



Alto de Perdon Pilgrimage Memorial (790m). Photograph by Bill Tyler

To be a pilgrim

This summer, Finchley Society president Bill Tyler set out to walk almost 500 miles in a month along the Camino, an ancient pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. He was raising funds for the North London Hospice and TreeHouse, the national charity for autism, which has a school in Woodside Avenue. Here, he recalls the pain and the pleasure of those 30 days in June.

It was wet and heavily overcast at St Jean Pied de Port, a meeting point for the centuries-old pilgrimage routes from northern France to Santiago de Compostela. Thick, lowering cloud obscured the mountaintops and the forecast was bad. However, the weather improved overnight and the local tourist office gave a thumbs-up for 'Go'. So off set a straggle of walkers at their own or their companion's pace and loaded with backpacks, some hung with the scallop shell symbol of St James, whose tomb we were heading for almost 500 miles away.

The route of the Camino is generally well marked but no one had told me how tough some of the terrain is, even for a pretty fit walker. There are rough and steep sections that badly punish feet and legs and I suffered with bad blisters. Several toes were quite severely bruised and muscles screamed achingly at times, too. There were days when I couldn't walk comfortably and had to rest or take a bus or train to keep on schedule.

Another hiatus was the loss of my wallet, or more likely its theft, and that's no joke in a small town where no one seemed to speak English. Amazingly, I was lent enough money to keep me going for a few days while my wife Diana and Western Union came to the rescue with transferred funds.

Ancient landscapes

From rough track to stony path, boggy morass, farm track to asphalt road, the Camino passes through hugely varied landscapes: the cloud-covered Pyrenees, rolling arable farmland, flat plains, forests, pastureland and valleys with rushing rivers. Many of the villages are semi-ruinous and populated almost entirely by the elderly, as highly mechanised farming has driven younger families to the towns and cities.

Pamplona, Burgos and Leon are the major cities en route but there are also many quite large towns, all incredibly clean and beautifully paved, as are some of the more important villages. The magnificent cathedrals - Burgos, Leon and Santiago - and the many fine churches and ancient buildings along the way are remarkable but particularly memorable was, for mile after mile, the complete lack of man-made noise: just the hum of insects savouring the myriad wild flowers along the path verge and, above it all, the trill of skylarks.

Almost all the hostels and pensions I stayed in were spotlessly clean and inexpensive. Wonderful meals of local produce, especially fish, were incredibly good value. Along the way I passed the time of day and some evenings with German, Austrian, Scandinavian, Canadian and Dutch walkers, only the French and Spanish keeping rather to themselves. Most people, including a few families with children, were serious pilgrims but others were doing it for the experience and

some, like me, raising money for charities. Most impressive was a group of Austrian students who had walked all the way from Vienna.

Time to pause

The attempt to do 490 miles in a month was over-optimistic, although beforehand two veterans of the Camino had said it was quite feasible. I managed only 250 on the route itself and another 20 or so with various diversions but after 23 days of moving on almost continually I felt completely 'walked out'.

So I travelled by other means to Santiago de Compostela, arriving six days before my booked return flight. This gave me the chance to go to Finisterre, the very end of the Camino, for a dip in the Atlantic off the westernmost point of Europe, and to get to know Santiago pretty well. There can be few nicer places in which to have to spend four or five days.

The amount I've raised in donations, to be split equally between the Hospice and TreeHouse, is more than £11,500, a fantastic response from my many very kind sponsors.

Juggling home and work

Many mums who saw their children start school for the first time in September may now be hoping to return to work.

An award-winning social enterprise set up by a group of north London mothers aims to help them search for a suitable job.

Women Like Us provides skills advice, job search support and confidence building for women who may have put their career on hold.

Margaret Cheng, Director of Coaching Services, said: "We are keen to highlight to

the thousands of mums across north London who want to return to work, that it is in fact possible to find jobs that match their experience, that are local and also fit around family life."

Founded in 2004 by two working mums, the enterprise has helped more than 3,000 women to date and has been recommended by the Prime Minister's Women and Work Commission for rollout across the UK.

Women Like Us can be contacted on 020 7281 6522 or at www.womenlikeus.org.uk.

"Serious charge against a Finchley woman"

The crimes of the so-called Finchley baby-farmers shocked the public at the beginning of the 20th century. Ann Bronkhorst tells how they were discovered.

On the evening of 12 November 1902, the Black Bess Coffee Tavern in the High Road must have looked inviting, but Annie Walters, a short, stout woman of 54, probably hurried on round the corner to a house in Hertford Road. She was responding to a telegram sent to her lodgings in Islington, which read: 'Five o'clock tonight, Sach Finchley'.

Earlier that day, a baby girl had been born to an unmarried woman. The Hertford Road premises where the birth took place was one of a growing number of private lying-in homes. Local papers carried regular advertisements for it: 'Doctor recommends comfortable home; skilled nursing; every care; terms moderate'. 'Terms' often included a fee for providing discreet adoption arrangements. The proprietress, Mrs Amelia Sach, in her late-twenties, claimed to be a certified nurse and midwife; sometimes a doctor attended difficult births.

Short-stay fostering

Annie Walters was not, however, a caring relative of the new mother but a regular visitor to the home. She described herself as a 'short-stay foster mother': extremely short-stay. She had been seen in various parts of London carrying doll-like bundles and, the following day, had just such a limp bundle with her in Whitechapel. It was never seen again.

Annie had chatted openly at her lodgings about her foster-mothering and the fine adoptive homes she found for babies. Her landlord, a police-

man, was sceptical. So was his colleague, Detective Constable Wright, who trailed her and her bundle across London to South Kensington railway station. The bundle contained a baby, a boy this time, dead for at least eight hours.

When arrested on 18 November 1902, Annie told the police: "I never murdered the dear. I only gave it two drops in its bottle, the same as I take myself." The drops were chlorodyne, a morphine-based narcotic.

Second arrest

The Hendon and Finchley Times broke the news locally on 21 November in a long article beginning: "Considerable sensation was caused in East Finchley on Tuesday night by the arrest of Mrs Sach." Although at first denying that she knew Annie or had ever given her any babies, Amelia's story shifted several times. She maintained her innocence, however, and professed horror at Annie's crime: "Do you mean to say that these babies are dead and that she has killed them?"

But witnesses came forward, many items of baby clothing were found and Amelia was soon heavily implicated. At the inquest on the three-month-old boy found dead in Annie's possession, the jury took five minutes to find Annie guilty of wilful murder and Amelia an accessory before the fact. Both women would face trial a fortnight later at the Old Bailey.

The story of the Finchley baby-farmers' case will be concluded in a later issue.

Light up a life

North London Hospice is offering the chance to remember someone special by symbolically sponsoring a light on the horse chestnut tree in the hospice grounds.

This is the 10th year of the annual Light Up a Life event and for the first time all the lights will be low-energy bulbs.

Anyone wishing to sponsor a light in memory of a loved one can contact community fundraising manager Theresa Bowman on 020 8446 2288.

All sponsors will be sent a card containing the name of the loved one they are remembering. They can also choose to attend the tree lighting ceremony on Sunday 25 November.

The hospice, based in Woodside Avenue, N12, provides end-of-life care for people of all denominations in Barnet, Enfield and Haringey.

It relies heavily on fundraising to meet its running costs.

A long pedigree

Estate agent Prickett & Ellis celebrated 240 years and nine generations of trading with a special dinner at Kenwood House, Hampstead.

The company, which trades as Prickett & Ellis Tomkins at 36 High Road in East Finchley, made its first property auction in 1767. More than 200 guests attended the lavish celebrations.