Interview

A route shaped by history

As plans take shape for a new pilgrimage route through Athelney, we spoke to Revd Dr Simon Bale, Vicar of Athelney Benefice, about the special history of the area, what makes pilgrimage so powerful, and what walkers might discover about faith, community and themselves along the way.



How does pilgrimage help us encounter God?

It takes us out of our churches and puts us in the world that God is active within and gives us a sense of our humanity under the skies.

Why does walking with others matter?

It is the other people who journey with you who really bring out the reflections you have. It is the conversations we have about the landscape we are walking through that are exciting and revealing.

What is the new Athelney pilgrimage route?

It is part of the pilgrim route being developed from North Petherton, to Somerton and beyond as a way of recognising the significance of King Alfred in the story of England.
The Isle of Athelney is where Alfred overwintered in 878–879, before his victory over the Danes at Edington.

After he'd beaten Guthrum, one of the settlements was that Guthrum should be baptised at Aller. This is in the middle of Athelney which, as a result, has had a spiritual essence for around 1,500 years. That history is important and the new route helps to place oneself within that history.

What can pilgrims discover?

Thousands of people have walked these routes over the years. Although we occupy the present, we are making the history for future generations to look back upon as well. If you think, 'Gosh, this is what Alfred did,' then who knows where that questioning leads you.

Do you need to be a Christian?

You get something out of pilgrim routes no matter where you're coming from. Within us all is a sense of spirituality which can often be nourished by a pilgrim route.

What should we do as we walk?

A pilgrimage isn't a race to the end. It is about pausing along the way. I encourage people to stop and pray about what they're experiencing. Think, 'I wonder where this is leading me?'

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From the Church of England Diocese of Bath and Wells November 2026

Exploring the great tradition of pilgrimage

For centuries, pilgrims have left home to walk with others, pray and encounter God beyond the walls of the church. Today, people still follow many of those ancient paths, discovering faith, fellowship and the beauty of the natural world along the way.

Pilgrimage is the focus of this year's diocesan Rural Forum. The annual gathering which brings together clergy, lay leaders and others involved in rural ministry from across the diocese, will explore what pilgrimage means today, and how journeying with others can become part of our shared life with God.

Rob Walrond, Rural Affairs Adviser for Bath and Wells said, "We're excited to explore pilgrimage together at this year's Rural Forum and discover how it can enrich the life of our churches and communities. We want to bring people together to share ideas and discover pilgrimage afresh."

Across the diocese, churches and communities are finding ways to make pilgrimage part of their life and worship, whether walking between churches, following routes connected



with saints, travelling to places of prayer, or simply making time to walk, pray and notice God along the way.

Rob said, "It is amazing all the new and inventive ways that people are exploring the great tradition of pilgrimage. It can be a wonderful and missional opportunity for churches to connect with their communities and further afield offering hospitality and sharing God's love."

The Rural Forum will offer an opportunity to hear more about pilgrimage, share experiences and consider how it might become part of the life of churches and communities across Bath and Wells.

News in brief

Year of the Angels

A special service at St Andrew's Church, Burnham-on-Sea, brought almost 200 people together to celebrate the church's historic carved Angels.
The service marked 200 years since the angels arrived in Burnham and was part of the church's Year of the Angels. Children from St Andrew's School sang a specially written angels-themed song, while pupils, residents and the town's mayor gave readings.



Thousands gather for online

81 schools joined together for the latest Online Collective Worship, led by Bishop Fiona and the Diocesan Education Department.
Bringing together first schools, infant schools, junior schools, primary schools and middle schools, the service welcomed more than 8,500 children and adults from our diocesan family of schools.
With the season of Harvest as a backdrop, Bishop Fiona explored the theme of growth.



On the road to Ukraine

A member of St Andrew's Church, Bath is helping send hundreds of solar panels to a church in Ukraine to support people who have been displaced by the war.
Revd Alan Bain, a retired member of clergy, has worked with churches in Ukraine for more than 20 years.

He has united with the Bristol based company, SolarSense and Ukraine Focus to send repurposed panels to Svalyava in western Ukraine, where they will help provide power for a church offering accommodation and meals to people affected by the conflict.

Find out more on these and other stories at bathandwells.org.uk/news

A journey with God

By Fiona Gibson, Bishop of Taunton

'One of the most significant places in the UK for me is the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, and the pilgrimages I've made to and from the island walking barefoot over the sands have been holy moments.

Unlike other journeys, pilgrimages are deliberate journeys of transformation. I went on a pilgrimage from Watchet to Stogursey this year with a group of laity and clergy from Quantock Deanery. It had moments of challenge, and moments of joy. We were definitely changed as we travelled. It was a holy time.

In Christian teaching, pilgrimage has long been seen as a form of martyrdom. Not the martyrdom of shedding our blood, but the martyrdom of shedding our preferences, our self-centred desires.

The psalmist wrote, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on a pilgrimage." Those words show a yearning to be with God in his dwelling place, and that's a yearning we can all mirror in our prayers, whether we can physically undertake a pilgrimage or not.

One of the most famous stories of a pilgrimage is, of course, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. I find the closing words of the book among the most moving in literature, as they link our lives in this world to our journey's end with God. "I cannot describe what Christian felt when he came face to face with the King … I woke too soon. And besides, no one can dream the Unimaginable. I shall have to cross the River myself before I can say exactly what the City of Gold contains. I would not have chosen to wake. But I did. I am awake now. Time to get up, then, I suppose, and continue the journey. I am on a pilgrimage, too, you see. Everyone is."

May God bless you on every step of your pilgrimage, and may you find your rest in him.

Fiona Gibson, Bishop of Taunton

