

JOHN EADE\*

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF RAILWAYS IN THE LIFE OF A EUROPEAN PILGRIMAGE SHRINE

**Abstract:** This paper examines the changing role of the railway in the development of one of the most important Roman Catholic shrines – Lourdes in France. During the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century trains were vital in establishing Lourdes’ position as a major national and international shrines. Although the expansion of car ownership and tourism after the Second World War have vastly increased, the numbers visiting the shrine, the importance of the railway has declined. This paper examines the changing role played by the railway in the shrine’s development, the declining importance of organised pilgrimage groups and the growth of individual choice and the flexibility provided by diverse modes of transport. It concludes with a consideration of the relevance of this case study to the study of pilgrimage and tourism in Europe and beyond.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, tourism, railways, roads, flying

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### Lourdes: the development of a shrine

In 1858 a local girl, Bernadette Soubirous, experienced a number of visions at a grotto by the river Gave outside the small Pyrenean town of Lourdes. Among the several messages which Bernadette reported after these visions the Roman Catholic Church officials favoured the one which uncannily referred to a dogmatic proclamation made by Pope Pius IX four years previously. In response to Bernadette’s question as to who she was, *Aquero* or “that thing” (Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ typically referred to as Our Lady) replied using the local Bigourdan dialect: “Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou” or “I am the Immaculate Conception”.

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Yet, what caught the popular imagination was another message concerning a spring Bernadette had uncovered during another of the visions, when Our Lady told her to: "Go and drink at the spring and wash yourself in it".<sup>1</sup> Claims that miraculous cures had occurred at the spring or through the use of "Lourdes water" quickly spread and established the shrine's fame as a national and then an international centre of healing.

Claims concerning the healing powers of "Lourdes water" led to intense debate between the religious and medical professionals associated with the shrine and their secular opponents.<sup>2</sup> The Lourdes authorities moved swiftly to control access to the water by providing taps near the grotto and began to test healing claims through a rigorous process of medical scrutiny. Bathing in the spring water soon became organised and a bathing house for pilgrims was built next to the Medical Bureau where people's claims to be cured were assessed. Yet, Lourdes' rapid development depended on more than debates concerning the authenticity of miraculous cures and struggles between religious and secular elites. The burgeoning "pilgrimage town", which emerged around the shrine, was shaped by the economic and technological changes transforming France more generally.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a wide range of accommodation, shops, restaurants and bars was established to satisfy the diverse tastes of the visitors. Outside of the daily religious routine within the shrine's precincts, such as the masses held at the grotto, the bathing, the afternoon Blessed Sacrament procession and the evening torchlight procession, people were free to browse round the shops and enjoy the company of family and friends in the bars and hotels. Pilgrimage and tourism became intimately linked with the places associated with Bernadette's life both inside the old town of Lourdes and the surrounding countryside attracting people inspired by a range of motives. In other words the most devout could rub shoulders with those who were just curious or even sceptical.

### The role of the railway

The railway played a vital role in this mixture of the sacred and secular. During the 1840s and 1850s a national railway network was established by different regional companies. By 1860 the main cities and towns across France had been connected by railway and the capital of the local department – Tarbes – had belatedly joined this expanding network through the arrival of the line from Bordeaux. When the Compagnie de Midi decided to build a line from Toulouse to the expanding resort of Bayonne on the Atlantic coast the rising fame of Lourdes led it to build a southern loop between Tarbes and Pau down to the shrine. In June 1867 the line was completed and a month later the first pilgrimage from Bayonne triumphantly arrived.

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1 LAURENTIN 1979. 60

2 See HARRIS, Ruth 1999, KAUFMAN 2005; CLAVERIE 2009.

In 1872 the new station saw the arrival of a large national pilgrimage for the August Feast of the Assumption and this proved to be the beginning of an annual event, which helped to secure Lourdes' position as the most visited national shrine. The arrival of a Belgian national pilgrimage group two years later also saw the beginnings of Lourdes' role as an international destination. During the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century groups arrived from Germany, Britain, Spain and the United States and by 1914 Ireland had also organised its first national pilgrimage to Lourdes. The British and Irish groups emphasised the ways in which the French railway network was connected to sea-borne traffic. The ferry from Dover to Boulogne provided easy access to the line leading to Paris and then down to southern France. The Irish national pilgrimage used this route for its first visit but then sailed directly from Cork to Bordeaux cutting out the long detour through England and northern France.

The railway was crucial in Lourdes' ability to see off the competition from rival shrines. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century new Catholic shrines were established not only across France but also in other European countries, such as Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal. La Salette, for example, had emerged in the Alpine region of western France through similar claims by two children to have had visions of Our Lady in 1846. The organisers of the 1872 French national pilgrimage also took a group to La Salette but its Alpine location made it much more difficult to access than Lourdes. La Salette remained an important national shrine but its lack of a direct railway link prevented it from emulating the national and international success enjoyed by its southern Marian rival. The journey to La Salette remained arduous and time consuming whereas the railway enabled many more people to travel to Lourdes in far larger numbers and in a much shorter time than by road.<sup>3</sup>

The national and international expansion of the railway network was more than an economic and technological process – it instigated crucial social and cultural changes. It increased the flows of people and information through the strict attention to timetables and the close coordination of different elements (engines, carriages, railway staff, customers and goods). It symbolised the triumph of modern rationality, industrial production and technological innovation over tradition and the ways in which isolated communities were brought into close communion with the rapidly expanding towns and cities. Lourdes expressed the triumph of modernity in the close coordination of the groups organised by dioceses, parishes and particular interest groups and arriving mainly by rail. This close coordination depended heavily on two lay confraternities – the Hospitality of Our Lady of Salut worked for the August French National Pilgrimage, while the Hospitality of Our Lady of Lourdes not only provided a highly organised corps of volunteer helpers at the shrine throughout the pilgrimage season but also liaised with the diocesan groups nationally and internationally.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, during the 1860s the journey from Bordeaux to the nearby spa of Bagnères-de-Bigorre took "some thirty-two hours by coach". HARRIS 1999, 24.

The railway played a key role in the growth of Lourdes' international renown as a centre of miraculous healing. The "sick" could be transported in much larger numbers than ever before and many came from hospitals – another expression of the ways in which modern science, technological innovation and hierarchical, rational organisation were combined with traditional modes of caring. Doctors and nurses became important members of the two confraternities and the Medical Bureau, which investigated miraculous claims, was staffed by eminent medical practitioners.

Lourdes also developed into a major tourism centre. Shops, cafes, restaurants and hotels quickly sprung up along the roads leading down to the Sanctuary. Although many shops catered for the interests of visitors as pilgrims through the sale of bottles for 'Lourdes water', rosaries, statues and paintings, for example, some also responded to the demand for touristic diversions. In 1900 a funicular railway was built to enable people to reach the Pic du Jer which overlooked the town and during the inter-war period local charabanc companies provided day trips to the mountain village of Bartrès where Bernadette Soubirous stayed and to such beauty spots as the underground caves at Bétharram and the limestone circles at Gavarnie. The massive sales of postcards by the Lourdes' shops witnessed to the crucial role played by photography in promoting the shrine and the importance of a large female market among the visitors for these and other modern consumer items.<sup>4</sup> The French railway network played a crucial role in bringing these goods to this expanding town and the railway companies benefited from promoting this far-flung town close to the national frontier.<sup>5</sup> Lourdes illustrated the ways in which the flows of goods and people were intertwined and how tourism and pilgrimage could be mutually supportive.

## Organised pilgrimages and the railway

The organised pilgrimages such as the massive French National Pilgrimage and the Rosary pilgrimage, which came in early October and was the last major group of the season, had long caught the imagination of a number of writers. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century French and Italian authors, in particular, vividly described some of these journeys for an increasingly literate population and the ways in which "sick" pilgrims were looked after. The controversial French scientist, Alexis Carrel, for example, recounted his journey with the French National Pilgrimage from Paris in 1903 and the cramped conditions which the 'sick' endured in the ill equipped, stifling carriages.<sup>6</sup> 1903 also saw the formation of the voluntary

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4 See KAUFMAN 2005.

5 See READER 2014. 65.

6 CARREL 1949.

organisation, UNITALSI<sup>7</sup> which commissioned “white trains” to transport “sick” and able pilgrims to the French shrine.

British and Irish organised groups also began to make their way to Lourdes by boat and train from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and a number of accounts were made of these journeys. A recent reflection of one such journey was provided by Matthew, a highly experienced member of the Hospitality of Our Lady of Lourdes.<sup>8</sup> He made his first trip with a diocesan youth group in 1968, which travelled from the north-east of England to London’s Victoria train station by twelve coaches and then boarded a chartered train for the port of Folkestone. The Channel ferry took them to Boulogne where they met another English diocesan group, which had chartered a train to Lourdes with their ‘sick’ pilgrims. The over-night journey took them across France and by lunch time they arrived in Bordeaux.

This gave people a chance to get off the train to stretch their legs while the water tanks on the train were being replenished and water was being obtained for the lunchtime tea run. This relieved some of the boredom of the journey as well as relieving the feeling of cabin fever, as this was before the time of any portable entertainment systems. Following the lunchtime tea run there was an increased feeling of anticipation as everyone began preparing for their arrival in Lourdes. As the train got closer the state of excitement was rising as was waiting for their first sight of the steeple of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, known as the Upper Basilica. Everyone was saying repeatedly, “It is just around the next corner.” Once the steeple came into view followed by the sight of the Grotto, the whole train broke into Ave, Ave, Ave Maria, the chorus of The Lourdes Hymn. From the train pilgrims were shepherded to coaches that would take them to their hotels, with little time to relax before meeting up at the Crowned Virgin for the opening ceremony of the Pilgrimage and the opening mass.

Significantly, the “sick” pilgrims from his diocese had flown to the small local airport the day before – a process that would gather pace from the 1970s and leads us on to the next section of this chapter.

## **Changes in transport and the decline of organised pilgrimages**

Although the railway had played a key role in Lourdes’ rise to fame during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, its contribution declined in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – a period which saw a spectacular increase in visitor numbers. Between 1866 and 1946 annual visitor numbers averaged a quarter of a million, although in 1883 (the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bernadette’s visions) around half a million reportedly arrived. However, in 1949 (a Holy Year)

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<sup>7</sup> Unione Nazionale Italiana Ammalati a Lourdes e Santiari Internazionali/Italian National Union of the Sick to Lourdes and International Sanctuaries.

<sup>8</sup> In 2013 I returned to Lourdes after a twenty-one-year break and after meeting Matthew and other veterans, who had continued to serve there during that break, I invited them to reflect on the ways in which the journeys and the shrine had changed over the years.

almost two and a half million people came to Lourdes and although annual numbers fluctuated considerably thereafter, numbers continue to increase overall and reached their highest level in 2008 – the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions - when nine million were recorded. Numbers fell back subsequently and had dropped to 5,800,000 by 2012 (the latest official figure). It would appear that this dramatic increase was largely due to the development of other modes of transport with the steady rise in car ownership,<sup>9</sup> the improvement in France's road network, the rising popularity of walking tours and the development of low cost flights. The proportion of people coming in organised groups by train has declined while the number of those arriving by road either as individuals or with friends and relatives has massively increased.

The move away from rail travel among organised pilgrimages from England, for example, was well described by Patrick, another regular volunteer and member of the Hospitality of Our Lady of Lourdes, who first came to Lourdes in 1990:

“There were conspicuously fewer pilgrims around in the summer of 2014 than I've ever seen before and the number of trains which halved between 2002 and 2012 continues to fall. Taking Britain as an example, in [the early 1990s] Hexham and Newcastle, Salford, Shrewsbury, Nottingham, Liverpool and Arundel and Brighton all travelled down by train. The Welsh National Pilgrimage have also used the train in the past. Now only Shrewsbury and Arundel and Brighton arrive at Lourdes railway station and even then, Shrewsbury fly most of their sick out.

There are fewer pilgrimages arriving and those that continue to come are a lot smaller than they were. SNCF are imposing restrictions on the times a train can travel and this is already having effects. Some groups are coming by coach instead which means that Lourdes is becoming a pilgrimage for the sick but it's increasingly difficult for the sick to be able to get there. It's an expensive place to get to [...] The days when the number of sick passing through the railway station could get up to nearly two thousand are gone and I'm unlikely to see a day when trains number two figures for a day.”

The leaders of the Hospitality echoed Patrick's view. The March 2014 edition of Sanctuary carried a report where they bemoaned the decline of special trains and its contribution to the falling numbers of 'people with reduced mobility.'<sup>10</sup> Between 2001 and 2013 the number of special trains had fallen from 500 to 250, while those categorised as “sick pilgrim” had fallen from 65,000 to 50,000 during the same period. The March 2014 letter claimed that all interest groups should

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9 The number of cars on France's roads rose from 2,500,000 in 1950 to almost 30,000,000 by 2005. See P. GANDIL 2005.

10 [http://fr.lourdes-france.org/sites/default/files/pdf/hndl/lettre\\_35\\_hndl\\_en.pdf](http://fr.lourdes-france.org/sites/default/files/pdf/hndl/lettre_35_hndl_en.pdf) Accessed on 06 January 2016.

think about how to respond to this decline including the transport network “who at one time signed agreements and put forward some development proposals [...] who knows what became of them.”<sup>11</sup> The urgency of the situation was compounded by the future opening of the network to competition and ‘the liberalisation of rail transport’ by 2019 at the latest according to an EU directive.

### **Increasing diversity in modes of transport and visitors to Lourdes**

The massive increase in visitor numbers to this small town near France’s southern, mountainous border after the Second World War reflected general socio-economic transformations across Europe and the associated diversification in and growth of mobility. The shrine at Lourdes continued to attract a hard core of committed Roman Catholics attached to highly organised pilgrimage groups but a vast and highly diverse penumbra surrounded this hard core. Although those intimately involved in the shrine described those comprising this penumbra as “tourists”, the situation was far more complicated since these visitors appeared to range from those connected with the organised groups but spending only a short time in Lourdes and not closely involved in the groups’ activities to those who were passing through on the way to the mountains or the seaside, for example. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Lourdes catered for a wide range of visitors and was no longer dominated by the organised pilgrimages. Furthermore, although the shrine’s ritual life was firmly tied to the Roman Catholic Church, those belonging to other faiths (Protestant, Orthodox, Hindu and Buddhist) were also drawn to the shrine, reflecting the growth of cultural diversity shaped by global migration.

Although car ownership and the improving road network contributed heavily to the massive increase in visitor numbers after the Second World War, the growth of low cost flights also played a part and was clearly reflected in the expansion of the local airport. When I first began to work as a helper at Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées airport during the 1970s, it handled very little traffic. International flights were few and far between and while some organised pilgrimages, such as the English one described earlier, were using it by the late 1960s, most people on these pilgrimages still relied heavily on the train. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the airport had been transformed. The small terminal had been replaced by a spacious hall for arrivals and departures while the narrow road outside had given way to a wide double-lane avenue leading to a large parking area for cars and coaches. A few destinations were connected by regular flights but the airport came alive during the summer pilgrimage season with the arrival and departure of charter flights from Europe and further afield. Travel agencies played a key role in the operation of these charter flights with the airport’s website listing 51 from 12 European countries (Italy alone accounted for 17 of these agencies).

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

The airport did not just rely on the travel and tourist trade, however, since it also hosted a light aircraft factory and, as a cluster of large aeroplanes parked on the airport perimeter, an international aeroplane service operation.<sup>12</sup>

The increasing importance of the airport in Lourdes' fortunes is well illustrated by the career of one of the town's remarkable entrepreneurs. Pierre Ferron (not his real name) was born in the Midi town of Carcassonne during 1941 but was brought up in Lourdes where his father ran a cafe near the station. Pierre became fascinated by the work of the station and the part played by Hospitality volunteers in helping people on and off the trains:

"From the age of six I was watching the voluntary workers who were helping in the [station's] St Martha's Hall where the buses arrived, often during the night and in the early morning. The members of the Hospitality came mainly from the nobility or the upper bourgeoisie. I considered them as the 'servants of God', nobles in the full sense of the term."<sup>13</sup>

In 1958, at the age of 17, he joined the Hospitality and worked with these 'nobles' as a helper at the station. However, he also became interested in the developing airport and in 1968 he started working there as a helper and he eventually became responsible for organising the teams of Hospitality workers, who enabled those with limited mobility to enter and exit the planes. (I joined one of these teams during my first period as a Hospitality member between 1967 and 1992). He forged close links with British, Dutch and Irish pilgrimage groups, in particular, and took advantage of technological innovations to make the process of entering and leaving the plane safer and more efficient for those with limited mobility. As the number of charter planes arriving increased so did the range of Pierre Ferron's networks and this benefitted his expanding hotel business in Lourdes itself.

In 2013 when I returned to work as a Hospitality helper after a twenty one year break, he was still organising teams for the airport while managing a three star hotel in the pilgrimage town near the sanctuary. It is tempting but too simple to see him as a businessman who was exploiting his shrine connections to his commercial advantage. His involvement in the life of the shrine was personal, even if he did benefit commercially from that personal involvement. Like other single stranded interpretations of what was happening in Lourdes, to interpret his career in terms of rational calculation, and business strategy, would miss the complexity of beliefs and practices in which Pierre was involved.

While the development of the local airport has clearly illustrated the increasing importance of flights as an alternative to the railway, improving access to Lourdes by road was probably even more important. During the pilgrimage season the main road, which forms a loop from the old town down to the Sanctuary and back up again, is busy with cars, camper vans, coaches and lorries, as well as

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12 <http://www.tarmacaerosave.aero/index.php?lang=en> Accessed on 06 January 2016.

13 Hommage a notre ami Jean, *Hospitalite Diocesaine Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, No. 65, March 2013.

the Disney-style *petit train* (see picture 1). Camp sites outside the town have expanded to provide a cheap alternative to Lourdes' hotels and to relieve pressure on its parking spaces. The gradual improvement of France's roads after the Second World War strengthened a national network, which linked up with similarly improving road systems in other W. European countries. As well as free access to the *Route Nationale* network, drivers could use the expanding toll *autoroutes* (motorways), which increased from 1,500 kilometres by the late 1960s to over 11,500 kilometres by 2005.<sup>14</sup> Increasing mobility and flexibility encouraged people to visit Lourdes for a day or two and even for a few hours rather than be tied down by train timetables and flight schedules.

The Sanctuary's officials were well aware of the challenge posed by the increasing flexibility brought by the changes outlined above. Between 2012 and 2013 they carefully reviewed the organisation of the Sanctuary and the challenges it was facing and the new bishop, Monseigneur Brouwet, reflected on those challenges and how to respond to them in "*Au service de la joie des convives*" *Orientations pour le Sanctuaire de Lourdes* (Serving the joy of the guests. Guidance for the Lourdes Sanctuary). He urged those working at the shrine to think about how to engage the vast penumbra outside the core of the organised pilgrimages:

"We must continue to welcome those who come on organised pilgrimages. But we must reflect in a new way about how to welcome those who come as individuals; in particular those who arrive in Lourdes without knowing what they will find there nor how they are going to spend their few hours or days at the Massabielle Grotto.

(Nous devons continuer à accueillir ceux qui viennent en pèlerinage organisé. Mais nous devons réfléchir de manière nouvelle à l'accueil de ceux qui viennent individuellement; en particulier ceux qui arrivent à Lourdes sans savoir ni ce qu'ils vont y trouver, ni comment ils vont vivre ces quelques heures ou ces quelques jours à la Grotte de Massabielle)."<sup>15</sup>

Given the changes outlined above as well as the rapid decline in congregational worship and religious vocations across France and other W. European nations, the bishop and his colleagues faced a formidable task.

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<sup>14</sup> See GANDIL 2005.

<sup>15</sup> <http://fr.lourdes-france.org/evenement/orientations-pour-le-sanctuaire> Accessed on 06 January 2016.

## Conclusion

The railways have played a crucial role in the development of Lourdes as France's most popular pilgrimage shrine, despite stiff competition from such other celebrated sites as Lisiuex, Mont St Michel, Rocamadour and the Rue du Bac in Paris. However, the railway has declined in importance since the 1960s as car ownership has rapidly expanded and cheap air flights have encouraged the development of the local airport. Although the number of visitors has risen dramatically – from two and a half million in 1948 to the nine million peak of 2008 – the majority are independent of any organised pilgrimage group.

The decline of the railway's importance had also important implications for Lourdes' role as a healing shrine, where the "*malades et handicapés*" (sick and handicapped) played a central role. The rapid decline in the number of special trains between 2001 and 2013 had played a large part in the fall of 'sick pilgrims' from 65,000 to 50,000. Specially equipped coaches brought some of these pilgrims by road and others arrived by plane but these alternatives had not prevented this decline. Lourdes was in danger of losing its historic role as a place which welcomed the chronically ill with the hope of miraculous healing.

Looked at within the wider European context the changes affecting this particular Roman Catholic shrine have lessons for the study of pilgrimage, in general. Reference has been repeatedly made to the popularity of such major Marian shrines as Częstochowa, Máriapócs, Altötting, Loreto, Banneux, Lourdes, Fatima and Knock and the dramatic rise of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>16</sup> However, the analysis of the diverse reasons people have for visiting these and other less renowned, more local shrines has been limited and the tendency has been to use the popular distinction between pilgrims and tourists, which fails to acknowledge the complexity of people's motives and the mutual dependency of religious and non-religious institutions. Ethnographic research has been dominated by an essentialist perspective which encourages anthropologists, in particular, to dismiss the kinds of flows discussed here as either secondary or irrelevant.

Yet the limitations of this essentialist perspective are being increasingly exposed by the growing literature concerning the complexity of people's motives and the relationship between religious and non-religious institutions.<sup>17</sup> Hybrid terms such as religious tourism have also been deployed to understand the intersection of different actors, institutions and processes, while a body of research is emerging on more open forms of pilgrimage.<sup>18</sup>

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16 The shrine has still to be officially recognised by the Vatican.

17 See, for example, ROSEMAN – BADONE 2004; TIMOTHY - OLSEN 2006; COLLINS-KREINER 2010, READER 2014.

18 See, for example, studies of the route to Santiago de Compostela by FREY 1998; GONZALEZ 2013; SÁNCHEZ Y SÁNCHEZ – HESP 2015, as well as the explorations by BOWMAN 2000, WEIBEL 2005; FEDELE 2012 of "spiritual" and other alternative forms of pilgrimage.

This paper seeks to contribute to this literature by highlighting the significant part played by changing modes of transport in the life of this highly popular Marian shrine. Hopefully, similar studies across Europe will help to produce a more holistic approach towards pilgrimage in the region and forge links with other studies on changing mobilities and cultural processes beyond Europe.

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Lourdes 1953 gavnarie  
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Patricia Wilkinson on the way home, 1971  
Copyright: Jim Taylor



Waiting for the train to come in, 1973  
Copyright: Jim Taylor



Loading the aircraft at Newcastle Airport (Michael Johnson & Alan Archer), 1970s  
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MARION BOWMAN\*

## RAILWAYS, RIVALRY AND THE REVIVAL OF PILGRIMAGE IN GLASTONBURY, 1895 AND 1897

**Abstract:** The coming of the railway to Glastonbury, England, enabled the resumption of large scale, formal pilgrimage to Glastonbury after a gap of over 300 years. First, in 1895 Catholic pilgrims were able to travel from all over Britain to celebrate the beatification of the Glastonbury Catholic Martyrs Whiting, Thorne and James. Then, in 1897, the railway brought an unprecedented number of pilgrims and sightseers to Glastonbury for what was hailed as an ‘international pilgrimage’ organised by the Anglican Church. This paper examines the crucial role of railways in the revival of pilgrimage to and within Glastonbury, and the importance of both the 1895 and 1897 pilgrimages in staking competing claims on Glastonbury’s history and significance – contestation which continues until the present day.

**Keywords:** Glastonbury; pilgrimage; Somerset and Dorset Railway; procession; Glastonbury Abbey; Glastonbury Tor; Glastonbury Pilgrimage 1895; Glastonbury Pilgrimage 1897; Abbot Richard Whiting; railways.

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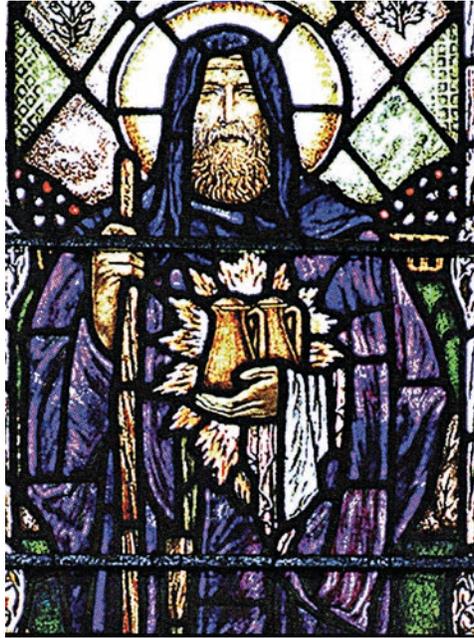
### Introduction

In this article I examine the significant role of the railways in the late nineteenth century in helping to re-establish the town of Glastonbury, England, as a pilgrimage destination. The Somerset Central Railway (from 1862 known as the Somerset

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and Dorset Railway after a merger) enabled two large scale pilgrimages to Glastonbury, one in 1895 the other in 1897, which were to revive pilgrimage to the town after a break of over 300 years. These events in turn contributed to Glastonbury's contemporary status as a multivalent pilgrimage site, where processions give physical expression to the claims on and contestation of the site until this day.<sup>1</sup>



St Joseph of Arimathea depicted in window  
of St. John's Church (Anglican), Glastonbury.  
Photograph: Marion Bowman

In the Middle Ages Glastonbury, in the Somerset Levels of southwest England, had been one of England's most significant pilgrimage destinations. Glastonbury claimed to be the earliest site of Christianity in England, allegedly missionized by St. Joseph of Arimathea.<sup>2</sup> He was (and still is) believed by many to have brought with him two cruets, containing the blood and sweat of Christ, or the chalice used at the Last Supper, also known as the Holy Grail.<sup>3</sup> On arrival on Wearyall Hill in Glastonbury, Joseph reputedly thrust his staff into the ground and it became the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury, famed for flowering both in springtime and around Christmas.<sup>4</sup> This myth of early, 'pure', pre-Catholic Christianity rooted in England was and remains immensely significant.

1 BOWMAN 1993; 2004; 2005; 2008; 2015.

2 CRAWFORD 1993; 1994.

3 For an excellent summary of these traditions see CARLEY 1996.

4 VICKERY 1979; BOWMAN 2006.



Allegedly built on the site of Joseph's early church, medieval Glastonbury Abbey was a great centre of Marian devotion<sup>5</sup> and a major pilgrimage site, with a magnificent library and a huge collection of relics, which allegedly included the bones of King Arthur.<sup>6</sup> However, at the time of the Reformation, in 1539, the Abbey was brutally dissolved. Abbot Richard Whiting and two monks, John Thorne and Roger James, were dragged through the streets of Glastonbury on 15 November 1539, and hanged on Glastonbury Tor (the distinctively shaped hill which dominates the local landscape) as traitors, for resisting the suppression of their house. The Abbey and its grounds passed into private ownership, and by the late nineteenth century the Abbey ruins were merely picturesque features in the garden of Abbey House.

Abbot Richard Whiting depicted with Glastonbury Tor in the background, St Mary's Church (Catholic) Glastonbury.  
Photograph: Marion Bowman



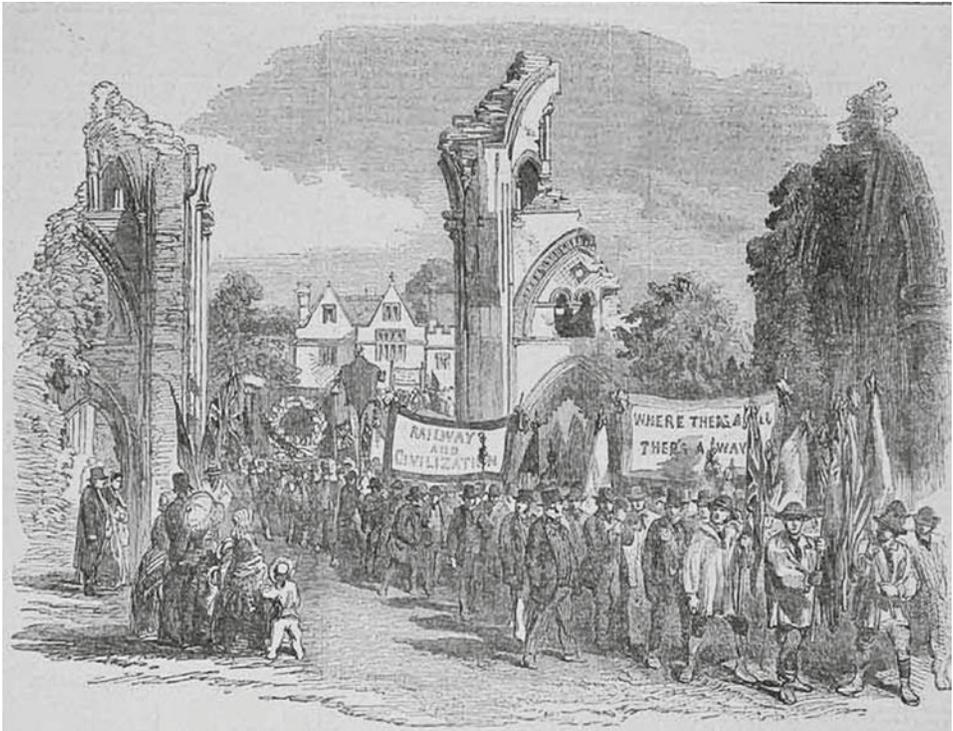
Abbey House (built in 1830, now an Anglican retreat house) with the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey in the foreground. Photograph Marion Bowman.

<sup>5</sup> HOPKINSON-BALL 2012.

<sup>6</sup> CARLEY 1996.

## The Coming of the Railway

Perhaps we tend to forget what an immensely big event the coming of the railway could be for a town, enabling people and goods to travel greater distances less arduously and more speedily, linking it to many hitherto remote places. When the Glastonbury branch of the Somerset Central Railway was opened in 1854, a great celebratory procession was held in the town. The *Illustrated London News* of 26 August 1854 depicted the scene in a sketch entitled 'The opening of the Somerset Central Railway' showing the procession wending its way through the Abbey grounds, with participants carrying flags and banners proclaiming WHERE THERE'S A RAIL THERE'S A WAY (a pun on the English proverb 'where there's a will there's a way') and RAILWAY AND CIVILISATION.



Sketch of celebrations in Glastonbury on the opening of the Central Somerset Railway. By Unknown engraver (*Illustrated London News* 20 August 1854), via Wikimedia Commons [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Opening\\_of\\_Somerset\\_Ctl\\_Rly.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Opening_of_Somerset_Ctl_Rly.jpg)

This railway provided the crucial infrastructure both for the 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage and then the 1897 Anglican Pilgrimage to Glastonbury.

## The 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage: Context

The 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage was focussed specifically on the beatification by Pope Leo XIII of the three Glastonbury Martyrs Whiting, Thorne and James in May 1895. As Giles Mercer puts it, “The Glastonbury Pilgrimage of 12 September 1895 was among the first, large-scale, legal, outdoor, public Catholic events in England since the Reformation and the first in the South West”.<sup>7</sup>

The 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage to Glastonbury needs to be seen in the broader context of English Catholicism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> This was a time of testing and pushing the boundaries of Catholic emancipation and toleration. In June 1895 the foundation stone was laid of Westminster Cathedral, London, the mother church of English and Welsh Catholics. Catholic pilgrimage in England was developing as a public display of devotion, strength and developing confidence. By the 1890s the Catholic Church was increasingly interested in both spiritually, and as far as possible physically, reclaiming or at least re-establishing links with Glastonbury, Walsingham and Canterbury, the three great shrines of pre-reformation Catholic England. Moreover, by then English Catholics were travelling abroad in increasing numbers to Jerusalem, Rome, Lourdes, Loreto and elsewhere: “The railway age was enabling pilgrimages at home and abroad to influence and gain strength from one another”.<sup>9</sup>

Pope Leo XIII was sympathetic to the English Catholic Church in its attempts to restore its role and legitimacy in public life and religious affairs, and to counter the claims of the Anglican Church to be in continuity with, and be the true successor of, the pre-Reformation church in England. English Benedictines Dom Francis Aidan Gasquet and Dom Bede Camm actively promoted interest in and devotion to English Catholic Martyrs, arguing that Anglican protestations of “continuity” were undermined by the history of Catholic martyrs such as Whiting, Thorne and James, who died defending communion with Rome. Gasquet’s popular book *The Last Abbot of Glastonbury and His Companions: An Historical Sketch* appeared early in 1895, in anticipation of the announcement of the beatifications of the three Glastonbury martyrs, to reinforce awareness of the martyrs’ story.

The main figures in the organisation of the 1895 Pilgrimage were Prior Ford of Downside,<sup>10</sup> and Bishop Brownlow, Catholic Bishop of Clifton in Bristol, a former Anglican cleric. The pilgrimage in honour of the beatified Glastonbury martyrs on Thursday September 15, 1895 was timed to be the climax of the annual meeting of the Catholic Truth Society (CTS), held that year in Bristol.

In August Bishop Brownlow sent out a Pastoral Letter to be read in “all Churches and Chapels” in the Diocese on August 11 to advertise the Pilgrimage

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<sup>7</sup> MERCER 2012. 79.

<sup>8</sup> See MERCER 2012; CORIO 2014.

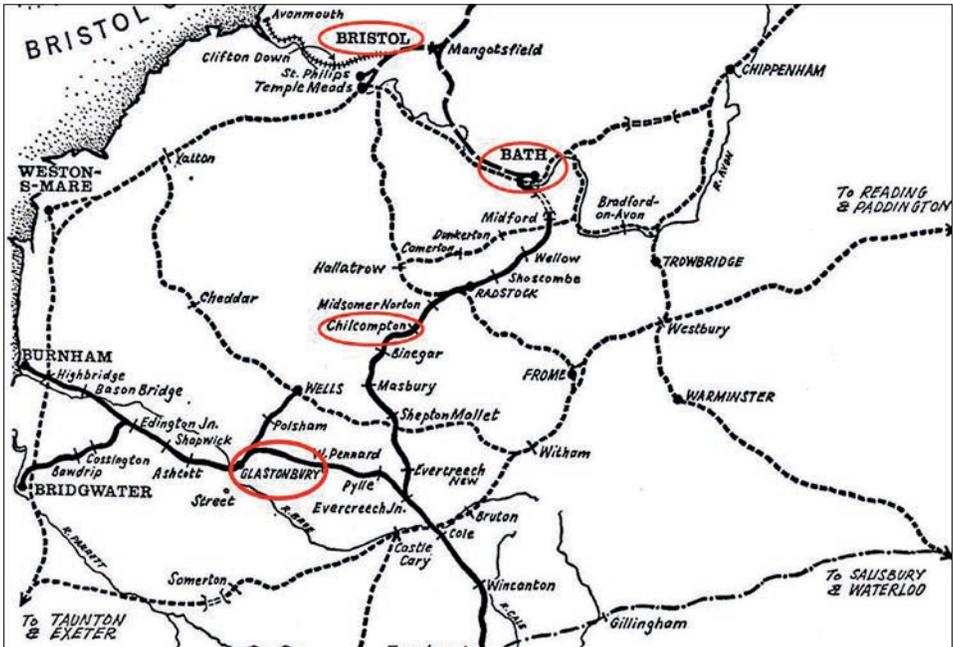
<sup>9</sup> MERCER 2012. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Downside, the Benedictine Abbey close to Glastonbury begun in 1872, regarded by some as the “new Glastonbury”. See BELLENGER 2011.

and explain its significance, granting an “Indulgence of Forty Days applicable to the souls in purgatory, to all those, who after Confession and Communion, take part in this Pilgrimage”.<sup>11</sup>

### The 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage: Logistics

A very detailed double-sided leaflet entitled *Directions for the Pilgrims* was produced, informing them of Somerset and Dorset, Great Western Railway and Midland Railway trains they might use for travel to Glastonbury on September 15, 1895. However, a ‘special’ (a privately chartered train) was to leave Bath at 1.30, calling at Chilcompton at 2.05, and arriving at Glastonbury at 2.55. All pilgrims were advised to be at Glastonbury station for 3 p.m., as the Pilgrimage procession would form up and start from there. A mobile vestry was arranged for the clergy on the special train. According to *Directions for the Pilgrims*: “A saloon carriage will be reserved for the clergy, marked ‘Engaged,’ in which they can vest, and in which they can leave hand-bags, umbrellas, etc, at Glastonbury under charge of the guard.” The train journey itself was to be a devotional experience, as the *Directions* section on Devotions made clear:



Railway map with places relevant to 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage circled in red.

11 MERCER 2012. 89.

"1. On leaving the first railway station, one person in each compartment should recite the Litany BVM, the others answering.

2. Between Chilcompton and Evercreech, the Litany of the Saints.

3. Between Evercreech and Glastonbury, the Te Deum."

These instructions also appeared in Catholic publication *The Tablet*.<sup>12</sup>

On the morning of 12 September, 1895, some delegates attending the Catholic Truth Society meeting signed up for a visit to Prior Park College in Bath, run by Christian Brothers. Bishop Brownlow and around 200 delegates, meanwhile, took the 9.35 train from Bristol to Chilcompton, in order to visit nearby Downside Abbey, where they were welcomed by Prior Ford. According to the account in the local newspaper, *West of England Advertiser*, Bishop Browning gave a short address there in which he reminded his hearers that "a pilgrimage was a pious journey, and they were all asked to join in the prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary asking for success, and they hoped the arrangements that had been made would be carried out".<sup>13</sup> He warned that

"A pilgrimage was not a party of pleasure, and they must be prepared for some of the inconveniences: but let them take them as pilgrims through a land which once knew their holy religion, and had now forsaken or forgotten it. They must not be surprised if there was irritation caused by their reminding their fellow Protestant countrymen of what once occurred. He understood that the people of Glastonbury were especially bigoted against the Catholics [...] and they must not be surprised if they met with some slight opposition on the part of the inhabitants. He believed that there had been some difficulties made about their going to the Tor, but they would be told at the station whether it would be possible to go through with the procession. If they were interfered with, they must suffer it, and even if they had stones thrown at them, they must act like true pilgrims and put up with it."<sup>14</sup>

This was not simply dramatic rhetoric; they truly did not know quite what to expect on arrival in Glastonbury. After lunching at Downside, the Bishop and his party walked back to the station at Chilcompton to join the special pilgrimage train, fifteen coaches long and hauled by two engines, which had left Bath at 1.30 and arrived at 2.00 p.m. already "well filled".<sup>15</sup> While pilgrims in each compartment attempted to recite the appropriate prayers on the journey to Glastonbury, there are some indications that this was rather difficult due to the packed nature of the train, with many even standing in the guard's van. The special train arrived at Glastonbury around 3.00p.m.

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<sup>12</sup> 7/9/1895; see <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/7th-september-1895/27/glastonbury-pilgrimage-thursday-september-12-1895>

<sup>13</sup> *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895.

<sup>14</sup> *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895.

<sup>15</sup> *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895.

Simultaneously, according to the *Central Somerset Gazette*, there was already considerable activity at Glastonbury station:

“Before the arrival of this train, a large number of people from Wells were brought in by a special train, and these were increased by additions brought by road and rail from all parts of the county. In the meantime, four Franciscan Friars of the Observance from Clevedon, in brown habit and cowl, sandals, and tonsure, had arrived, and marched up and down the station platform silently reciting their prayers [...] Nineteen choirboys from Clevedon accompanied the Friars, and, after vain attempts to secure a private room at the station in which to robe, they put on their cassocks and surplices at the end of the platform; a number of banners were unfurled and the nucleus of the procession was formed in the station yard before the arrival of the main body of pilgrims. A goodly number of Catholics from various places in the district also awaited at the station the arrival of the special train, being distinguished by the wearing of yellow and white favours [papal colours] [...]

At last, about 3 o’clock, the train steamed into the station, bringing nearly 1,000 pilgrims. The station was at once transformed, and became crowded with strange travellers, giving one the impression of a continental railway station during gala-time. The scene was thoroughly un-English in some aspects.”<sup>16</sup>



1895 Catholic Pilgrimage Procession setting out from the station. Photograph from Remembering St. Louis website: <http://www.stlouisconvent.co.uk/pilg.html>

<sup>16</sup> *Central Somerset Gazette* 14/9/1895.

Once the main pilgrimage train from Bath had arrived, the procession proper could begin. According to the *West of England Advertiser*:

“The stewards soon marshalled the party, a large cross being placed at the head of the procession, and following this came the Burnham Brass Band, which played sacred music during the walk to the Tor. The Pilgrims formed into line four abreast, and many carried handsome religious banners of various colours, and illuminated with the representation of some saint. It is estimated that over 1000 joined in the procession, the preponderance being women, and some 100 priests [...] The Orders represented in the procession were the Jesuits, Dominicans, Capuchins, Carmelites, Fathers of the Sacred Heart, Sisters from Burnham, Wales and Bath, and the Blue Nuns of Clifton.”<sup>17</sup>



Map of Glastonbury showing in red the route taken by the 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage procession from the station to the Tor.

Glastonbury station was on the opposite edge of town from the focus of the Pilgrimage, Glastonbury Tor, the site of the 1539 martyrdoms. The long procession of pilgrims, reciting the Rosary interspersed with hymns, proceeded along Benedict Street, up the High Street and along Chilwell Street, taking about an hour to reach the foot of the Tor. At that point the procession was joined by those who had been transported for the first part of the route, and then continued onto

<sup>17</sup> *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895.

the steep slopes of the Tor, where it halted while hymns were sung and three short addresses made to the crowds by Dom Benedict Snow (Titular Abbot of Glastonbury), Fr Philip Fletcher (master of the Guild of Our Lady of Ransom, founded in 1887, to work for the conversion of England) and Prior Ford. The address by Abbot Snow was very fully reported in both the local newspapers<sup>18</sup> and *The Tablet*.<sup>19</sup> Snow reminded the crowd that “there was no spot in the island which showed more completely the continuity of the Catholic faith than the hallowed ground which was around them”. He took them through the various saints and historical events connected with Glastonbury, culminating in the martyrdom of Abbot Whiting and his two monks.

“You have come here to-day to this very spot to vindicate the blood of the martyrs. On the testimony of the Vicar of Christ you have come to proclaim that his [Whiting’s] was not a felon’s death, that it was no mere political execution, but that it was a true martyrdom, that it was the greatest of heroic acts by which a man giveth his life for his faith and his God. You have come to proclaim that this ignominy was an honour, that his life was illustrious, that his death was a passage into a glorious life. You come to thank God, who is wonderful in His saints, for the constancy, fortitude, and love of the blessed martyr. You come, too, to ask his intercession who has been declared to belong to the white-robed army of martyrs in the kingdom of heaven. You are the first to come to the place of his martyrdom to vindicate his shame and ignominy, and you may seek his intercession with confidence. Look down, then, Blessed Richard, on this place of thy triumph, upon this thy family gathered together in thy name, and obtain for us some of that constancy and firmness of faith that led to thy crown [...] Look down upon this our country, your country, and obtain from the God of peace that we may be again united in faith, and that England may be one Catholic nation, as in the days when you were blessed as the Abbot of Glastonbury”.<sup>20</sup>

The pilgrim procession then regrouped for a final ascent to the top of the Tor, in front of the ruins of St Michael’s church, the site of the martyrdom of Abbot Richard Whiting & monks John Thorne and Roger James.

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18 *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895 and *Central Somerset Gazette* 21/9/1895.

19 *The Tablet* 21/9/1895; see <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/21st-september-1895/22/the-pilgrimage-to-glastonbury>

20 *The Tablet*, 21/9/1895.



Glastonbury Tor, with the tower of ruined St Michael's church visible. Photograph Marion Bowman.

At a temporary altar erected there, Bishop Browning prayed that the faith for which Blessed Richard had died should once more be granted to England, and the pilgrims sang *Faith of Our Fathers* and recited the prayer for the conversion of England, which includes:

“O Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our most gentle Queen and Mother, look down in mercy upon England, Thy Dowry, and upon all of us who greatly hope and trust in Thee. Intercede for our separated brethren that in the one true fold we may all be united under the chief shepherd of Christ's flock, and that by faith and fruitful in good works we may all deserve to see and praise God together with Thee in our heavenly home.”

Bishop Browning then gave a blessing, using a relic of the Holy Cross claimed to have belonged once to Glastonbury Abbey. As *The Tablet* reported enthusiastically

“It was, of course, impossible for the procession to return in anything like definite order, but it poured down the hill in one unbroken stream, which flowed from the tower on the summit along the spur to the College at the foot. Viewed from this spot, nothing could well be more inspiring. In the midst of the surging crowd could be seen the mitre and crozier of the Bishop, and the red vestments of the

sacred ministers; laity and clergy, were mingled together without distinction, and priests and religious in cassock and habit might be seen assisting the more feeble of the pilgrims down the steeper portions of the hill. Never did the hymns already so frequently sung by the pilgrims sound with greater effect than during the return of the procession [...] Just before the foot of the hill was reached, by happy inspiration, the pilgrims spontaneously began to sing the first verse of 'God Save the Queen.' This was taken up by whole immense multitude with startling effect. Thus ended the spiritual portion of the pilgrimage."<sup>21</sup>

Hundreds who had obtained tickets in advance had tea in the grounds of the Catholic College of the Sacred Heart at the foot of the Tor, but eventually the crowds made their way to Glastonbury station

"where again the remarkable sight might be witnessed of two very lengthy special trains, each drawn by two engines and extending far beyond the platforms of the station, to which priests in cassock or habit were directing the now weary steps of the returning pilgrims. As was remarked by more than one person, it looked as if Glastonbury were once more in the midst of a Catholic country."<sup>22</sup>

Numbers for the Catholic Pilgrimage are extremely hard to pin down, as estimates vary between around 1,500 – probably based on the numbers starting at the station – and 4,000 in the latter part of the Pilgrimage.<sup>23</sup> Despite the fears expressed by Bishop Browning, "no one could complain of the spectators, who maintained a respectful demeanour while the pilgrims wended their way through the streets of the town".<sup>24</sup> Indeed, many spectators appear to have joined the procession when it climbed the Tor. Bishop Browning subsequently had a letter published in which he expressed grateful thanks to the people of Glastonbury "for the courteous and even respectful reception that they gave to us." He had heard that some had been hurt by his words to the pilgrims at Downside

"I confess that I thought it possible that some hostile demonstration might have been made, and considered it my duty to warn the ardent and more muscular of my audience against the temptation to retaliate. The good sense and courtesy of the Glastonbury folk

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<sup>21</sup> *The Tablet*, 21/9/1895. See: <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/21st-september-1895/22/the-pilgrimage-to-glastonbury>

<sup>22</sup> *The Tablet*, 21/9/1895. See: <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/21st-september-1895/22/the-pilgrimage-to-glastonbury>

<sup>23</sup> The *Central Somerset Gazette* (14/9/1895) commented that "The scene on the Tor was imposing in the extreme, three or four thousand people forming the procession down the hill."

<sup>24</sup> *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895.

showed that my remarks were quite unnecessary, and I hope they will forgive me for having so misjudged them."<sup>25</sup>

Mercer claims that

“what had brought about the triumphant success of the 1895 Pilgrimage was the energetic bringing together of various elements: a Papacy which strongly supported English Catholics through honouring their martyrs and through other areas; greater Catholic public confidence, hand-in-hand with a softening of public opinion towards the Catholic Church; a revived monasticism and religious life [...]; a deeper and better-informed Catholic historical scholarship; and a Europe-wide renewal of pilgrimages and veneration of shrines.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition, however, the railway’s role in enabling the organisers to bring together such crowds at Glastonbury was crucial. The pilgrimage was judged a great success by all, but in fact it was to become just the opening salvo in relation to the revival of Pilgrimage in Glastonbury and the use of the procession to assert claims over that contested site.

## The 1897 Anglican Pilgrimage: Retaliation

1897 was the year of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, marked on 22 June by many celebrations and immense numbers of visiting foreign dignitaries. In 1897 there were also many great ecclesiastical celebrations to mark the 1300th anniversary of the arrival of St Augustine in Kent in 597, the year generally considered to mark the founding of the English Church.

While there was no chance of a Catholic celebration in Canterbury Cathedral, a Catholic pilgrimage was organised to Ebbsfleet in Kent, the site where St Augustine and his monastic companions landed, on 14 September 1897. As with the Glastonbury Pilgrimage, the anniversary celebrations at Ebbsfleet were combined with the annual conference of the Catholic Truth Society, which that year met at Ramsgate in Kent.

However, the most significant 1300th anniversary celebrations were organised by the Anglican Church, and took place at Canterbury Cathedral on July 2 1897, timed to coincide with the start of the Lambeth Conference, the great gathering of the Archbishops and Bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion normally held every ten years.<sup>27</sup> An outing to Ebbsfleet had been organised in relation

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<sup>25</sup> *West of England Advertiser* 21/9/1895.

<sup>26</sup> MERCER 2012. 106.

<sup>27</sup> The Lambeth Conference was moved out of sequence in order to accommodate the 1300th anniversary celebrations.

to this. A special train run by the South Eastern Railway collected the cathedral clergy and choir at Canterbury, delivering them to a temporary platform which was built at Ebbsfleet for first class passengers, although second class passengers had to alight at Minster-in-Thanel and walk the remaining 2.3 miles. After an act of worship at Ebbsfleet, the party visited the Roman remains at Richborough, and took tea there. The bishops then travelled back to Canterbury to be ready for the opening service of the conference on the following day.<sup>28</sup>

Also in 1897, an Anglican "International Pilgrimage" to Glastonbury was staged, the brainchild of the Anglican Bishop of Bath and Wells, George Kennion (a former Bishop of Adelaide). In 1896 he issued a letter of invitation to Bishops intending to attend the Lambeth Conference. Noting that much attention would be directed to the founding of the English church through the arrival of St Augustine in Kent in AD 597, the Bishop continued

"To some of us it appears worthwhile to draw attention to the existence of the British Church in these islands before the arrival of St Augustine and his companions, and to the connection of the Church of England with that church, and through it with some of the earliest efforts to spread the Gospel in the West."

Putting forward the claim that "in Glastonbury Abbey we have the one great religious foundation which lived through the storm of English conquest, and in which Britons and Englishmen have an equal share", he announced that

"The owner of Glastonbury Abbey has kindly given me permission to invite the Bishops who will be in England next year to visit Glastonbury, and I am writing to ask you whether you are willing to come there on Tuesday, August 3rd, the day after the closing ceremony of the Conference at St Paul's Cathedral. Glastonbury is about six miles from Wells, and about four hours' journey from London. Arrangements will be made for the journey being performed with comfort to the Bishops who attend, and for a luncheon for the Bishops at Glastonbury."<sup>29</sup>

The Lambeth Conference was to start with a pilgrimage to Canterbury, but it was to end with a pilgrimage to Glastonbury. The Anglican Pilgrimage to Glastonbury was undoubtedly in reaction to the 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage. It was attempting to undermine Catholic claims by stressing the pre-existence and pre-eminence of Glastonbury *before* the arrival of St. Augustine and Catholicism. It was to be held on the site of the Abbey. It was to be an altogether grander, higher

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<sup>28</sup> Clearly not all of the railway arrangements in relation to the Canterbury celebrations went according to plan, for according to *The Times* 3/7/1897, the Dean of Canterbury complained of "the appalling mismanagement by the railway authorities."

<sup>29</sup> Printed in *The Church Times*, 5/3/1897. 276.

profile event than the 1895 pilgrimage, and it very definitely relied on the railways for the logistics of bringing in so many pilgrims from much further afield.

On August 3rd, 1897, as the *Central Somerset Gazette* reported:

“The town was brightly decorated for the occasion: festoons of steamers spanned the principal streets, and the buildings were freely treated with flags and bunting and devices of an appropriate character. From an early hour in the morning visitors began to arrive by road and rail, and the approaches were continually thronged with pilgrims [...] The traffic was exceedingly heavy on all the local railway lines, about 4,000 people having thus reached the town, besides which several thousands more arrived by road. Messrs. Cook, the world-renowned promoters of modern-day tours, brought between 2,000 and 3,000 visitors. Consequently, there must have been nearly 10,000 visitors to the town.”<sup>30</sup>

Naturally considerable attention was paid to the special train, composed of saloon carriages, bringing the large number of bishops from London. Detachments of the Church Lads’ Brigade (an Anglican youth organisation) were positioned at Waterloo, Salisbury and Glastonbury stations to greet the bishops’ train. Schoolchildren with flags and a banner stating “Welcome to the diocese of Bath and Wells” had been located at Templecombe Station, Templecombe being the complicated junction between the main line from London and the Somerset and Dorset Railway to Glastonbury, which inevitably involved the train slowing down.

Although the special train had left London early in the morning, and was timed to arrive at Glastonbury at 1.15, because of some delay on the London and South-Western Railway, it was almost 2 o’clock when the train arrived. As the *Central Somerset Gazette* (7/8/1897) reported

“The bishops with some difficulty made their way along a crowded platform, took their seats in the carriages that were awaiting them, and were driven to the Assembly-rooms where they were entertained at luncheon by the Mayor of Glastonbury [...] The luncheon was of an hurried informal character, owing to the late arrival of the train.”

Approximately 120 bishops attended, and after lunch they went to St John’s Church on the High Street for robing. Meanwhile, roughly one thousand clergymen had robed at the Anglican St. John’s Church and St. Benedict’s Church, and formed up on the High Street in front of St John’s.

Unusually for England, it was an extremely hot day (in the 80s Fahrenheit/30s Celsius), which was to cause some discomfort to participants. All were to be

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<sup>30</sup> *Central Somerset Gazette*, 7/8/1897.

in place by 3.15pm for the start of the procession. In stark contrast to the long Catholic Pilgrimage route, the actual pilgrimage procession simply went up the High Street, around the corner into Chilkwell Street, into the grounds of Abbey House, round the south side of Abbey, and into the remains of the Abbey church.



Map of Glastonbury showing in blue the route taken by the 1897 Anglican Pilgrimage procession from St John's to the Abbey grounds, compared with the route taken by the 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage procession from the station to the Tor, in red.

The procession was, nevertheless, most impressive. A simplified version of the Procession plan, as reported in the *Central Somerset Gazette*, gives some idea of its grandeur and extent:

- “Mayor and Corporation
- Lord Lieutenant & Deputy
- Cross bearer and acolytes
- 8 x Companies of 32 clergy, separated by banners
- Bishops headed by three banners
- 150 clergy
- Choirs of Bath Abbey, Wells Cathedral, St. John's & St. Benedict's
- Band of the Royal Marine Artillery
- Dignitaries from other dioceses
- Wells Cathedral Chapter
- Banners
- Bishop Herzog [convert from the Roman Catholic Church]
- Bishop of Stepney & chaplain

Bishop of Bath & Wells & chaplain  
Vicar of Leeds  
Archbishop of Canterbury, chaplain, cross & pages  
Chaplains of other bishops  
Banners  
250 clergy, separated by banners into groups of 32  
Students of St. Boniface's Missionary College, Warminster."<sup>31</sup>

The procession certainly caused great excitement in Glastonbury:

"The streets leading to the Abbey were lined with thousands of spectators, whilst every window along the route was filled, even the roofs of houses where practicable being used as points of vantage. As the procession slowly wended along, it presented a grand and imposing spectacle.

The Bishop of London [...] remarked that probably never since the Reformation had such a procession taken place in this country, and that certainly never did Glastonbury in its palmiest days see anything to compare with the number of pilgrims who visited it on that day [...] The procession was picturesque and remarkable in the extreme."<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting the fact that such processions were still comparatively novel in the Anglican context, the reporter for the Anglican publication *The Church Times* commented that

"The attitude of the crowd in the streets was distinctly creditable. There was no semblance of devotion about it, and it would have been unreasonable to expect a demeanour of reverence there. But a strong and friendly interest was manifest on every face [...] and in the England of thirty years ago how would the procession of hundreds of surpliced clergy in the open streets have been met? By unfriendly astonishment, if not by worse."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the comparatively short distance, the long procession took about an hour to get settled inside the Abbey grounds. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Bath & Wells, and other Archbishops and Metropolitans sat at the east end of the choir, with Bishops on chairs on each side, dignitaries and clergy occupied the rest of choir, and the general public were in the nave and other parts of the grounds. The address of the Bishop of Stepney, Bishop Designate of Bristol,

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31 *Central Somerset Gazette* 7/8/1897.

32 *Central Somerset Gazette* 7/8/1897.

33 *The Church Times* 6/8/1897. 139.

was reported in full, both in the *Central Somerset Gazette* and *The Church Times*. He declared that

“there are persons foolish enough to declare that the Church of England before the Reformation was a Roman Catholic Church. It never was. It was always the *Ecclesia Anglicana, Anglorum Ecclesia*.”<sup>34</sup>

After the Bishop of Stepney’s address, the Magnificat was recited, and the Archbishop of Canterbury gave a blessing. Hymns were sung while the Bishops and clergy left the Abbey. As the *Central Somerset Gazette* reported, after the Bishops had unrobed, “they and their wives were entertained to tea and a garden party by Mrs. Stanley Austin at the Abbey, the Wells City Band rendering a choice selection of music during the evening.”<sup>35</sup>

There were subsequently some critical comments concerning the length and density of the Bishop of Stepney’s address and the impropriety of people applauding at some points.

“When the Church was in effect taking possession again in the name of God His desecrated house, it was not the time to be scoring against Rome small points of controversial triumph. Thousands were waiting there with hearts open and eager to hear what would uplift and inspirit [...] Better if the address had been a sermon.”<sup>36</sup>

The issue of payment was also raised. *The Church Times* noted that

“[...] the public were admitted to the [Abbey] grounds only on the payment of three shillings. Thousands would have gone into the service, we are credibly informed, had the usual charge of sixpence been made. But it is the old story of the exclusiveness of official Anglicanism, un-careful of the masses, and caring only for the big purses. It was a grand opportunity completely thrown away, for the people were sympathetic and willing to be enthusiastic. Thousands went a long distance to be there, many went from the midlands, Birmingham, and elsewhere, and to them an extra three shillings was completely prohibitive. The Bishop of Bath and Wells, who is both one of the secretaries to the Conference and a chief promoter of the Glastonbury function, is especially to blame. With his lordship’s colonial experience, we might have expected better things.”<sup>37</sup>

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34 *The Church Times* 6/8/1897. 139.

35 *Central Somerset Gazette* 7/8/1897.

36 *The Church Times*, 6/8/1897.

37 *The Church Times*, 6/8/1897.

Overall, however, the day was judged a huge success on a number of levels. The Anglican Church had retaliated very publicly to the 1895 Roman Catholic pilgrimage to Glastonbury and its concomitant claims on 'authentic' English Christianity. At the end of the day, as the *Central Somerset Gazette* reported

"The large influx of people also gradually decreased in number as the special trains bore them homeward, but it was not till late at night that the town resumed its normal appearance. The arrangements of the police in dealing with the vast concourse of people were extremely satisfactory [...] Special praise is also due to the railway officials for their efficiency in coping with the enormous traffic."<sup>38</sup>

The railway, once again, had made possible the transportation of huge numbers of people to Glastonbury for a one day event of considerable symbolic importance. The rail link with London in particular enabled Bishops from around the world to converge on Glastonbury.

## Conclusion

The Somerset and Dorset Railway was instrumental in the late 19th century revival of pilgrimage to and the public contestation of Glastonbury as a sacred site. Both the 1895 and 1897 Glastonbury Pilgrimages highlighted "diverse processes of sacralization of movement, persons and/ or places" and "meta-movement – the combination of mobility itself with a degree of reflexivity as to its meaning, form and function."<sup>39</sup>

For the 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage in particular, not only had the trains transported the pilgrims but they had been incorporated into the event itself as devotional sites. The train journey, like the procession itself, was punctuated by prayers and hymns; train travel and the trains themselves were temporarily scaralised. In 1895 the special pilgrimage train from Bath also functioned as a mobile vestry. The lack of access to private rooms for robing stood in stark contrast to the amenities later afforded to the Anglican clerics and related personnel, with Glastonbury station platform being used for this purpose by some of the participants in the Catholic event. The station yard was utilised to muster the procession, and the station's situation on the edge of town reflected the marginal status of the Catholic pilgrims. The great majority of Catholic pilgrims walked the distance from the station to the Tor, circumambulating the ruined Abbey site at the centre of Glastonbury, commemorating the last journey of the Glastonbury martyrs; the form and function of the procession was redolent with meaning.

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<sup>38</sup> *Central Somerset Gazette* 7/8/1897.

<sup>39</sup> COLEMAN - EADE 2004. 18.

In contrast, the railway functioned more mundanely as vital infrastructure to transport the high-status, international guests and unprecedented numbers of pilgrims and sightseers for the 1897 Anglican Pilgrimage. Designed to dazzle in both form and function, the size, status and magnificence of the Anglican procession reinforced the *status quo*, underlined that the Anglican Church represented and was part of the establishment, and that it could command resources and personnel to greatly outshine and upstage the Catholic Church in relation to Glastonbury. The focus of the Anglican Pilgrimage was firmly on the centre of town, specifically on the Abbey, to which the Anglican pilgrims had privileged access for their service and on which the Anglican hierarchy was most definitely staking a claim. The fact that so many people could both participate in and view the spectacle of the Anglican Pilgrimage was nevertheless dependent on the railway.



2015 Catholic Glastonbury Pilgrimage in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey. Nowadays the Mayor and civic dignitaries attend both Catholic and Anglican Pilgrimages. Photograph Marion Bowman.

There is still an annual Catholic Pilgrimage and an annual Anglican Pilgrimage to Glastonbury, and these days both pilgrimage processions are given access to the Abbey grounds.<sup>40</sup> Since the late nineteenth century numerous other claims have been made on and for Glastonbury as a religious and spiritual centre, and the procession has been utilised by a variety of people and groups as a means of establishing a presence in and taking a stand there.<sup>41</sup> The railway itself has not fared so well. In 1966 the Glastonbury line was closed, the station fell into ruins and was demolished; barely a trace of it remains at the site. Bizarrely, one last railway relic remains, far away from the station, in the town's central car park. Vestiges of the Somerset and Dorset railway line now provide a pathway through the site of the world famous Glastonbury Festival at nearby Pilton, arguably a different sort of contemporary pilgrimage event.<sup>42</sup> The railway's legacy, though, lives on in relation to the religious revival, contestation and the use of the procession as a means of staking claims on Glastonbury which it enabled and sparked off in 1895 and 1897.



Last remnant of Glastonbury station, relocated to a car park in the centre of town.  
Photograph Marion Bowman.

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<sup>40</sup> The Abbey is now administered by a Trust as an historic site; both Anglican and Catholic pilgrims pay an entrance fee.

<sup>41</sup> BOWMAN 1993; 2004; 2008; 2015a.

<sup>42</sup> McKay 2000; Bowman 2009.

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