

Pilgrim Path

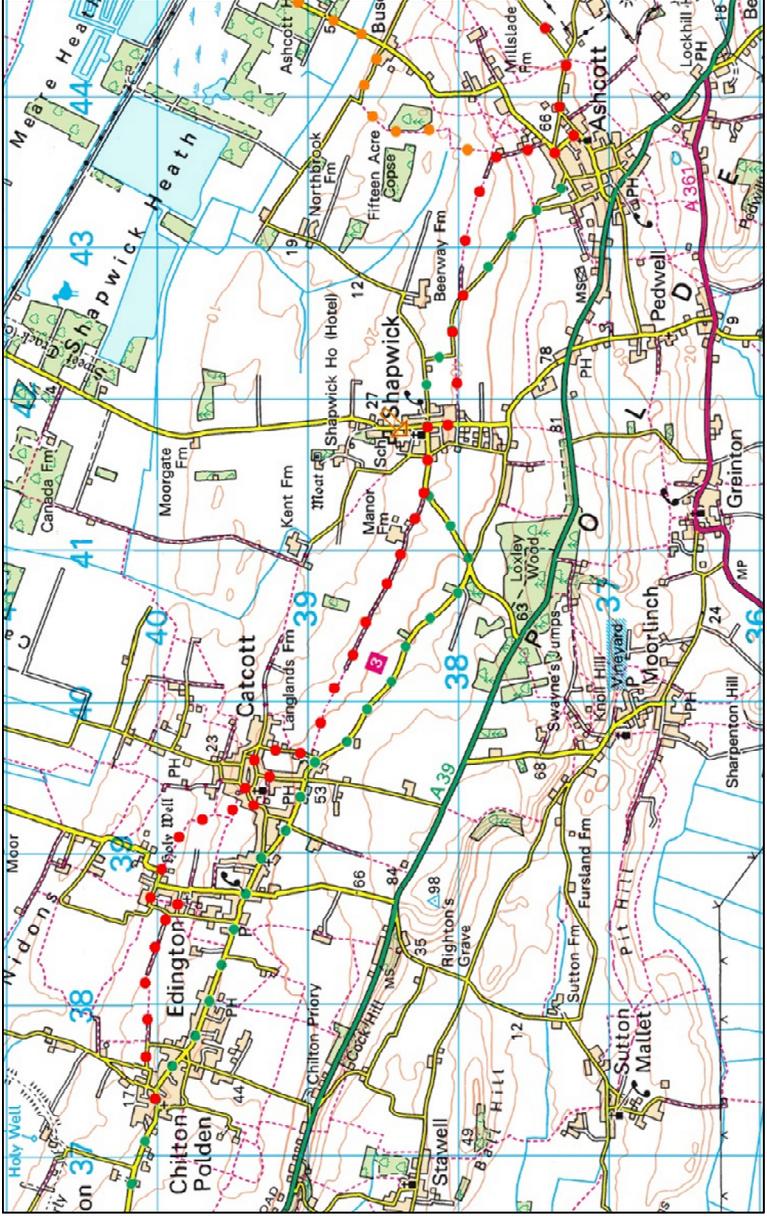
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Polden Hills



Map of the Polden Wheel Pilgrim Path: (1) Chilton Polden to Ashcott

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Map of the Polden Wheel Pilgrim Path: (2) Ashcott to Glastonbury

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Introduction to the Polden Hills Pilgrim Path

Pilgrimage is part of the landscape of the Polden Hills: in mediaeval times, Glastonbury Abbey drew pilgrims from across the British Isles and further afield. Recently, there's been a revival of interest in pilgrimage: it offers a way of connecting with God which is not constrained by buildings or liturgy, and recognises that God may be found on the journey as much as at a holy site.

This Pilgrim Path starts from Chilton Polden and goes through the Polden villages via Ashcott to the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey. The first half is similar to what many pilgrims would have taken in mediaeval times, although they would then have remained on high ground before the River Brue near where the Pomparles Bridge is now. The route described here from Ashcott is more direct, going across the Levels and through the southernmost part of the Ham Wall nature reserve.

For a walk to be a pilgrimage, there is an intention to use the time as an opportunity for spiritual reflection. Thus, this guidebook offers prompts for reflection: although it is hoped that you find this helpful, the more important thing is that you are able to use the route as an opportunity to connect with God. The prompts for reflection are written from an explicitly Christian perspective – which befits an area marked by pilgrimage to Glastonbury Abbey.

Practicalities

The full route is about 10 miles long. It's realistic to do this within a day, with suitable reflective breaks along the way. An alternative would be to do it in two halves, splitting the route at Ashcott.

At the time of writing, the 75 bus goes through Glastonbury and the Polden villages: it is a regular but infrequent service, with 5 buses in the day currently serving the full route. One option for doing the full walk in one day would be to park a car in Glastonbury in the morning, take the bus to Chilton Polden, and walk back to the car.

The churches tend to be opened between about 9am and 10am, and tend to be closed at around dusk.

Starting the pilgrimage

As you start, it would be worth spending a few minutes reflecting on why you are doing it:

- Maybe you would just like a nice walk, and a few moments of quiet reflection would be a helpful extra.
- Maybe you have some things on your mind and you would like the opportunity to quietly reflect on them, and offer them to God, as you go.
- Maybe you would like to follow in the footsteps of the pilgrims of old, wondering what it is that they sought as they travelled.
- Maybe you don't know why you are doing it – but some insight along the way would be helpful!

All of these are good reasons. For this to be a pilgrimage rather than a walk, it is helpful to start by identifying your own reasons (or even the lack of them).

Prayers for the journey

The essence of prayer is that we speak to God, in whatever way feels natural, and open ourselves up to receiving from him, in whatever way he chooses to do so. For some, it is natural to do this spontaneously – to chat to God as one would do with a close friend. For others, it is helpful to use written prayers – perhaps as a springboard into one's own praying. The prayers offered in this booklet are intended as a helpful aid, not as a formal requirement.

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In my journeying with you,
may I never lose my sense of direction,
never lose sight of the landmark
towards which I travel.
And should cloud or rain obscure my vision,
may I draw closer to you,
so that my feet may tread
in your footsteps,
your words be my encouragement,
and your love my protection
against the storms that assail me.

In this busy world
that we inhabit
grant us space
to rest awhile -
by the still waters
of your peace,
to hear the whisper
of your voice
and feel the warmth
of your breeze
within our souls.
Grant us space
to rest awhile.

Chilton Polden to Ashcott – route directions

The first half of this walk connects five of the churches along the Polden ridge, from Chilton Polden in the west, via Edington, Catcott and Shapwick to Ashcott in the east. Each of the churches are worth stopping in for a while, although you may prefer to remain in the outdoors.

Glastonbury Abbey estate

In mediaeval times, the entire area through which this Pilgrim Path proceeds would have been part of the Glastonbury Abbey estate.

Your first view of Glastonbury Tor, an obvious landmark along this route, appears unexpectedly along the path from Smallways Lane to Edington.



1. Starting from **St Edward's church** in **Chilton Polden**, turn right to walk along Broadway. *(Please mind the traffic here, as there is no pavement.)* Turn left into Goose Lane, and then right into Combe Lane. When the road joins Smallways Lane, turn right. When Smallways Lane turns sharp right just after the playing field, keep straight on to the farm track.
2. At the end of the track, go to the left of the hedge where the footpath continues along the right-hand side of the field. At the end of the second field, the path bends to the left where it joins a track from Edington.

St Edward the Martyr

There has been a church in Chilton Polden since the 7th century, probably on the same site of the present church. It was eventually named after an English king, who reigned from 975 to 978, before being murdered at Corfe Castle, probably aged only 16. He was already considered a saint by 1001.

Although some people have been named as saints, the word 'saint' in the Bible applies to all who believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God. This is apparent for example at the start of Paul's letter to the Romans: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Your pilgrimage therefore starts at a site where saints have trodden for at least 1300 years.

3. At the end of the track, turn right into Broadmead Lane, and then the second road on the left into Church Road, to get to **St George's Church**.
4. As you leave the church, go round the back of the church to join a footpath on the north side of the churchyard. Cross the lane (called 'The Walls') and carry on down the footpath, and turn right at the end onto Chandlers Lane. This will merge with Holy Well Road coming in from the right: keep going straight on until you reach the restored **Holy Well**.
5. Follow the footpath to the right of the Holy Well. Cross the stile and head east along the side of the field. In the second field, the right-of-way is technically along the north and east sides, although in practical terms there is usually a well-worn footpath diagonally across it. At the far corner, continue diagonally across the next (rather narrow) field to join a track from Catcott.

Holy Wells

There were several holy wells along the Polden Hills, with most falling into disrepair. However, the one in Holywell Road, Edington was extensively renovated in 1937, although the flow is now intermittent.

These wells, with their high mineral content, usually sulphurous, were foul-tasting but said to have curative properties.

Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' – **John 7:37-38**

6. The track joins Broadmead Lane (Catcott version): keep going slightly to the right. Turn right into Brook Lane. At the **war memorial**, turn right into Manor Road, going past the Primary School. Just before the road turns right, take the well-marked footpath to the left, to reach **St. Peter's Church**.

War Memorial

In the first world war, all of the physically able men in the village joined the armed forces. Six men died serving their country; five also in the second world war, and two in later conflicts.

- What do you think is worth paying the ultimate price for?

*My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. **John 15:12-13***

Catcott: a Church saved from demolition

There has been a church on this site since at least the 13th century – but it has had an eventful history. In 1551 it was sold to a William Coke who proceeded to demolish it – but was ordered by a court to rebuild it. The church today is the rebuilt church. It is unclear exactly how much had been demolished, and how accurate the rebuild was. For example, the north wall, parts of the east wall and the priest's door by the altar may be 13th century; the chancel roof is 15th century and parts of the tower may be 14th century.



7. As you leave the church, re-join the road (Church Way). At the end, turn left into King William Road, and at the end right into Manor Road.

A Methodist heritage

In Manor Road, just past Bay Tree House (no 14) on the left, there is a small passageway, 'The Standards'. A short detour down there will take you to the remains of the first Catcott Wesleyan Methodist chapel, dated 1826. A little further along Manor Road, just past Buck Furlong Farm (no 17) there is a small path off to the right. The house at the end of the terrace is where the first meetings of Methodists took place in the village, being registered for worship in January 1796, less than five years after John Wesley's death.

8. At the junction with Langeland Lane turn right into Weares Lane. Keep walking up this lane, past the small playing field. Near the end of the lane, just before the house on the left (called Snipe Furlong), take the footpath on the left.
9. At the end of the track, cross the gate to join a footpath along the right-hand side of the field. Keep following this footpath along the hedgerow across three fields.

Towards the end of the third field, note the very small, wooded area ahead of you: just within this is a small plot which is the Quaker burial ground, which was established in 1659 (note the marker stone at the southern end). There was a large Quaker following in the area, including the Clarks family who founded the Shoe manufacturers.

10. The path crosses the field boundary and continues along the left-hand side of the next field. At this point you will see the wind turbine owned by Manor Farm in Shapwick. This is a convenient landmark as the path heads towards but slightly to the left of the turbine.

Note on walking across farmland

Following this route, you will venture into the heart of a rural working environment, which is an important aspect of life in the Polden villages. Consequently, be aware that farmers' animals may often be in your way; sheep, goats and cattle are unpredictable and curious – and possibly dangerous too when approached by folk unfamiliar to them, especially if they have a dog. So be aware, beware and be safe!



11. With the turbine in view, the path heads down into a small dip and across a stream (Mill Brook), across another field and then along a rather narrow field which widens out after about 200m. Keep going along the path until you reach the lane from Manor Farm.
12. Follow this (unnamed) lane, past Manor Farm. At the junction, keep straight on into Church Road, which comes in from the right. This road will take you to **St Mary's Church** in **Shapwick**.

Mediaeval villages

The layout of the streets in Edington, Catcott and Shapwick goes back to Medieval times, and may even be earlier. They are located close to the spring line on the north side of the Poldens, which would have been natural places for early (pre-Roman) settlements to have developed. The villages would also have been convenient places to stop for pilgrims on foot between Bridgwater and Glastonbury. Thus, as you walk the lanes, you'll be walking along the same lanes that the mediaeval pilgrims would have walked.

13. As you leave the church, turn right into Main Road, and then left into Vicarage Lane. At the end of the lane, cross the gate into the field. Follow the footpath along the left-hand edge of the field, across three field boundaries. The footpath joins the back lane from Ashcott: keep going straight on, along the lane.

A Bronze Age path and an Old Church



Shapwick and the surrounding area was the subject of intensive research by a team of archaeologists in the 1990s. As part of this, they dug a trench across the path from Vicarage Lane, in the last field before the road, and found evidence that this path was being used in the Bronze Age (about 500BC).

As you reach the lane, take note of the field opposite (part of Beerway Farm). Below the surface lies an extraordinary array of archaeological remains, including both a possible Roman temple and the Old Church, which preceded the one now in the centre of the village.

*Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **John 14:6***

Martyrdom in Shapwick

On 8 May 708, an Irish pilgrim called Indract was passing through Shapwick on his way back from Rome, having stopped off in Glastonbury. There he was accosted by a sidekick of the King of Mercia, Ine, and was murdered.

Although this is the most well-known version of this story, much of it is open to question – for example, was the martyr instead the abbot of Iona, Indrechtach ua Finnachta, who was killed in England in 854?

Nevertheless, St Indract was venerated at Glastonbury Abbey from the 11th century to the Reformation.

This story is a reminder that it has not always been safe to be a pilgrim in this country. The charity Open Doors noted that, worldwide in 2020, 4,761 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons.

14. After about 400m along the lane, take the track which goes off to the left, then follow the footpath along the right-hand side of the field. Halfway along the third field, the footpath crosses a plank bridge across a small stream, and then continues along the left-hand side of the next set of fields. The footpath reaches a lane on the edge of Ashcott.
15. Turn right to go up the lane, and at the end turn right onto the Ridgeway. Turn left to go down Farm Hill (avoiding Whitley Road, which is sharp left); at the end, turn right to reach **All Saints Church, Ashcott**.

“Come unto me”

There is a rather fine wooden statue of Jesus in Ashcott church, presented to the church in 1986, called “Come unto me”.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [Matt 11:28-29, NIV]

- Do you need to hear Jesus saying that to you today?
- What makes you feel weary and burdened, and needing rest?



Halfway reflections

As you reach the halfway point, it is worth reflecting on the pilgrimage so far, possibly spending a few moments in the quiet spaciousness of All Saints Church in Ashcott.

- What has been the most helpful for you so far on the journey?
- What has been distracting or unhelpful?

A reflection

Your life was a journey
from the moment you were born.
From birth to death.
From Bethlehem's stable
to Calvary's cross.
How often we fail to understand,
that the conclusion of your journey
was inevitable,
that you understood this
from the very beginning,
and yet still walked the path
that was yours to take.
By comparison
the many choices we make
in our life seem trivial,
the twists and turns we choose
are often taken on impulse,
with no clear comprehension of the outcome.
Thank you, Jesus.
Thank you that you loved humankind enough
to make that journey,
even as you felt the pain of rejection,
the pain of the lashes,
the pain of the nails,
the pain of the cross.

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Ashcott to Glastonbury– route directions

This second half of the journey, from Ashcott to Glastonbury, crosses the Levels, which would have been marshland in mediaeval times. It is a much wilder part of the route, and offers opportunities for a different type of reflection than the first half, which went through the villages.

1. As you leave the church, turn right to head out of the village, continuing along High Street to where it joins Whitley Road, coming in from the left. Take the next road on the left, labelled Stagman Lane, which is signed for Sharpham.
2. Keep going along Stagman Lane to the T-junction at the end, where it joins Sharpham Lane. Turn left at the end.
3. Follow the road as it continues down onto the Levels. After about half a mile, the road crosses a wide rhyne, next to which is the Stanley Durston Fishing Lake. Take the footpath on the right, which will follow along the north side of the rhyne. Although the path is not especially clear, it is easy to follow because of its location, and there are no major hazards. Keep along the path until you reach Sharpham Drove.

If the weather is poor or conditions underfoot are very wet, you may prefer to continue along Sharpham Lane when you get to the fishing lake. The road turns right at Durston's. At the end of the road there are two options. One is to turn right and then left onto the footpath slightly to the south of the road junction. After a quarter of a mile, you'll re-join the main route. The second option is to follow the green dots on the map at the back, by turning left at the junction and following the lane round until it reaches a T-junction. Turn right to follow the River Brue upstream and to re-join the route at Cradle Bridge (step 6) below.

Varied land use

The route across the Levels offers an opportunity to consider the varied ways the land has been used – and the changing perceptions of what is appropriate.

- One of the few remaining peat manufacturers is in operation along Sharpham Lane (below). The industry was of great importance to the area in the 20th century before its environmental impact was questioned.
- Much of the former peat workings have been given over to nature reserves, such as the RSPB's Ham Wall, through which this path passes. The Avalon Marshes are now recognised as having major importance to conservation.
- The water quality in this area has recently been rated as 'unfavourable, declining' which – if it continues – will have a disastrous impact on the wildlife of the area. Evidence of water pollution may be seen in the rhynes along the walk.

To what extent do you feel that people's use of the land is or is not in line with the purposes of the God who created all of this? What do you think should be changed?



4. Cross the Drove and follow the path between the rhyne and the lake. This is now the back of the RSPB Ham Wall reserve and is well-maintained. Continue along the path until you reach the end of the lake. Turn left along the east side of the lake, and at the end turn right to cross a rhyne via a plank bridge.

Caring for wildlife

The path passes through the back of the Ham Wall reserve, some way from the main areas for watching wildlife, but you may still see birds like the Great White Egret flying over (below) or the Marsh Harrier. You might also see animals like roe deer (right) and hares.



In the Old Testament book of Job (chapter 38), God challenges Job about how little he knows, and depth of God's care.

“Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

Do you observe the calving of the deer?

Can you number the months that they fulfill,

and do you know the time when they give birth,

when they crouch to give birth to their offspring,

and are delivered of their young?

Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open;

they go forth, and do not return to them.”



5. Continue along the path; after you reach a gate, the path becomes unclear across a part of an open field, but the right of way cuts across to go down the drive from Cradlebridge Farm to a road.
6. Turn left and then shortly afterwards turn right onto Porchestal Drove. The bridge (called **Cradle Bridge**) crosses the River Brue.

Cradle Bridge

It is worth spending a few moments at this bridge. The River Brue would have been the main means by which wealthier pilgrims would have travelled from the west, from the harbour at Bridgwater to Glastonbury. As you look south-east from the bridge, you will see a small, low hill at the edge of the Levels: this marks the port at Beckery, where pilgrims along the River Brue would have disembarked before continuing into Glastonbury on foot. The ruins of an old chapel remain there (sadly overgrown).

- *Imagine what it would have been like for a pilgrim disembarking at Beckery: the journey almost over, and the destination close by. What might their thoughts and feelings have been? What are yours now?*



7. Follow the drove for about two-thirds of a mile. This reaches an industrial estate on the edge of Glastonbury. Cross the road into a small lane, which is a no-through road for cars. At the end there is a pedestrian crossing across the A39. Turn right into and then immediately left into Benedict Street.

Mistaken identity?

The naming of the church as St Benedict's dates from the late 17th century. This is a modern corruption of the original name of St Benignus, which dates from the church's foundation in 1091. At that time, a story had developed that the 5th century Irish saint, Patrick, had ended his days as abbot of Glastonbury, while his deputy, St Benignus, had become a hermit at Meare. The evidence is stronger that both Patrick and Benignus died in Ireland, while the hermit at Meare remains unknown, other than that his name, Beon, was confused with Benignus, and that his bones were transferred to the abbey.

- *It's basic to Christian belief that we are known by God, by name. "Do not be afraid—I will save you. I have called you by name—you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1, GNT). "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:14)*
- *What would it feel like to be fully known, understood and loved?*

8. Walk along Benedict Street, until you reach St Benedict's church.
9. When you leave the church, continue along Benedict Street and then right into Magdalene Street. The entrance to the **Abbey** is on your left. Although entry to the abbey is not cheap, it is very worthwhile finishing the walk there – and contemplating what it was that drew so many pilgrims there over many centuries. Alternatively, you may want to conclude your walk at one of the nearby cafes!

Concluding reflections

As you finish the walk, it is worth reflecting on what you have gained in the journey.

- Thinking back to your thoughts at the start of the walk, to what extent did the journey meet your expectations?
- Which parts of the walk were most helpful? – and which were the least?
- Did you have any unexpected conversations along the way? To what extent did they influence your reflections as you walked? Take a moment to note down any insights that you gained during the walk, if you haven't done so already.

History and myth at Glastonbury Abbey

There has been an abbey at Glastonbury from at least the late 7th century. After the reforms by Dunstan in the tenth century, it thrived as a wealthy abbey and as a magnet for pilgrims throughout the Mediaeval era. It was terminated in 1539 at the Dissolution of the Monasteries, with its abbot hanged on the Tor.

There are well-known myths about the Abbey. Some are of doubtful historicity, such as the Mediaeval legends of King Arthur, and of the abbey being founded by Joseph of Arimathea. Others have more basis. William of Malmesbury, writing in 1130, believed an ancient brushwood church (which still existed) dated back as far back as 166AD. Tantalisingly, there is recent archaeological evidence of a wealthy establishment on the site of the abbey, pre-dating the 7th century Anglo-Saxon one. This is suggestive of an earlier Celtic Christian community that might have existed there – a conclusion made more likely by the discovery of Britain's earliest monastery at Beckery, which pre-dates the arrival of the Saxons.



- *Myths about the Abbey shouldn't blind us to its real history, or to the genuine faith of many who were part of its life.*
- *What would convince you that the Jesus of the New Testament is based on history rather than myth?*

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