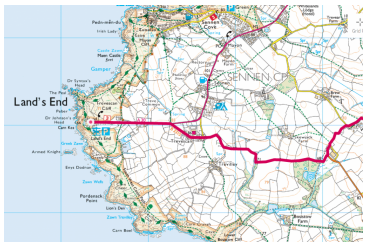
Loving Where You Put Your Feet

This is a story of a virtual pilgrimage, and sowing the seeds of the real one.

During the lockdown of early 2021 we were all, of necessity, spending a lot of time in our homes. As I pondered the tumultuous year that had been 2020 I found myself on the Ordnance Survey website looking at some of the places where we had walked during the summer. I love maps. I value my Ordnance Survey (OS) subscription!



I found myself, with podcasts playing in my zoom-seasoned headphones, scanning the map of the country that I have come to call home. I "visited" Land's End – the most Westerly point of Great Britain – and I began to ponder. How *do* people do that famous "LEJOG" walk, from Land's End to John O' Groats. What paths do they take? What does it *look* like?

On the OS maps you can zoom right in. You can find the public rights-of-way; the green-dotted lines that give us the right to walk across fields and forests and back alleys and carparks of industrial sites. The satellite imagery lets you know if it's paved or gravel or overgrown-tangle-of-nettles-and-brambles. You can see when the way is blocked by a river, or a motorway, a railway, or an MoD restricted zone. I began to plot a route, planning my path, imagining the place where feet might tread…

I became lost in it. Even on a screen, it became something of

the rhythm of trudge. I've done a lot of hiking in my youth. I know what it's like to be in that zone. It is a place of peace, and of processing pain; it's a place of simply being on an internal journey while the outside moves on past. This is part of walking-as-pilgrimage, as I understand it: The interior journey and the exterior journey align.

As the lockdown continued, the virtual journey did too. I began to ponder what was moving me. In the end it wasn't to travel across Britain, it was to travel across *England*. We've had this heart for a while: The Scottish love Scotland, the Welsh love Wales, but who loves England? As my computer screen took me across moors and meadows, suburbs, cities, and industrial scars, I was beginning to pray for this adopted country of mine. I want to love the place where I put my feet.

Now my virtual pilgrimage had purpose. Lands' End to Lizard Point takes us to West and South extremes. It would end in Marshall Meadow's Bay, on the Scottish border in Northumberland. Lowestoft Ness (near where I was born) would take me to the most easterly point, and some of the lowest points in East Anglia. And why not take the route to Scafell Pike, and stand (virtually) speaking on England's tallest point?

But even with all the cardinal points, so much would still be missed. Praying and loving the scenery I saw (on a screen in a vicarage study in Sheffield), I found myself visiting every Cathedral in the country. It would take a zig zag up the country; two thousand miles of plotted pixels and roads to imagine.

And then it was done. Not in reality; just in my heart, and on an internet site. But what would it take "IRL", as they say? Google tells me that pilgrims on, say, the camino de Santiago, can average 15 to 20 miles a day. I plotted it out. Averaging 17 miles a day, with a day off every week, a real-life walk, a

placing of love-plodding feet, would take 140 odd-days. That's a sabbatical and a few weeks annual leave! Perhaps one day…

But it got me thinking. It got me pondering my own interior life, as well as my own physicality. I wasn't sure I could walk five miles, let alone seventeen! I might not be able to walk across the land; but could I even walk across the *city* to which God has brought me? I *love* this place; and I'm learning to love it more and more. It has posh green parks, and broken old factories, ancient ruins, and legoland low-rises; and people of every colour shape and sound.

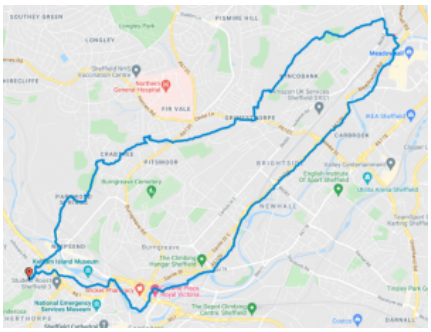
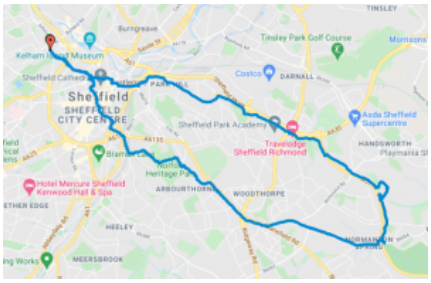
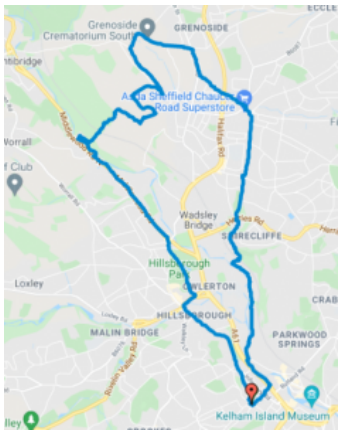
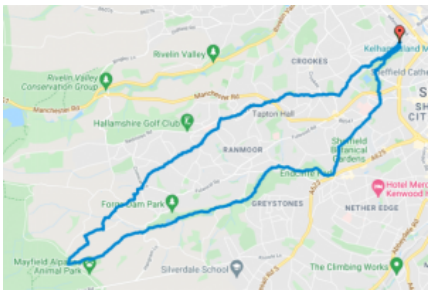
Throughout his year, therefore, I've been doing a local pilgrimage; loving the place where I put my feet. It began with "loop walks" from my house. I walked to Meadowhall and back; nine miles and I couldn't walk for a week! It has ended with long treks to other counties, to return by train; sometimes alone, sometimes with companions, or larger groups.

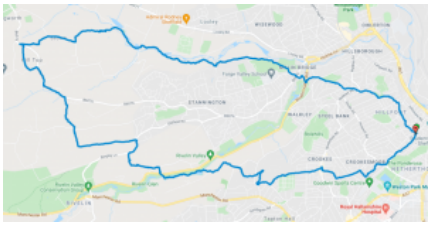
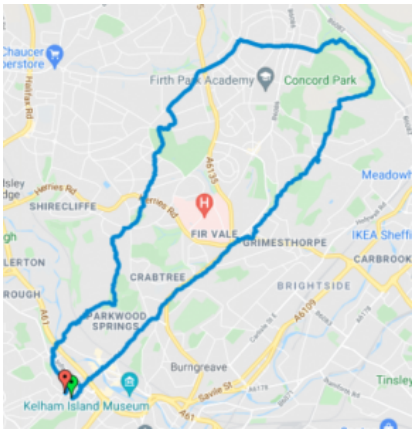
Each walk – whether four hours long,or eight hours long – has been a *journey*. Sometimes there's been a bounce in my step. At other times I look at the horizon to where I'm going and I'm plodding, and hurting, and wondering why I bothered. Leaning into joy, or into pain and weariness; such is life.

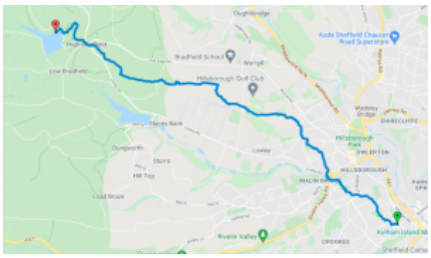
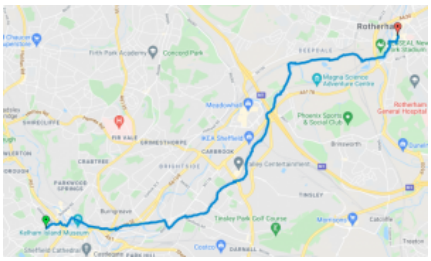
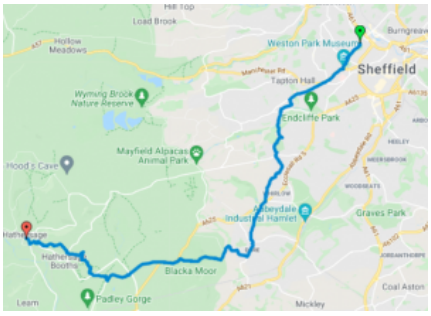
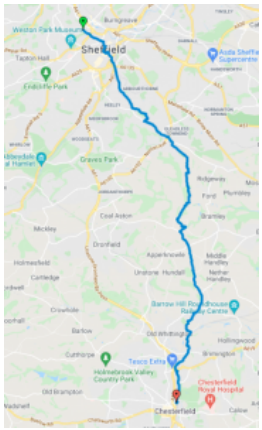
And I have *seen* the place to which God has brought me; nooks and crannies and even some hidden paths that I would never have discovered. I have chatted with a few along the way, and received encounters as God's invitation.

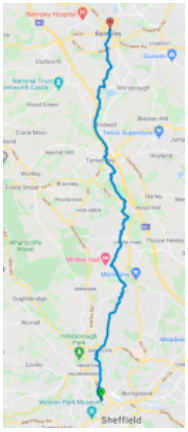
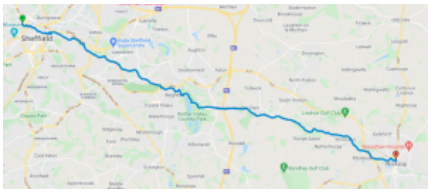
The routes I have taken form something of a flower-shape; these became my "flower walks" of 2021. And they have been a joy. They'll continue into 2022, where I'll continue to love where God has put my feet. Feel free to join me!

And for those who would like to know the detail of where I've been….

	**FEB 2021 – MEADOWHALL AND BACK** Nine miles, and I couldn't walk afterwards. The five-weirs walk, and then back along the hills. I discovered Wincobank! Iron age history, and a patch of moorland in the midst of Sheffield suburbs.	
	**MAR 2021 (#1) – WOODHOUSE AND BACK** Eleven and a half miles alongside the Parkway before looping down and back along the tram road, finishing with Norfolk Park and through the central city.	
	**MAR 2021 (#2) – GRENOSIDE AND BACK** A tick under ten miles, and feeling stronger. A walk along the Don River and through the suburbs of Parson Cross before farm fields (muddy!) and Beeley Wood and returning through Hillsborough.	
	**APR 2021 (#1) – PORTER BROOK AND BACK** The snow was falling! Ten and a half miles across to Endcliffe and all the way up the Porter Valley and back through the suburbs of Fullwood and Tapton Hill.	

	APR 2021 (#2) – CATCLIFFE AND BACK For twelve miles, I was joined by two fellow travellers and a dog! Through Darnall and Tinsley Park, almost to the M1, before coming back through Handsworth, and back along the Parkway. At the turnaround point, it felt like a long way from home.	
	**MAY 2021 – DUNGWORTH AND BACK** Across to Hillsborough and then along the Loxley Valley. The hills and valleys on the way back matched some ups and downs in my interior life. Each hill was a push.	
	JUNE 2021 (#1) – BEAUCHIEF AND BACK A loop into South Sheffield, through Nether Edge to Beauchief, across to Graves Park, and back via Heeley. I struggled with foot pain, but the day was a joy, resting in God.	
	**JUNE 2021 (#2) – SHIREGREEN AND BACK** I was joined by my daughter for a loop into North Sheffield, through Fir Vale to Concord Park, and back through the old and new estates of Shiregreen and Longley to Parkwood Springs. This was to bring the “loop walks” to a completion.	

	**JULY 2021 – AGDEN** It was time to go on a journey “with an end” and not loop back. On a hot day, family and friends were going to Agden Reservoir. I joined them, walking through Hillsborough and the edge of Wadsley, and through beautiful farmland to High Bradfield.	
	**AUGUST 2021 – ROTHERHAM** I’d been set back by a dose of covid. I need a walk that was a physical rest. A gentle flat walk along the canal to Rotherham was perfect. This was also the beginning of a new season (post-summer) of integrating physical, emotional, and spiritual health. More on that soon.	
	**SEPTEMBER 2021 – HATHERSAGE** It was time to be stretched; to throw some caution to the wind. I was joined by a dear friend on a journey to Hathersage, through the well-to-do suburbs of South Sheffield and over the peaks, on a gorgeous, spirit-lifting day.	
	**OCTOBER 2021 (#1) – CHESTERFIELD** Another shift in season. It was time to walk *to* somewhere, not just *from* Sheffield. I pushed long to Chesterfield, from suburbs to suburbs with farmland in between. Some of the paths were overgrown. This was a solitude walk, a time of retreat.	

	**OCTOBER 2021 (#2) – BARNSLEY** Joined by two good friends, this was an adventure for all of us. Through north Sheffield suburbs and outlying villages, interspersed with fields. This path went alongside the M1 for quite some time	
	NOVEMBER 2021 – EDALE Time to walk as community. A group of about a dozen, from all different walk of life, joined me on perfect autumn day, across the peaks, to Edale. This pushed the limits physically. Walking together is slower, but much more enjoyable. Fellowship at its best.	
	**DECEMBER 2021 – WORKSOP** Winter was closing in, and so was my mental health. This was a solitude walk, almost impromptu as the diary cleared along with the weather. A day of retreat and soul searching as I trudged beside still waters.	

The pilgrimage will continue in 2022. Nothing forced. Semi-planned but impromptu. With solitude, and togetherness. Loving where we put our feet.