WINCHESTER to CANTERBURY

a pilgrimage

DAY 1  June 2nd  Winchester to Alresford

Daughter Beth provided transport to Winchester and came into the Cathedral where the pilgrimage started at St. Swithun's shrine. Remembrances and prayers were offered. Left to my own devices, and after hot chocolate in the Refectory, the walking began heading north past the ruins of Hyde Abbey along the banks of the Itchen River. It took a while to clear the city and cross under the A34 and M3 motorways giving access to pleasant pastures alongside the river and small villages. At Martyr Worthy the church was open and welcoming especially to those travelling. Inviting prayer and reflection.

The first pub that was open provided thirst quenching at Ovington and eventually Alresford was reached as it threatened rain for the first time. Accommodation was in the Swan Hotel as the Diocesan Conference and Retreat Centre was unable to offer space. Sadly there were no steam trains to look at on the Mid Hants Line as they don't run on Mondays.

Day 2  Alresford to Alton

It rained overnight and the walk continued in rain for the first couple of hours towards Alton. The St. Swithun's Way path is not all that easy to follow and in places is not well marked or defined but near the summit was a Garden Centre and the lass who served me with Hot Chocolate told of walking the Way from Canterbury to Winchester with an all age group from the her RC diocese. Near to Alton is Jane Austen's House and much learnt of her family and times. On into Alton where Brian and Sheila Crow met me. We had shared growing up in East Barnet during and after the War. Their kind hospitality and reminiscences made for a really good visit.

St. Laurence Church Alton has a splendid tardis towards the rear of the Nave containing various facilities (sorry no picture). I learnt the origins of the expression 'Sweet Fanny Adams' which involved the abduction, murder, and dismemberment of an 8 yr. old girl in Alton. The details were gruesome and when men of HM Navy were dished up with vile looking meat they coined the phrase it was 'Sweet Fanny Adams' that they were eating.

DAY 3  Alton to Farnham

Walking North East from Alton through small villages and coming to a place called Upper Froyle where the Church has obviously followed a strong Anglo Catholic path for many years I found some incredible Vestments exhibited.

The parish is now joined with Bentley Parish which is of an extremely different hue in churchmanship and is busy building a Hall in the churchyard to help accommodate the fast growing congregation of families with children. There I was entertained by one of the Wardens and his wife. On towards Farnham I found myself inadvertently on a busy B road but managed to escape to a field path for most of the way into Town. Here I was stabled with the first of three parish folk offering accommodation to a complete stranger. Mary Haines and her family were a delight with teenage busyness including a drum lesson in a neighbouring room. Mary is a daughter of The Vicarage. Her Father served a parish in St. Albans diocese for 50 years. She serves as a pastoral assistant and was to make two baptism visits and a funeral visit the morning I left.

St Andrews Farnham in Guildford Diocese has been re-ordered with much space for the Liturgy and large social space at the back of the nave.

DAY 4  Farham to Guildford

The path forward to Canterbury is dominated by the North Downs Way national long distance path with some deviations along the old Pilgrims Way track. It starts on the by-pass close to the railway station and soon picks up the Wey valley.
DAY 5  Guildford to Dorking

Dropped in a traffic jam I set off to regain the path up onto the North Downs and soon climbed through woodland to St. Martha’s Hill which gave the first long views of the walk across The Weald to the South Downs. From here back into woodland contouring at around 600 feet and coming across a series of WW 2 pillboxes part of the defences against the expected invasion. in the early 1940s.

The highest point on the walk that day had been reached. From here was a largely gentle descent down to the Wye just south of Guildford. Instead of crossing the Wey here I headed south upstream for another mile or so to the next road bridge where I and crossed to find The Parrot pub where I was met by Sally Davies (former Curate colleague in Chalfont before she moved to The Old Naval College Chapel at Greenwich and in more recent times to Shamley Green). She and husband Kevin made me most welcome at The Vicarage that has a lovely open garden fine views across fields and gentle slopes. After a pub meal just down the road we spent a pleasant evening in catch up conversation.

In the morning ready to go to London for a preview of the RA Summer exhibition while I was to rejoin the path towards Dorking.

DAY 6  Dorking to Mertsham

Arrival at Dorking Station was greeted with bright sunshine but the need to walk half a mile to find a mobile phone outlet that could get me back on line. So a new basic machine with a battery charged well enough for the day and then off a mile and a half to the official starting point passed the previous afternoon. This provided the excitement of crossing the River Mole This was the nearest I got to walking on water. The small dog found it challenging but managed, like me, not to fall in.

Further on more views, more woodland and then on to Ranmore Common with views of Dorking.

This church’ a massive Gilbert Scott in the middle of nowhere. On through Denbies the largest vineyard in England complete with visitor ‘petit train’ a la France with punters sipping some of the produce. Descent to the valley of the River Mole at Westhumble to find few trains and an out of order ticket machine so walking the mile extra to Dorking station with tickets and trains available. So 14 miles that day and off to London to stay with Mike overnight. The forecast storms did come but not too badly, just enough to delay departure from London back to Dorking. The other problem that did not beset pilgrims of yester year was a defunct mobile phone as the family required I should a working phone to warn of catastrophe besetting the ‘old man’.

Big step for a small dog
Now at the bottom of the well known leisure spot 'Box Hill' I faced a series of uneven steps which were an impediment to steady progress. Box Hill provided a launch pad for model gliders, aeroplanes, Scouts rolling down the slope and picnics.

Box Hill

Another viewpoint and then down off the ridge and close to the railway line running from Reading across to Gatwick onto a road where I missed the footpath through the trees. There followed a few minutes of mayhem on the road but was not responsible for any accident. Back in open country and climbing onto the ridge finally up onto Coley Hill where just behind the deafening roar of this was to be seen with relatively light traffic. Beyond here to Reigate Hill and an old fort where folk were playing old soldiers pre 1914!

It was Saturday afternoon after all. From there over the A217 and into Gatton Park (NT territory) but a surprise in finding a State Boarding School providing education for 1000 or so young people. Finally out of the park and into the edge of Merstham village. Its medieval church of St Katherine was accessed by a footbridge over the M25. Here I was met by Val Williams (non stipendiary priest) who was giving me shelter that night. This parish is in Southwark and is a village chopped up by both the M25 and A23 the old Brighton road. To the south if has a large post-war LCC Estate which makes massive contrast socially and economically within a single parish. On Sunday morning Val went for a run, before getting ready for the Pentecost Eucharist in St. Katherine's where she was the preacher. Again most generous hospitality in a delightful spot.

Coffee was served in the Hall before I left to walk beyond Oxted that Sunday afternoon.

**DAY 7: Merstham to Botley Hill**

The end point of the walk this day was determined by finding a place where my next hosts could reasonably pick me up, so the top of Botley Hill with an advertised car park was mutually arranged. Over the A23 and crossing both the double track Brighton line I was soon passing some desirable residences with views to the south and then on the way down to go under the M23 found a large patch of Orchids (the most I have seen in one spot in Britain). Unfortunately the photo taken fails completely to do justice to the sight. There were plenty more orchids on the chalk hills further on route. (The guide to the North Downs Way states that 60% of Britain’s orchid species are found on the North Downs.) At Botley Hill the highest point on the whole walk (853 feet) I was met by Barry and Glenys Dean. A 40 minute drive was made to their home in Crowborough where they have lived for over 40 years. I had known Glenys in Kenya during my National Service through her family. Her Father established and ran the work of Church Army there I had been put in touch through people I knew in a cell movement (SCK). We made contact again in 2012 meeting up with other folk from that time.

**DAY 8: Botley Hill to Otford Manor**

In the morning we drove back to the top of Botley Hill. Barry and Glenys walked for the morning. From Botley Hill we were now in Kent and further large properties were found on the edge of the route. At lunchtime we met up with Glenys’s brother Stephen who took us to a pub for lunch. I was deposited back at the point of pick up and Barry and Glenys they were taken back to their car.

Further East the route again met the M25 running North/South and dropped down to the Darent Valley before reaching Otford. After a barren part of the walk close to heavy traffic pleasure, the Lavender fields on the edge of Otford were a . In the large village the Parish Church was the first in Rochester Diocese. It was well resourced with good attached facilities and obviously very active.
There was a final slog up hill to the highest point in the day's walk at Otford Manor now known as Oak Hall a residential Christian Centre which runs Christian Adventure and Overseas holidays. There were no groups in, but I was made very welcome and had supper with some of the team of young people from a number of countries exploring their Christian faith and the world. Sent on my way the next day to tackle the long walk along the Downs Way before cutting down towards the Medway and my next destination The Friars at Aylesford.

**DAY 9 Otford Manor to Aylesford**
Starting at the highest point of the day rapid progress was made to Wrotham. Wrotham was infamous for traffic difficulties in the days before motorways. It is now blessed with both the M20 and the A20. The route fortunately headed away from these and up onto the downs towards Trottiscliffe (known as Trosley) and the Country Park there. Just as the Way turned directly North I bailed out down the side of the hill to Birling and found a good pub before heading over the fields towards Snodland and a large building marked on the map hidden by earth works and trees but issuing considerable noise. In circum-navigating a sign board welcomed me to "Tesco" No retail therapy here, It is just a major processing and distribution centre. The walk continued through a country park (largely comprising fishing lakes) to gain a footpath following the railway line to Aylesford. This passes a massive Paper Mill complex. At Aylesford it was necessary to cross the line at a level crossing where despite the red lights flashing I was beckoned to cross by the signalman. Shortly afterwards I gained the bank of the Medway and saw The Friars on the opposite bank. This was accessed by crossing the ancient bridge linking the old settlement with the northern edge of Maidstone.

Staying with the Friars I met people from Yorkshire including the lead Chaplain to Sheffield Hallam University. Until ordination he had served for over 20 years with Church Army including in the East End of London. I attended the daily offices but missed Mass.

**DAY 10 Aylesford to Lenham**
The journey started with a detour to get cash before ascending to join the North Down's Way (left the previous afternoon) now running up on the ridge to the East. The path crosses HS1 just by the entrance to the tunnel which takes it virtually to the crossing over the Medway just outside Rochester. I was soon able to follow the lower rout of the Pilgrim's Way but found various bits of traffic not present on the higher footpath. Just at the edge of Detling village the paths meet and have to cross the busy A249 by a massive footbridge built after four people including a girl called Jade had been killed. It was a hot day and the pub provided adequate rehydration material (not ale). Still over 9 miles to go to Lenham but mercifully the gave relief from a death wish setting in with a bit of walking which went up and down monotonously seemingly getting nowhere. "The Dirty Habit" at Hollingbourne provided a welcome late lunch. On route there was another pilgrim seated but no conversationalist Brother Percival Lenham was finally reached after passing the top end of the 'Marley Tile Works' (still in business but doing plastic stuff of various types). The village is reached by dropping down off the way and crossing the busy A20. There in the middle of this substantial settlement I found my Host for the night. Anne Cook has been a friend of my sister Anne since their teenage years (again Anne lived in the same road as us). Her husband Michael served as aircrew and while at Bassingbourn with Anne lived in Sheene Mill Melbourn. Much later it became a Restaurant and all three of our children had gainful employment during their teenage years. Unfortunately Michael was having surgery the day but Anne provided splendid taxi service to and from their home in Cox Heath and also to the local pub for our evening meal. Again was much talk of life in the 1950s in East Barnet.

**DAY 11 Lenham to Godmersham**
Having been deposited in the centre of Lenham a visit to the church and seeing the War Memorial that was after 1918 put at the foot of the Cross on the hillside, but in more recent years brought down to the village. After a steady walk along the ridge above the A20 a turn into the village of Charing with the Oak Inn providing rehydration and a chance to see the remains of 'one' of the old palaces of former Archbishops of Canterbury; not quite the Pope's summer retreat!
The Cross remains Archb'ps Palace Charing

Back on the downs to Eastwell Park a large estate before being deposited on the A 251 Ashford to Faversham road and a large village green and the Flying Horse pub doing very good trade. I had passed a man eating his lunch a little way back and he said he would come to the pub and found me there. A complex story of family in New Zealand and back here, a number of different jobs and perspectives and having driven down to Charing he was walking to Wye before catching the train back to Charing and driving home to London, a walk in the country on a Thursday. He is something of a walker and was already encouraging me to take on more having heard a bit about my journey up to then. We walked for a little way until our paths diverged.

Soldiering on and nearing the end of the day's march

A Distant white splodge confirmed the first sight of Canterbury Cathedral about 10 miles ahead

Soon afterwards I was descending through the grounds of Godmersham Park (at one time owned by Jane Austen's brother and thought by some to be the setting for 'Mansfield Park') So to my last host Caroline Spencer who is much involved with both the Cathedral and Diocese and was able to allay fears of a frosty reception at the Cathedral by contacting the Canon Pastor telling of my arrival next morning. Again, splendid hospitality and much chat about the state of the church. has been a family home since the 1920s

The River Stour at Godmersham

DAY 12 June 13th Godmersham to Canterbury The day began with driving in the opposite direction to Canterbury to the Parish Office of the Wye group of parishes found in the Methodist Church There we had Celtic morning prayer before back to Godmersham for breakfast and walking to Chilham station where I was to meet son Mike off the train. He and I to walk the last 7.5 miles into Canterbury together. There was the charm of Chilham village and a welcoming church and then off up Long Hill and into Old Wives Lees along into Orchard country and pickers encampment Chartham Hatch a strange settlement, No Man's Orchard now a nature reserve on over the A2 and into Harbledown into town and St. Dunstan's Church where the head of Thomas More is buried therein. So through the West gate and to the gate of the Cathedral where we were welcomed by the person guarding the gate picket gate as we were expected.. At the welcome desk we were greeted again and the Canon Pastor informed of our arrival. Canon Clare arrived to greet us and led us into the Crypt which is kept as a place for prayer and quiet. After prayers of thanksgiving we were led to the Treasury/Vestry and allowed to leave the rucksack carried for 12 days to be collected when we attended Evensong later. So after a while in the Cathedral we found a nearby pub in which to take a rather late lunch before walking a bit in the town and returning for Evensong.

A hurried exit after Evensong and train back to London changing at Ashford, we whistled back to St.Pancras by Javelin. Appropriate for a railway nut.

As the result of good people's generosity in a number of places Betty's Charity (and therefore Jersey School ,Katete, Zambia). will benefit by a further £1300 or more.

A big thank to all who on route gave such generous hospitality, both old friends and those not knowing me who were kind enough to open their home. It was a real pleasure and privilege in meeting and sharing something of our lives and concerns.

A very worthwhile journey with plenty to think about as the pilgrimage continues. The walking was very physical and required discipline that I don't often apply to my life. If, as St. Augustine says 'In the evening of life we will be examined in love’ I had better try a bit more discipline.

Deo Gracias.