link to the North Downs Way and onwards to Canterbury. It fills a missing link in the pilgrimage route network. The pack produced to accompany this new trail, although similar in style to its predecessor, incorporates improved information on accommodation, attractions and public transport. And the Hampshire Walking and Local Food Festival (28 September to 6 October 2002), with its 36 guided walks around the county and local food and drink theme, would probably also not have come about without the departmental links being cemented.

With over 2,800 miles of Rights of Way in Hampshire, we are keen to ensure that the county continues to benefit from these assets.