

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No.6

PILGRIMS IN MEDIEVAL LINCOLNSHIRE



Figure 1. *Pilgrims of Chaucer's England*

'Then on they went quite boisterously, goggling here and there,
Knelt them down before the shrine, and heartily said their prayer.
They all prayed to St. Thomas, in such wise as they could,
And then the holy relics kissed, each man as he should,
While a goodly monk told them the names of every one.
And then to other holy spots they turned till they'd completely done,
Continued in their devotions till service was sung through,
And then as it was nearly noon to dinnerward they drew.
Then, as the usual custom is, pilgrims' signs they bought.
For men at home should know what saint the pilgrims here had sought.
Each man laid out his silver on the tokens they liked best
. . . They set their tokens on their heads, some on their caps did pin,
And then to eat their dinner good, they rushed back to the inn'.

From the *Tale of Beryn* Early fifteenth century

THE PILGRIMS

During the Middle Ages, many thousands of men and women from all walks of life from King to labourer undertook pilgrimages to shrines in this country and abroad. They went for a variety of reasons — some to fulfil a vow or promise made at a time of personal crisis or illness, others in the hope of a miraculous cure for a malady, like leprosy or blindness, while others journeyed to holy places as a form of penance or to absolve themselves from their sins.

But not all pilgrims were so sincere or so needy, as many writers of the period make clear. For a great many, a pilgrimage was an adventure, an escape from the humdrum existence of day-to-day life — Chaucer's poem *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the latter part of the fourteenth century and describing a pilgrimage to Canterbury, is characterized by its holiday atmosphere and almost carnival mood. For others, going on a pilgrimage was a way of earning a dishonest livelihood, or a means of escaping from a former employer. Nonetheless, for the ordinary man or woman, the excitement of journeying to Canterbury and the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, or to Spain, to the shrine of St. James at Compostella in Galicia, or to Jerusalem or Rome, was likely to be the experience of a lifetime. In an age of bad roads and slow transport, these journeys would have been true adventures for those who would normally have had little necessity to travel beyond their nearest market town, and serve to demonstrate the enormous distances over which people could and did travel in the medieval period. To assist a pilgrim on his or her way was to have a small share in the pilgrim's achievements, and it was through the help of others that the poorest, humblest pilgrim could undertake long journeys. Professional pilgrims, known as Palmers, travelled from shrine to shrine, maintaining themselves wholly through the generosity of others. Their stories of their adventures and travels, often greatly exaggerated, were frequently satirized by writers of the period (see below).

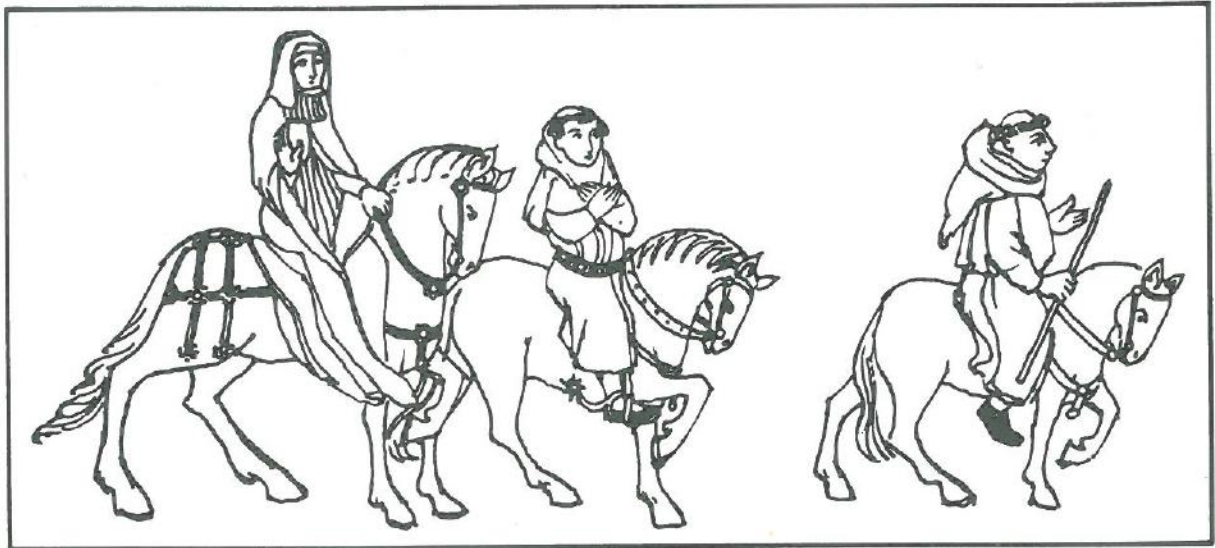


Figure 2. A prioress and clerics travelling

In many instances employers or gilds would help would-be pilgrims on their way. One of the rules of the Gild of the Resurrection at Lincoln (founded in 1374) was 'if any brother or sister wishes to make pilgrimage to Rome, St. James of Galicia or the Holy Land, he shall forewarn the gild; and all the brethren and susteren shall go with him to the city gate, and each shall give him a halfpenny at least'; while the tailors of Lincoln gave a halfpenny to those in their company going to Rome or the shrine of St. James, and a penny to those going to the Holy Land. In Hull, the Gild of the Virgin (founded in 1357) ensured that 'if any brother or sister of the gild wishes at any time to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, then in order that all the gild may share in his pilgrimage he shall be fully released from his yearly payment until his return'.

THE SHRINES

Most major religious centres in medieval England were also centres of pilgrimage. The cities of Durham, York, Peterborough, Winchester, Westminster, St. Albans and Lincoln to name but a few, all had one or more shrines to which pilgrims, both English and foreign travelled. Two of the most popular shrines were those of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury and Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk. Thomas à Becket was murdered by four knights of King Henry II in Canterbury Cathedral on Tuesday 29th December 1170. In February of 1173 he was made a saint by the Pope. In life he had captured the imagination of the Christian world, in death he secured its devotion, and thousands of pilgrims flocked annually to his shrine where many miracles were said to have taken place. At Walsingham, the splendid statue of the Virgin Mary attracted many devotees, and also served as a major source of revenue for the village and those looking after the shrine.

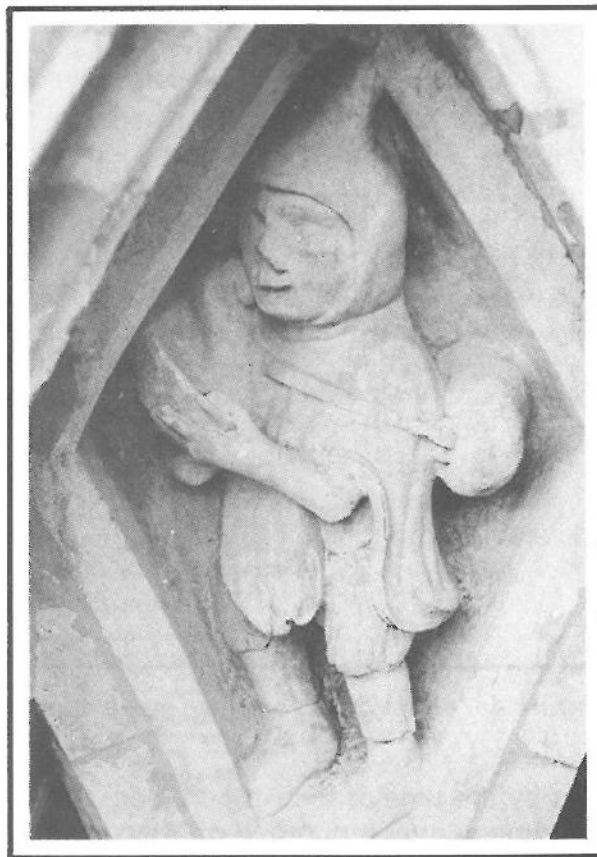


Figure 3a/3b. Pilgrim and traveller — Lincoln Cathedral

In Lincoln, the shrine of St. Hugh, the greatly loved Bishop of Lincoln who died in 1200 and was canonized in 1220 by Pope Honorius III, was widely known. The Angel Choir in the cathedral was built to provide a suitable setting for the shrine, at which many miracles were said to have been wrought. Amongst others the Shrine of Bishop Robert Grosseteste (1235-1253) was also well known. A marble tomb was erected over his grave in the east transept of Lincoln Cathedral, and John de Schalby, a Canon of Lincoln (1299-1333) records how "the marble tomb . . . repeatedly distilled the purest oil in the presence of very many who were in the church". Despite the many miracles said to have taken place at his shrine, and notwithstanding the many representations made to Rome, Grosseteste was never made a saint. His tomb was destroyed by Parliamentary troops during the Civil War.

Elsewhere in Lincolnshire other shrines such as those at Sempringham and Crowland were very popular, while holy crosses and statues, like those at Boston and Rippingale, attracted many pilgrims. At Rippingale the Pope had granted permission to the rector in

1390 "to found and build a chapel of Holy Cross and have mass and other divine offices celebrated therein upon the spot in certain fields within the parish bounds near the high road in which stood and still stands a certain wooden cross" (known locally as Jurdon Cross), "whither by reason of the miracles wrought there, great multitudes with offerings resort from the said diocese and other parts of England". At Grantham church, certain relics of St. Wulfram were so greatly revered that a porch was built on the north side of the church in the fourteenth century with a chapel above, where the relics could be shown to the many pilgrims to this holy place on feast days.



Figure 4a/4b. Woman on pilgrimage and pilgrim

But by the time of the Reformation, the tide of opinion had turned, and the days of the pilgrimage were numbered. Men and women had become aware that for many superstition had taken on the guise of piety, and that their worship at shrines was often little short of idolatry. By the Act of Supremacy in 1534 Henry VIII became head of the Church in England. In a period of conscious antagonism and rejection, the pilgrim and the pilgrimage died away and the deliberate destruction of many hundreds of shrines in England took place.

On the 11th June 1540 the shrine of St. Hugh at Lincoln was destroyed by Henry's agents, who had received these instructions: —

"Forasmuche as we understande that there is a certen shryne and dyverse Feynyd reliquys and jeuellys in the cathedrall church of Lincoln wherwth all the simple people be moche deceyvvyd and brought in to gret superstition and idolatrye . . . we auctourise, name, assigne and appoynte you . . . to take downe as well the sayd shryne, superstitiose reliques as superstitiose juellys, plate, copes and other suche like, as you shall thynke by your wysdomys not mete to contynewe or remayn ther . . . and to see the said reliques juellys and plate salvely and surely to be conveyed to our towre of London unto our juell house ther . . ."

(Chapter Acts of the Cathedral Church of St. Mary of Lincoln, 1540)

BADGES AND TOKENS

“ . . . it was late and they were a long way from home when they met a man dressed like a Saracen, in pilgrim’s clothes. He was carrying a staff with a wide strip of cloth wound around it like bindweed, and a begging bowl and a satchel were slung on his hip. He had a hundred or so ampullae fastened to his hat, souvenirs of Sinai, scallop-shells from Galicia, and on his cloak were sewn crosses, cross-keys from Rome and a copy of St. Veronica’s handkerchief in the front — so that all should see by his souvenirs which shrines he had visited.

The people asked him where he had come from.

“From Sinai,” he said, “and from our Lord’s sepulchre; I have visited Bethlehem, Babylon, Armenia, Alexandria, and many other spots. You can see from the souvenirs on my hat that I’ve walked a good, long way in all kinds of weather, seeking out the shrines of the saints for the benefit of my soul.”

From *Piers the Plowman* (14th century)

This fourteenth-century description of a palmer and the above description of the pilgrims visiting the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, both mention the souvenirs which pilgrims bought at the shrines they visited. One of the commonest souvenirs was the **ampulla**, a little leaden or pewter flask which contained a few drops of holy water from a shrine or holy well. These ampullae were worn on a pilgrim’s hat or around his neck as proof of his pilgrimage, and the holy water which they contained was treated as a curative for the sick in times of need. The ampullae most commonly found in England are made of lead and are similar in size and shape to the one discovered at Caistor, Lincolnshire (see illustration). They were made in the shape of a little flask with a handle on either side of the neck, and were commonly decorated with a scallop-shell or cockle-shell motif on one side and an initial or heraldic emblem on the other side. The ampulla found at Ewerby, Lincolnshire has a scallop-shell on both faces. In a number of cases the shell is replaced by a compass-drawn flower. The scallop-shell was originally the emblem of St. James of Compostella, but it gradually came to have a much wider significance and by the later Middle Ages was viewed generally as a sign of pilgrimage.

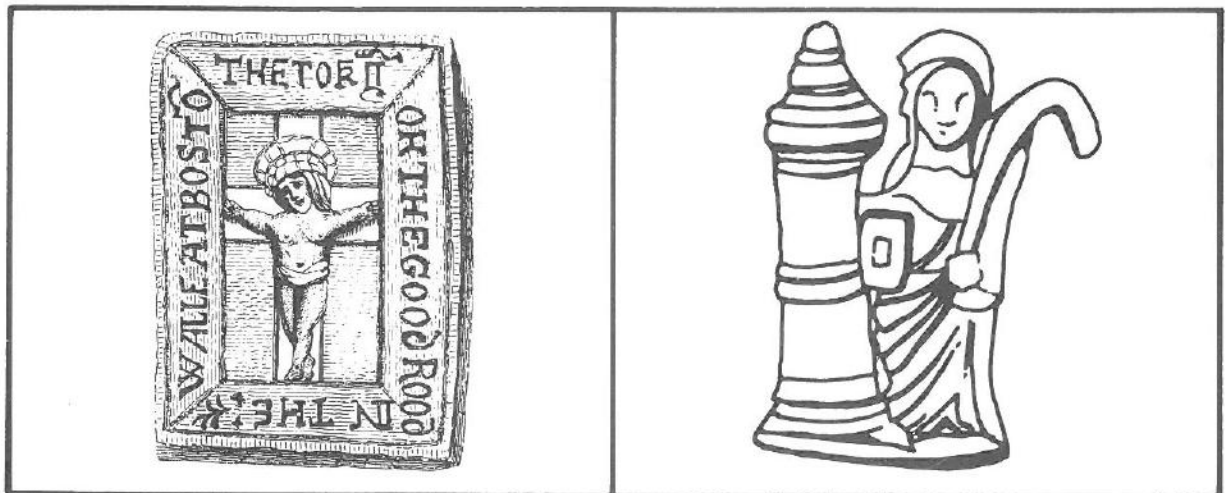


Figure 5. Token of the Holy Rood at Boston
Pilgrim badge of St. Barbara from Nettleham

Apart from ampullae, pilgrims wore badges or tokens. The little badge of St. Barbara recently found at Nettleham, Lincolnshire is one such pilgrim souvenir. Many of the badges bear a representation of a saint with his or her special attributes. The token of the “Good Rood in the Walle at Boston” is another such souvenir. Found at Brothertoft in about 1810 it was probably produced by the Gild of the Good Rood in the Walle at Boston and sold to a pilgrim visiting this holy cross. Little is known of this Gild and the token itself is long since lost.

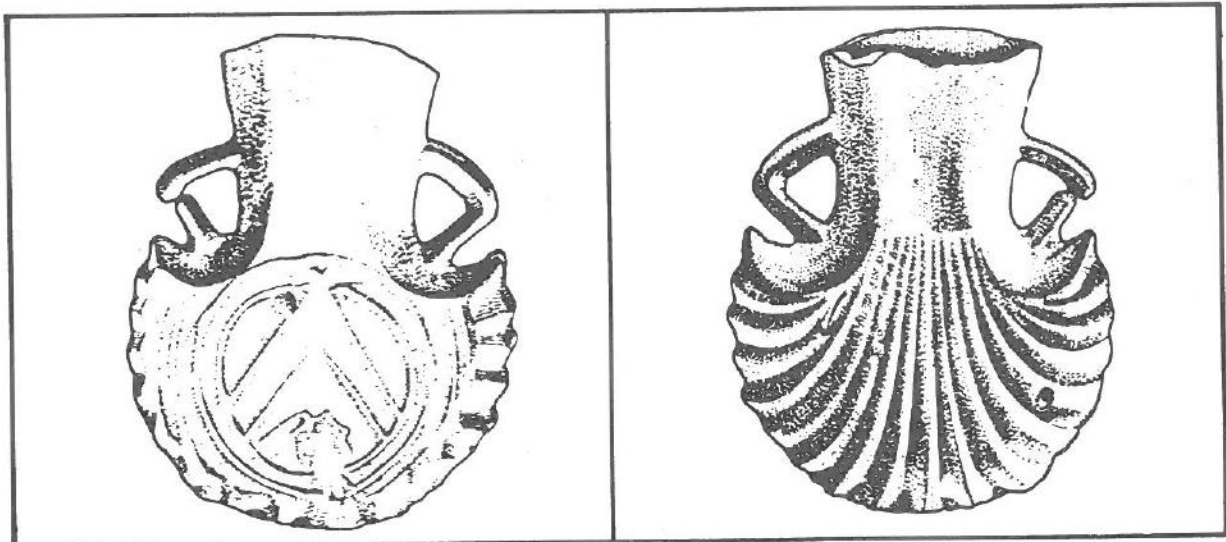


Figure 6. Ampulla from Caistor

PILGRIM SOUVENIRS FROM LINCOLNSHIRE AND SOUTH HUMBERSIDE

<i>Ampullae found at</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Location</i>
Saltfleet	6-petal flower, crescent and circle	Scunthorpe Museum (110 . 54)
Caistor	Scallop-shell	City and County Museum, Lincoln; at present on display at Caistor Library (30 . 66)
Ewerby and Evedon	Scallop-shell	British Museum (91, 4- 18, 24)
Maltby	Shield in circle, crowned heart	In private possession
Stixwould	Patterned lines	In private possession
Low Toynton	Elongated — unusual type	In private possession
Toynton All Saints	Scallop-shell	In private possession
Kirmington	Scallop-shell	City and County Museum, Lincoln (3 . 75)
<i>Badges and Tokens found at</i>		
	<i>Type</i>	<i>Location</i>
Fishtoft	Thomas à Becket mask	In private possession
Maltby	Badge — disc with face	In private possession
Nettleham	Pendant badge of St. Barbara	City and County Museum, Lincoln, — on loan (156 . 77)
Brothertoft	"Token of the Good Rood in the Walle at Boston"	Not known. Lost?

SOURCES

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COMPILED AND WRITTEN BY

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