

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

* Marion Bowman, Religious Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK. Email: marion.bowman@open.ac.uk

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.¹



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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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 devotion⁵ and a major pilgrimage site, with a magnificent library and a huge collection of relics, which allegedly included the bones of King Arthur.⁶ 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



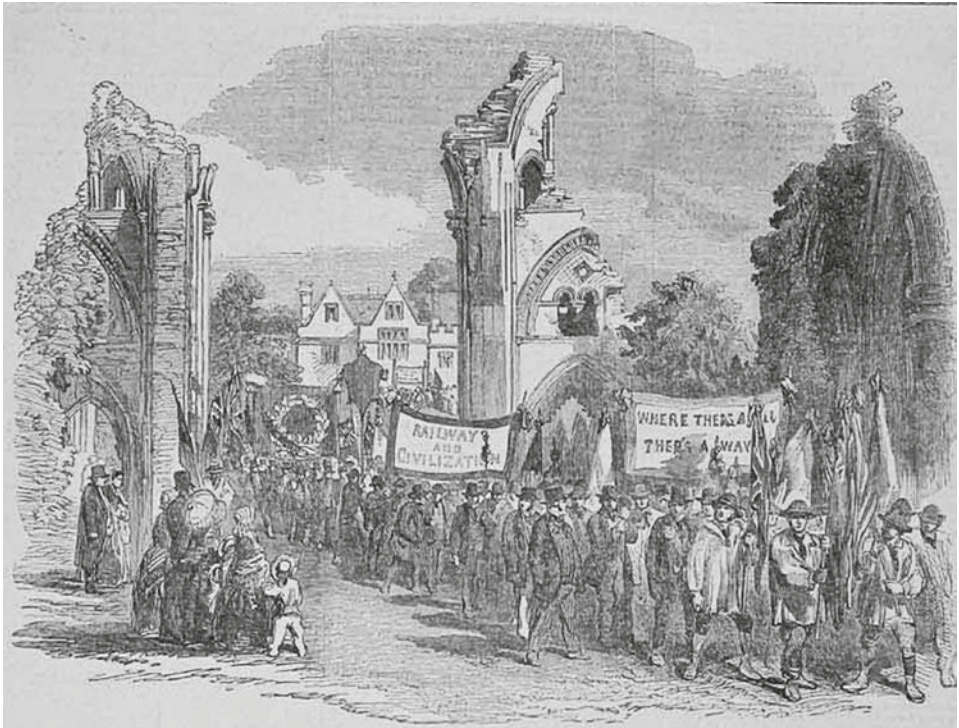
Abbey House (built in 1830, now an Anglican retreat house) with the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey in the foreground. Photograph Marion Bowman.

⁵ HOPKINSON-BALL 2012.

⁶ 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

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”.⁷

The 1895 Catholic Pilgrimage to Glastonbury needs to be seen in the broader context of English Catholicism in the late 19th century.⁸ 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”.⁹

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,¹⁰ 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

⁷ MERCER 2012. 79.

⁸ See MERCER 2012; CORIO 2014.

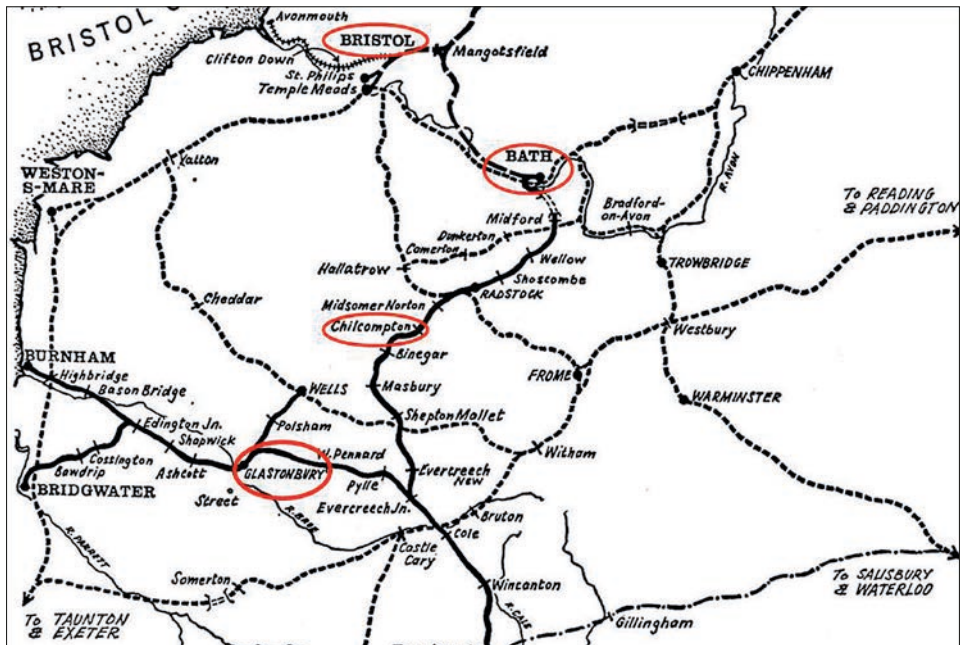
⁹ MERCER 2012. 82.

¹⁰ 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”.¹¹

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*.¹²

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".¹³ 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."¹⁴

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".¹⁵ 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.

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

¹³ *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895.

¹⁴ *West of England Advertiser* 19/9/1895.

¹⁵ *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."¹⁶



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

¹⁶ *Central Somerset Gazette* 14/9/1895.

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 newspapers¹⁸ and *The Tablet*.¹⁹ 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”.²⁰

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.

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."²¹

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."²²

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.²³ 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".²⁴ 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

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

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

²³ 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."

²⁴ *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."²⁵

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."²⁶

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.²⁷ An outing to Ebbsfleet had been organised in relation

²⁵ *West of England Advertiser* 21/9/1895.

²⁶ MERCER 2012. 106.

²⁷ 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-Thamet 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.²⁸

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."²⁹

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

²⁸ 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."

²⁹ 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.”³⁰

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. School-children 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

³⁰ *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."³¹

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."³²

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."³³

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,

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*.”³⁴

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.”³⁵

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.”³⁶

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.”³⁷

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."³⁸

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."³⁹

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.

³⁸ *Central Somerset Gazette* 7/8/1897.

³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.

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

⁴¹ BOWMAN 1993; 2004; 2008; 2015a.

⁴² McKay 2000; Bowman 2009.

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