
In the footsteps of St Birinus: the pilgrim walk to Dorchester

In the first of an occasional series on pilgrimages, we trace the history behind the route which hundreds of pilgrims will take on Sunday 3 July as they follow the St Birinus pilgrimage. Why not take part yourself and collect 'pilgrim stamps' along the way.? Full details are available at www.dorchester-abbey.org.uk or from the Rector, Revd Sue Booy.

ST BIRINUS was a Benedictine monk of the monastery of St Andrew in Rome, the same monastery which produced St Gregory the Great and St Augustine of Canterbury. He was sent to Britain by Pope Honorius I to 'sow the seeds of our Holy faith in the distant lands beyond the Kingdom of the English, where no other had been before him'. He landed on the south coast in 635 and within a year had converted Cynegils, the King of the West Saxons.

According to tradition, Birinus and Cynegils first met on Chum Knob near Blewbury, where our pilgrimage starts.

He later baptised the King beside the river Thame, close to the spot where the present Dorchester Abbey stands.

When he died in 650, Birinus was buried in the church he had built in Dorchester. In about 680, his relics were transferred to Winchester; one of the churches he had founded, and shrines to him were erected in Abingdon, Dorchester and Winchester. The shrines were later destroyed by King Henry VIII.

The pilgrim walk is 12 miles long and starts at Chum Knob, where you will receive the first stamp in your 'pilgrim passport' and goes across

the floodplain to the Abbey. The route takes in six historic churches, two Iron Age hillforts and the Iron Age dykes of Dorchester. It will culminate in a procession into the Abbey for a service led by the Bishop of Reading, the Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell.

Refreshments are available along the route and there will be a barbecue after the service.

John Crowe, the former Rector of Dorchester; was an avid pilgrim, organising the St Birinus pilgrimage in his day, as well as following the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela. In a recent article on pilgrimages for the Quiet Spaces journal, he said: 'From prehistoric times it has been natural for people to walk to holy places. Walking gives the chance for reflection; it gives a sense of purpose, direction and goal. Most of the world's major religions share in this experience of significant journeying. It has always been part of the Jewish/Christian tradition-seen as a foretaste of the journey every individual makes from birth to death, from earth to heaven.'

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