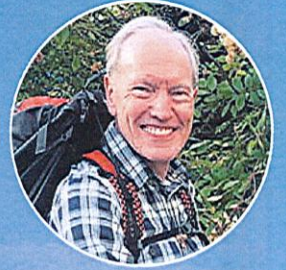


The stunning hilltop village of San Gimignano

Last year, diocese of Leeds' chief operating officer Ian Burrell took on Italy's St Francis Way. Not satisfied with that feat of hiking endurance, this year he embarked on the lesser trod Via Francigena, from San Miniato to Bolsena. Rowan Morton-Gledhill tells his tale



Another Apennine adventure

The BBC may not carry advertising, but one of its recent programmes – *Pilgrimage, The Road to Rome* – has promoted renewed interest in an ancient and lesser-known pilgrimage route between Canterbury and Rome: the Via Francigena.

Irish singer and former politician, Dana, was the only practising Catholic among the eight British celebrities of different faiths and none, drawn from the worlds of TV comedy, sport, music and dance, who walked part of the route through Italy for the TV cameras, and now the diocese of Leeds' own 'Celebrity Pilgrim', chief operating officer Ian Burrell, has also walked some of the most challenging and picturesque stages of this Italian 'Camino'.

Last year, Ian took a month to walk the St Francis Way through the Italian Apennine Mountains. This year, he was back walking 'the Apennine way', but much further west.

His journey took in Stages 30 through 38 of the Via Francigena. It began in the city of San Miniato with its cathedral dedicated to St Genesius who – it's hoped the BBC's researchers discovered – is the Patron Saint of actors and comedians. While performing in a play mocking Christianity and the Sacrament of Baptism, it is said that the saint had an on-stage conversion and later went joyfully to his martyrdom at the order of Emperor Diocletian.

Ian's journey ended in Bolsena, one week, 200 km and a total ascent of 10,000 feet later, where it was hoped that he had maintained the sense of humour for which accountants are justly renowned!

The Via Francigena is first mentioned in a manuscript from the year 876, but it was – quite literally! –

put on the map at the end of the C10th by an Archbishop of Canterbury-elect who recorded the route he took on the way back from collecting his pallium in Rome.

He was known as Sigeric the Serious and probably travelled there and back with a retinue of servants and companions. Ian the Intrepid, on the other hand, was once again travelling alone, keeping diocese of Leeds Curia colleagues informed of his Pilgrim's progress through the wonders of WhatsApp.

On his long, solo, walking pilgrimages, Ian relies on his 'miraculous' GPS watch on which the whole route is downloaded. This ultra-hi-tech device guided Ian's month-long pilgrimage walk last year through the wolf, bear, and wild boar infested mountains and forests of the Apennines between Florence and Rome via Assisi on the St Francis Way.

The Via Francigena is not a single road or path between two points; from its inception it comprised several possible routes which have altered over the centuries with political, trade, and seasonal variations, and these run between abbeys, rather than cities. This definitely makes this pilgrim way a 'road less travelled', with the sort of divergences which would have confused even Robert Frost himself.

However, one has to travel hopefully before one arrives, and after setting forth from Harrogate, even the flight was comically eventful. The aircraft was grounded for one hour owing to the loos not having been cleaned. Once airborne there were further delays, as too much fuel had been loaded. The solution for a company with an environmental policy '...to improve fuel efficiency

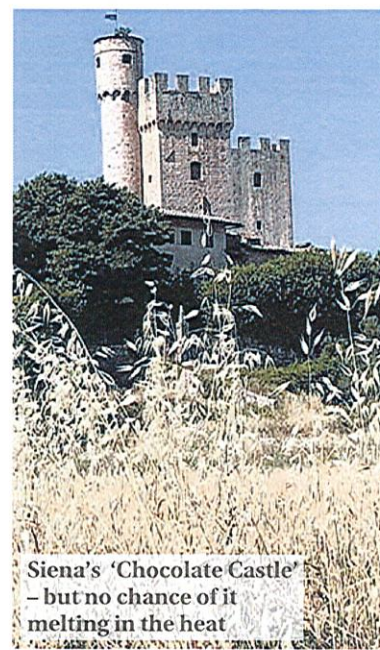
...' was then to circle Pisa Airport several times to burn it off! For a Yorkshireman who has just cleared a diocesan debt of £14m in two years, Ian's outrage at such wasteful practices was only assuaged later on the train to San Miniato, when his Via Francigena Passport gained him a discount.

Sometimes it pays to be a pilgrim! The threemile walk from the station in 37 degree heat also merited a treat – and according to the miraculous watch, a 'recovery time' of 55 hours! With the money he saved on rail fare Ian was able to enjoy the most expensive dish on the menu that evening in San Miniato: pasta made with the local delicacy, *tartufo bianco*. There is nothing 'common or garden' about any truffles, but the white truffles of Tuscany are even more sought-after.

San Miniato's Cathedral seems equally sought-after as a wedding venue. Upon his arrival in the city, Ian had made a beeline for the 6 O'clock Mass, only to find that all Masses had been moved to the nearby church of San Domenico, owing to no fewer than six cathedral weddings being held on that day!

With an accountant's typical facility for understatement, Ian described the first stage, from San Miniato to Gambassi Terme, as 'a challenging day'. Walking 30 km of which the final seven km were continuously uphill for almost 1,000 feet of ascent in more than 30 degrees heat was challenging enough, but the path was unclear. The signage pointed one way; but the route downloaded from the official Via Francigena website pointed another way. It was the first of many such conflicting directions.

Ian noticed that some pathways



Siena's 'Chocolate Castle' – but no chance of it melting in the heat

appeared to have been deliberately blocked. "One farmer seemed to have closed the footpath to stop walkers with a 'fallen' tree, allowed prickly scrub to grow up over the path, and had ploughed up the rest...but I too ploughed on and after about 100 metres regained the path."

"An extra six km and one hour's walking in the baking heat ensued, and my watch recommended a recovery time of five days! I had burned more than 4,500 calories, but had only eaten two bananas, one apple and a handful of raisins – plus two litres of water!

"Although I kept a fast pace all day, unusually for me I needed to rest in the very few shaded places. Amazingly, the fastest mile I walked was the last one and it was all uphill;

not quite sure how I managed that!" At the end of that stage, although the original famous Roman hot baths were out of commission, Ian did find liquid refreshment at a Convent with its own Chianti winery!

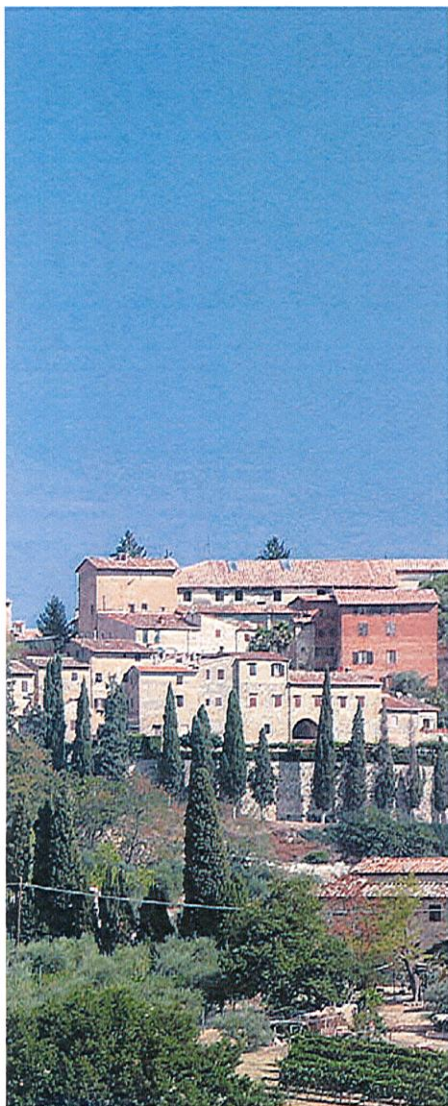
The next day's 13km between Gambassi Terme and San Gimignano was supposed to be the shortest walking day – but something did not add up – every accountant's worst nightmare! "The wayside signage is variable: everything from little pilgrim pictograms to red rags hanging off a tree. Checking my watch and route one km after leaving Gambassi showed not 12 but 17 km to walk; after a further 8 km the watch showed 10 km still to go... could San Gimignano be a place of myth and mirage, akin to a 'San Brigadooniano'?"

Eventually, Ian reached the famous towers of San Gimignano and was able to light a candle at the Basilica of St Maria Assunta. The church contains the 13th Century Shrine of St Fina (Serafina), a native of the town and its patron saint. She is also patron of all physically-challenged people and her sad story of a short lifetime of debilitating illness, bravely borne, is told in the church's beautiful murals.

Saint Gregory the Great appeared to her, predicting that she would die on his feast day (12th March). When that day came, white violets grew upon the 15-year-old Fina's deathbed and still continue to bloom in the town to this day.

With the physical challenges ensuing from a temperature of 37 deg C and rising, Ian adopted St Fina as his patroness for the next day's long 31 km walk to Monteriggioni. By now the watch had definitely lost its 'mojo' and the road, as Bilbo Baggins

Around the Parishes



One of San Gimignano's many medieval towers which dominate its skyline



Above, twice a year Siena hosts the 'Palio' – the famous horse race round the town square. The winning district celebrates its victory – and right is the winning horse



might have said, went 'ever, ever on! After 25 km it said 50 km to go... 'Time for an upgrade!' But on safe arrival in Monteriggioni, as the former finance director of a construction plc, Ian was not too tired to notice and admire the non-slip paving on the steep ascent to the fortified hill-top town's San Giovanni Gate.

The 24 km of Stage 33 – Monteriggioni to Siena – felt longer in the searing heat (which fortunately had dropped from 40 deg C to a mere 34). In that weather, Ian was concerned for the structural integrity of what seemed to have been named the 'Chocolate Castle'. On closer inspection, he noticed the crucial difference in spelling: the confectionery is *cioccolato*, whereas the castle was named for its '*chiocciola*' or spiral staircase.

After a long period of radio silence, Ian's WhatsApp message of 'reached cemetery on outskirts of Siena and ready for a rest!' was received with some concern until a more cheerful pilgrim's greeting of '*io ho, arrivato in Siena!*' made clear that the rest was not of the eternal variety and he was not yet ready to hang up his boots in the UNESCO World Heritage Site which is one of Italy's most-visited and historic tourist attractions.

It was time for some sightseeing.

"Entering the city via the Porta Camollia, it looks like a backdrop for one of Shakespeare's Italian plays. I'm reminded of childhood paint boxes containing the colour Burnt Siena: the landscape surrounding the city has a reddish orange tone so the local stone and bricks give the buildings that distinctive hue.

"The previous day had been Siena's famous horse race, the Palio, and the winning district and horse were still parading round the city. The race is run twice a year around one of Europe's largest mediaeval squares, the Piazza Il Campo.

"St Catherine of Siena is a Patron Saint not only of the city but of the whole of Europe. She was known for having a 'mystical marriage' with Christ, but also renowned for her political and diplomatic skills as a trusted advisor to the Papacy and one of the doctors of the Church."

In the air-conditioned Cathedral museum, Ian had sight of his first wolves in the form of Roman statues and mosaics. The creatures are well thought of in Italy owing to the story of the she-wolf which raised Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome. Throughout his journey, Ian had hardly seen another pilgrim and had fortunately avoided wolves and bears, although he encountered lo-

cal – of all species – on the remote mountain slopes. "Passing a herd of goats with noisy bells, I was confronted by three huge, white dogs. Although they blocked my path, barking and threatening, I forged ahead, expecting the worst, but as soon as I had passed the goats they were guarding, they lost interest."

"I walked past another farm and several large dogs came charging out. One of them, a Dobermann, managed to jump over the fence and leapt at me, paws on my shoulders and drooling menacingly. He was called off by his owner who seemed to be saying that this meant the dog liked me. Wondering at what the creature might have done had I not met with its approval, I survived to tell the tale."



St Catherine of Siena – Patron Saint not only of the city but of the whole of Europe.

The wayside signage is variable: everything from little pilgrim pictograms to red rags hanging off a tree...



From Siena, Ian's next long but picturesque stages passed uneventfully through wheat fields, olive groves and gardens. Many fortified villages and castles are testament to the region's turbulent history, but even these were outnumbered by the wayside shrines and churches from the days when pilgrimage had been a local 'industry'. As in Britain, the cathedrals charged an entry fee: 13 Euros to help maintain the buildings and their restoration. However, there was evidence that not all the churches, hostels and religious houses were still thriving. Several Church and secular organisations and individuals still generously provide accommodation for donation-only or at a reduced rate on production of pilgrim credentials. Sadly, owing to many travellers taking advantage of the 'give what you can' philosophy, some religious houses have had to stop taking in pilgrims – but Ian was pleased to see that a Pilgrim Code of Ethics has been drawn up with a fiscally-responsible suggestion of a minimum donation of 10 Euros.

Although in its heyday countless British pilgrims passed along the Via Francigena, neither the BBC's 'celebrity pilgrims', nor even Sigeric, Charles Dickens, nor Ian himself were the most notable Brits to walk that way. San Quirico d'Orcia was the scene of a diplomatic triumph involving the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Adrian IV: the first and only English pope!

It was during these final stages through Radicofani and Acquapendente – the borderlands of Tuscany and Lazio – that a multiplicity of alternative routes finally revealed why

the walking distances had not been adding up. A 'gremlin' in the downloadable route on the Via Francigena's website was to blame for the worrying miscalculations – and Ian's faith in his Miraculous Watch was restored!

As he arrived in Bolsena in plenty of time to catch the (only!) "bus to Orvieto and make the journey back home to Harrogate," Ian found himself in the right location and in good company as a believer in minor miracles. The town, on the shores of the volcanic Lake Bolsena, was the scene of a truly major miracle. At the Basilica of Santa Cristina in 1263, a priest with the obligatory alliterative name, 'Peter of Prague' had stopped there on pilgrimage to Rome. Fr Peter had been questioning whether transubstantiation really meant that the Eucharist was in fact the actual body and blood of Christ – and his doubts were to be removed in the most graphic and dramatic way.

As he celebrated Mass in Bolsena, the elevated Host began to drip blood on to his hands which ran on to the corporal cloth in the shape of a cross. He was instantly reconverted and the following year's institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi by Pope Urban IV also gave rise to St Thomas Aquinas being commissioned to compose the familiar words we sing to this day: *Tantum Ergo and O Salutaris Hostia*.

As the idea of pilgrimage is to mirror our journey through the trials and hardships of this life, the Eucharist sustains us along the Way, as *viaticum* (literally, 'food for the journey') before attaining the joys of eternal life – hopefully with the pilgrim cry of '*io ho, arrivato in Paradiso!*'