

THE MEDIEVAL PILGRIMAGE: SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

The subject of the March meeting of the Saundersfoot Historical Society was The Medieval Pilgrimage and the guest speaker, Sandra Stauch, took as her particular example the pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostela.

Pilgrimages would be undertaken for a wide variety of reasons: penance for sins, the hoped-for cure of sickness and infirmity, a sense of adventure and curiosity about other lands, social status from having undertaken a pilgrimage, a desire for knowledge and the earning of indulgences. Pilgrims would often dress in a type of uniform to identify themselves to strangers. They would carry a certificate from their bishop to allow, they hoped, safe passage and the Church agreed to care for the families of dead pilgrims.

Santiago de Compostela developed in the ninth century as a place of pilgrimage, much later than Jerusalem and Rome. It was to occupy a place in the second tier of pilgrimage sites: two visits to Santiago equalled one to Rome, interestingly, the same status was accorded to the shrine of St. David. Santiago held the shrine of St. James the Apostle; medieval legend held that the light of a bright star guided a shepherd to a field where the remains of the saint lay. To honour this discovery a cathedral was built on the site and which quickly became a destination for the devout. James's emblems are the scallop shell, denoting his former life as a fisherman, and the guiding star. James also became a symbol of the Spanish fight against the Moors and he is often depicted in warrior form.

The land route to Santiago de Compostela was difficult, dangerous and arduous. It could take up to sixteen weeks and pilgrims faced the threat of running out of money, of sickness, of robbery and encountering war. The sea journey was much quicker – some eleven days – and ship owners were soon alive to the development of a form of package tour, with high season around St. James's Day, 25 July, and a cheaper off season in the winter. Pilgrims would arrive at the port of Corunna and make their way to the cathedral where they could obtain a certificate to prove their visit. They could also purchase souvenirs of their stay and pilgrims' ampullae or flasks from Santiago de Compostela adorned with the scallop and star have been found here in Pembrokeshire.