

Green Pilgrimage Vadstena Trip 2018

Digital Pilgrim perspective

The medieval tradition of pilgrim souvenirs could enrich the current scheme to develop European cultures of pilgrimage. Its reinterpretation for modern pilgrims could enhance a sense of authenticity, aid branding and offer commercial opportunities. Representing the Digital Pilgrim Project, I visited Vadstena with Norfolk County Council in order to explore how modern research into medieval pilgrim signs could inform the Green Pilgrimage Project. My particular focus was the prospective work on trails to Walsingham that may be undertaken by Norfolk County Council.

In the Middle Ages, pewter pilgrim souvenirs were made in their millions and sold cheaply to pilgrims to be worn on the return journey from a saint's shrine. They bore pictures to and had pins on their reverse, so they could be pinned to clothing. They often depict monuments that the pilgrim would remember from their destination, such as buildings and sculptures (much like modern souvenirs). They also came in the form of pendants, shaped into bells and whistles. They suggest that returning from pilgrimage was celebratory and joyful, the pilgrims having proven loyalty to the saint and won indulgences from the church.

Very popular shrine sites like Walsingham had several 'signs' or pilgrim souvenirs. Any of these could be reinvented for a modern pilgrimage trail. This would have the twofold effect of branding the route and giving pilgrims an opportunity to engage with the deep heritage of their journey and destination.

The work of the Cammino Matterano team, presented in Vadstena, has shown that such historically derived signs can be effective emblems for individual routes. They have been reproduced as stamps for pilgrims to collect as they walk the ways.



Medieval Walsingham souvenirs could be revived for this purpose. For example, if there were three trails through Norfolk, they could be identified by three different emblems, converted into stamps and badges. All three could be sold as souvenirs at the destination attached to an explanatory card. This would provide educational insight into the origins of the shrine at Walsingham.

The medieval souvenir of the Holy House depicts the wooden building that housed the shrine to the Virgin in the Middle Ages. It was built in 1061 by an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman called Richelde of Fervaques, who

had received instructions from the Virgin. The house commemorated the one in which Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel.



Another souvenir shows a lily in a vase. As a symbol of purity, the lily refers to the Virgin.



The Angel Gabriel's visit to the Virgin was commemorated with a souvenir depicting the angel and the virgin either side of a lily in a vase. The leaves of the lily create an attractive pattern. Despite the badges' grey appearance now, they were shiny when freshly cast and may have had colourful backings. All of these fit in the palm of the hand.



In the design of these emblems, it would be important to convey a sense of simplicity and playfulness. Consistent with the values and ambition of the Green Pilgrimage Project and the historical model, they should be locally and sustainably reproduced, visually appealing and universally affordable. They should also be available in the form of badges and other paraphernalia.

The Cammino Matetrano team also created an overarching logo with natural, rather than historical roots. It depicts a grass common to the region and unites all 5 trails under one brand. It is modern, locally grounded, suited to appearing on a range of media and has a sense of onward momentum by leaning to the right.





Emulating this model may prove effective for trails in Norfolk. An overarching symbol could be the reed, as it appears across the county. My design-suggestion gives the seed heads the appearance of pointing hands.



During the Vadstena visit, we discussed the potential for public engagement. The basic selection and design of these emblems should, in my opinion, be undertaken in consultation with a graphic designer and historian. They will perform a crucial role in promoting future trails and fall into the same category of material as promotional text and the design of the routes, all of which necessitate specialist expertise.

However, there is still scope to engage groups within the region. Little academic work has been done on the surviving Walsingham pilgrim souvenirs, a number of which are in Lynn Museum. This may be an opportunity to ask medieval History of Art students at UEA to write dissertations on them and work towards a small publication for a general audience. It could be sold in churches and hostels along the routes.

School children could likewise be encouraged to recreate the signs in different media and display their artworks as part of the trail launch. They could be incorporated into a travelling exhibition in local museums focused on the history of pilgrimage in Norfolk. Funding could be sourced from the Museum Universities Partnership Initiative (MUPI), which fosters just this form of collaboration between the two institution-types.

The Walsingham Pilgrim Tree?

There is another model offered by the culture of medieval pilgrimage that has not been revived in modern contexts: that of the votive offering. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims would leave objects at or hang them on the shrine; items like wax body parts, flowers, clothing for the statue, jewels and model ships depending on their needs and wealth. It was thought that these offerings would show devotion to the saint and encourage their patronage of the pilgrim. Votive offerings are found by archaeologists at holy sites across the world, from many different eras. It suggests that donation, as well as acquisition, is part of the contract of exchange humans appreciate after a long journey. How could this be adapted to a modern and often secular demographic? It would be important to design an offering that was not obviously religious but allowed the buyer to feel they have done a good deed. Some central location for the offerings to be displayed would be necessary but not the shrines because of their religious status. Bridges, like the bridge of locks in Paris, and trees, like the rag trees of folklore, are possible candidates.



A traditional 'rag tree'.



Bridge of locks, Paris

One option could be a sculpted (metalwork?) tree in a public space, perhaps designed via a competition and made at a local college. Once in Walsingham, pilgrims could buy small corn dollies made of reeds (reed dollies??) to hang on the tree (locally sourced and biodegradable). The dollies could be made by volunteers or according to a similar system as the Remembrance Day poppy. It would state clearly in the shop that revenues will go towards the upkeep of the trails and a local charity, fostering a sense of having 'given back'.



A 'reed dolly'.

The preliminary suggestions offered above could be developed in discussion with local cultural bodies and as Norfolk County Council progresses with its research. I hope it has demonstrated the various ways in which the county's rich heritage of pilgrim souvenirs may enhance its work for the Green Pilgrimage Project.