

Following in the footsteps of the monks who walked the St Kenelm's Way from Clent

by John Price

The figure of Saint Kenelm is one that has figured in the background of my life for many years. This association began when I was still at school in 1972; the family home moved from Blackheath to the village of Romsley, and our new address became St Kenelm's Road. I was to learn that this name derived from a figure of ancient Mercia, a member of the royal family of Mercia, a boy king and martyr, murdered in the nearby Clent Hills in 819 AD to further the interests of an ambitious relative. After his body was concealed, it eventually came to light by virtue of miraculous intervention.

A church was built on the site where the body was discovered, about one mile from present-day Romsley, and the well which was said to have sprung up during the exhumation can still be seen close to the church and attracts veneration to this day. Incidentally, the reason for the isolation of the church is that it is the last surviving remnant of a much older settlement, the village of Kenelmstowe.

It must be said at this point that there is little historic evidence which supports the legend; rather the reverse in fact. A prince called Kenelm certainly existed, but he seems to have survived to maturity, died in battle fighting the Welsh in around 812, and never became king at all.

The importance of Kenelm lies more in what he meant to the people of the Middle Ages than the actuality of his life. St Kenelm was in fact one of the most important saints of medieval England, one referred to by Chaucer in the Canterbury Tales and venerated throughout England. Indeed, William of Malmesbury, writing in the twelfth century, reported that "there was no place in England to which more pilgrims travelled than to Winchcombe on Kenelm's feast day." This small Gloucestershire town is where the saint's body was taken by the monks of St. Peter's Abbey to be interred, and is the place most commonly associated with Kenelm other than the Clent Hills. It was here that I encountered the legend for the second time, when I moved to nearby Cheltenham fifteen years ago.

The idea then formed of creating a walk which linked Romsley and Winchcombe, recalling the

journey taken with the saint's remains, and it had a particular resonance for me as it also linked the two places where I have lived for much of my life.

It turned out to be a sixty mile journey, the St. Kenelm's Way, across many memorable landscapes, beginning with the chain of hills to the south of the Black Country and used for recreation for many generations of Midlanders: Clent, Waseley, and Lickey. The journey then continues along the scenic Birmingham-Worcestershire canal, passing the astonishing line of the thirty Tardebigge locks, one of the great feats of engineering. Leaving the canal, the walk diverts to the remote heartlands of Worcestershire, visiting numerous ancient villages and passing by places of historic interest, such as the picturesque but obscure Huddington Court, and concluding with a spectacular finish through the grounds of the more famous Sudeley Castle.

If the legend of St. Kenelm is the central idea of the walk, I would suggest that the unifying theme can be identified as the religious life of medieval England. As many as ten churches dating from the Middle Ages can be found en route; in addition, there are two holy wells associated with St. Kenelm and two ruined monasteries, Winchcombe and Hailes Abbey. If we also consider the famous monasteries that lie near the route, at Halesowen, Worcester, Evesham, Pershore and Tewkesbury, it can be seen that the area covered by the walk has a rich and ancient religious tradition.



The ancient St Kenelm's Church near Romsley, in an engraving dating from 1800, which is the starting point of the St Kenelm's Way.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this area also figured prominently in opposition to the Reformation, with nearby major houses being associated with the Gunpowder Plot, in particular Coughton Court, Hagley Hall and Hewell Grange, all of which lie near the walk, and Huddington Court, which is actually on it.

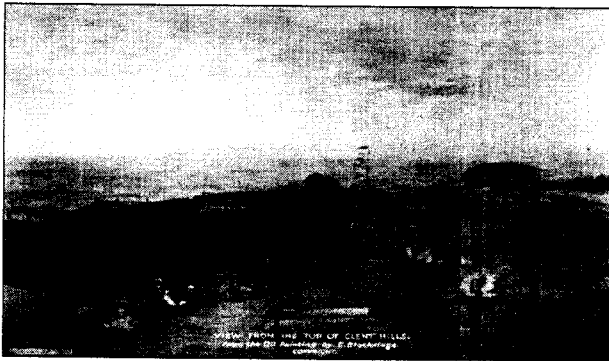
More positively, the walk should also recall the old religion of England, because it invites the participant to escape briefly

from urban life and glimpse the world of seasonal birth, death and regeneration which formed the reality of life in rural medieval England, and which were rendered meaningful by the cycle of liturgical and sacramental celebrations of the churches we still see today. In this context, we can begin to understand how the story of the martyrdom of a boy-king offered hope of renewal, and why it had such a hold on the collective imagination of the

period. It is also perhaps something to contemplate as we view the fascinating trail of religious monuments that are present along this route.

Details of the walk, including full directions, maps and practical information, as well as background notes on general points of interest on the way, can be found at my website, which is www.kenelm.org.uk.

This site also features a full discussion of the legend of St Kenelm.



St Kenelm's Way begins in the beautiful Clent Hills, before wending sixty miles to Winchcombe where the saint's remains were buried at St Peter's Abbey. (From E. Blocksidge's 'Clent Described and Illustrated' - 1910).



John Price, who has formulated the St Kenelm's Way walk, alongside the remnant of a medieval preaching cross at St Kenelm's Church in Upton Snodsbury, Worcestershire. The saint's body is said to have rested here for a night.



The spring, said to have sprung up at the site of the murder of the young king, as it looked at the turn of the last century.

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