

Pilgrimages were very popular in the Middle Ages. A pilgrimage is a journey to a special place for religious reasons. Usually people went to a church or cathedral to visit the burial place of a saint, hoping he or she would grant their prayers or cure their sickness. Journeys could be long or short. All medieval churches had relics of saints, either the whole body or a few bones, an item a saint once wore, or even a statue or painting which was thought to work miracles. A pilgrimage could be a journey to a nearby church, or one in the same county or more distant place, including shrines in other countries. Pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem and Compostela in Spain were particularly important, although most people were not able to travel that far.

Going on pilgrimage was not an essential part of the Christian religion, but people had a strong urge to visit sites and touch something physical, even from the beginnings of Anglo-Saxon Christianity in the 600s. There are no dedicated pilgrim routes in England as there were in Europe to Rome and Compostela. However, the road from London to Canterbury was well-known for pilgrims going to Thomas Becket's tomb in Canterbury Cathedral, which was the most popular shrine in England. In recent years, new pilgrimage routes have been created to link sites with religious significance. The Pilgrims' Way in Surrey is



The Pilgrims Way running across St Martha's Hill near Guildford

well-known, but is a Victorian invention. Pilgrims travelled on well-used roads, where there were inns or other places to rest, partly because they usually travelled in groups. They might also go by sea along the coast.

Sadly, the medieval shrines were destroyed at the Reformation when a different way of interpreting Christianity took hold: Protestantism. It was no longer felt that saints could intercede with God and people had to rely on their own prayers. Most shrines in Surrey are now lost to us, but we have evidence for a few, especially St Martha's and St Catherine's near Guildford. Although they look similar, both being on hilltops on the sand ridge, they are not connected with each other.

Other evidence for medieval pilgrimage in Surrey can be hinted at through references in wills. In 1533 there was a mention in a will of the Holy Sepulchre in Farnham churchyard, which could have been an object of pilgrimage. In the same year a Dorking man referred to Our Lady of Wotton, presumably an image which may have attracted pilgrims. Many pilgrimages were probably very local and are now lost to us. There are no major Surrey shrines, although the body of Henry VI was known to attract many pilgrims. He was buried in 1471 at Chertsey Abbey to avoid becoming a source of pilgrimage, but this did not work, and he was moved to Windsor in 1484 where pilgrimages continued. A pilgrimage badge for him was found at Newark Priory.

Metalwork items recorded through the Portable Antiquities Scheme also serve as evidence for local pilgrimage. Ampullae, such as the one below decorated in the form of a scallop shell, were a common pilgrim souvenir from the late 12th century and would have



Lead-alloy pilgrim's ampulla dated c.1150-1350 from Betchworth © Surrey County Council

contained water from holy shrines and wells to be taken as a cure. Pilgrim badges were also popular in the 1500s and 1600s and indicated a pilgrimage taken. The iconography is often specific to certain shrines, such as the one to the right, which may be an image used for Our Lady of Walsingham, a Norfolk pilgrimage site also cited in a 1519 will from Titsey.



Copper-alloy pilgrim badge depicting Mary with a crucified Christ from West Horsley © Surrey County Council



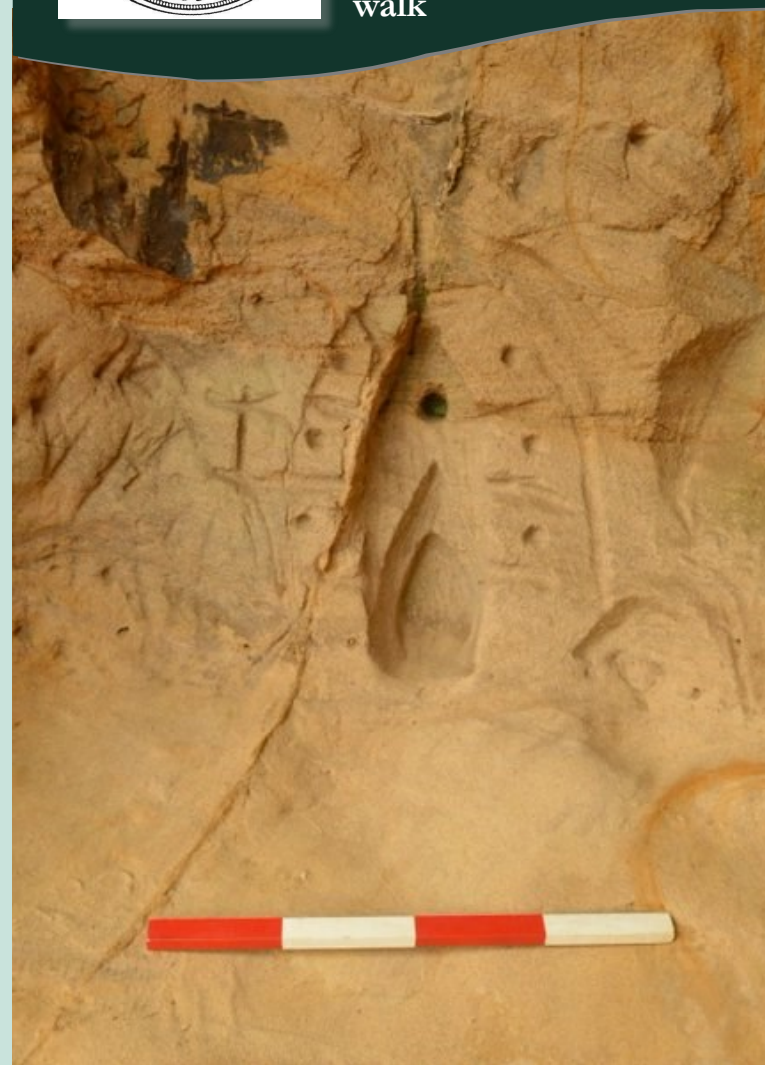
The Medieval Studies Forum is grateful to Dr Mary Alexander for compiling much of the historical content of this leaflet.

Cover image: 14th century carvings at St Catherine's cave shrine, discovered in 2020 © Archaeology South-East (please note the cave is not accessible to the public)



Medieval Pilgrimage

Self-guided heritage walk



Surrey Archaeological Society
 Hackhurst Lane, Abinger Hammer, Surrey RH5 6SE
 Tel: 01306 731275 / Email: info@surreyarchaeology.org.uk

www.surreyarchaeology.org.uk

Registered Charity 272098

Explore your local heritage and discover more about the origins of Surrey's ancient settlements

St Martha's is the older of the two. It is very unusual, being isolated on a hilltop, with no proper roads leading to it, and no village. The name is also unusual, as the dedication is unique in medieval England, but it is probably not the original one. The cult of St Martha, a Biblical figure, did not take off until the late 12th century, and that was in southern France. The earliest known phase of the church building has been ascribed to the early 1100s. This was the former west tower, a massive structure with a ground floor chamber that was covered by a stone vault, a highly unusual feature often associated with a particular focus like a shrine or important altar. In the 1270s, when Edward I's son was seriously ill at Guildford Castle, offerings were sent to several shrines for prayers for the child. They were all nationally important shrines, and included St Martha's. We do not know which saint was involved. There are later references to pilgrims going to St Martha's, and in 1486 the owner of Chilworth manor left money in his will to erect a marble cross on the hill, carved with scenes of the life of Thomas Becket. It is possible that there was a relic of the saint in St Martha's, but he was martyred in 1170, several decades after the vaulted west tower was built.



The origins of St Martha's remain far from clear. The cruciform shape of the medieval building is very unusual for a small isolated church and suggests that it might have once been much more important. One theory is that it began life as a minster – a religious community forming a focus for Christianity in an area. Minsters began to be founded in the 7th century by royalty. If St Martha's was a minster, it was probably founded later by a local landowner, perhaps in the 8th century. If there was not a minster at St Martha's, it is not clear why a church was built there. It could have been built on the site of a pagan shrine – hilltops were often chosen for these. A 6th-century pottery urn has been found nearby.

When St Martha's first appears in the documentary record, it was a parish church, with a tiny parish. In the late 12th century, the landowner of Chilworth manor gave the church to Newark Priory, as a source of income. When the monasteries were closed in the 16th century, the church was returned to Chilworth manor. The tower fell into ruin at an unknown date, perhaps in the 17th century (possibly as a result from an explosion at the gunpowder works in the valley below), and the nave was probably damaged at the same time. Afterwards, the chancel was walled off from the ruins and used as the church. The whole church was rebuilt in 1848, mainly out of the local ironstone, with a central tower instead of the original western one. The door and windows, though 1848 work, are partly based on the medieval features.

Although no metalled roads lead to St Martha's, there are several paths coming from most directions, some aiming for the hilltop, others skirting it. It was clearly somewhere that people journeyed to from all directions. It is on or near a route along the Greensand ridge from the east, now called the A25, which continues as a track towards Farnham in the west, crossing the river at St Catherine's, once known as Drake – "Dragon" – Hill.

St Catherine's was a chapel, not a church. That means the priest could not baptise, marry or bury people there, but only celebrate the mass. The common interpretation of the chapel's location is that it was built so that people in the southern parts of Artington parish, at a distance from the parish church of St Nicholas in Guildford, could get to mass more easily. The chapel was probably built by the rector of St Nicholas' in about 1300, and soon afterwards he applied for a licence to hold an annual fair on the hill, which would earn him money. The fair was held for five days from St Matthew's day, 21st September, perhaps because St Catherine's day on 25th November was too late in the year. The licence to consecrate the chapel in 1328 mentions miracles occurring there and people flowing to it. Later there also was mention of pilgrims going to the fair.

The founder of St Catherine's may have been inspired by the hilltop site of St Martha's. Catherine was often the dedication for hilltop churches and chapels, because it was said that her body was carried by angels to Mount Sinai when she died. Despite its elevated position, the chapel would have been very convenient for travellers along the east-west sand track, or the Guildford to Godalming (and Portsmouth) road with which it formed a crossroads, to call in for a prayer or blessing, or to hear mass. The annual fair would also attract travellers. It is very likely that there were relics in the chapel, and the striking situation and convenient position on a busy road may well have attracted pilgrims. To reach the hill



from the east, travellers would have had to cross the River Wey. Although there was a ferry here in historic times, there is no definite evidence for a medieval one.

Another attraction to the site may have been a hermit. In 2020 a cave was discovered on the hillside, which had been partly destroyed by the railway tunnel. There were religious symbols carved on the walls, and it could have been a hermit's cave. He might also have operated the ferry, as it was common for hermits to live off the fares or offerings. Hermits always attracted visitors, even though they were trying to live solitary lives.

Built of local Bargate stone with chalk for the features needing shaped stone, St Catherine's chapel – like St Martha's – would have originally been plastered over and whitewashed.

Though there are signs it has been altered, little is known about the building itself, as it fell out of use after the Reformation in the 16th century to become the roofless ruin of today.

