

the destruction of the familiar old, the unseen substructure forced shockingly into the limelight. But the unmistakable character of the landscape - these little hills are the last stand of what were once huge mountains like the Alps - remains deep, harsh and mystical.

It is April 7, painful anniversary of the recent deaths of two beloved souls. Two stabilising influences torn away, leaving a gaping hole I am still struggling to patch. But I chose this day to start with them in mind, to bring some kindred spirits along on this first step of my Tro Breiz journey, an adventure that will honour and respect ancestors from a much more distant past, exploring the bonds that hold us up and tie us down. The weather is beautiful, but it is not a moment for the quiet contemplation I had envisaged to mark the start. On the summit, workmen are putting a new roof on the iconic hill-top chapel, hammering nails into the fresh timbers.

First constructed in 1672, it was granted indulgences by Pope Innocent XI, acknowledging a role on pilgrimage routes, but the chapel fell into disuse after the French Revolution, being found in a ruinous state when Jacques Cambry visited in 1795. A small pilgrim's shelter was established in 1842, and two annual Pardons to celebrate Saint Michael were held. But the chapel also came to serve practical purpose as a shepherds' hut, offering protection in the serious weather conditions of this isolated spot. During WW1 pilgrimages came here to pray for peace: in 1917 people from all surrounding villages arrived in procession, singing canticles and reciting prayers. In WWII the chapel survived German occupation, when the summit was used as a radar site with a massive antenna.



I'm lingering over these views and the pilgrim past, but my young dog is over-excited before we have begun, leaping and circling on his lead, wanting to be off. He has probably heard long before me the strange noises assaulting the air from the other side of the hill. A long, ragged line of maybe fifty teenagers and a handful of adults comes caterwauling across the moor. There is a sort of singing, but also yells and cries that sound like anguish. I sit on a rock to wait as they stagger in dribs and drabs up the last steep ascent. As I finally walk away across the moor, I turn back to see a line of silhouetted figures round the rim of the hill, yelling and gesticulating, like some primitive declaration of war.

The discordant noise echoes all around and then fades away, finally to be replaced by welcome silence and aloneness, although this is a very early reminder about the nature of the task: there is no possibility of controlling conditions, and taking what comes is an essential skill to be mastered. Pilgrimage is only a romantic practice from the comfort of an armchair. Being on the road is hard for everyone at some point, whether the struggle comes from mind, body or emotional upheaval. For many these trials can be relieved by company, a fundamental part of medieval pilgrimage, as Chaucer so memorably portrayed in the *Canterbury Tales*, and today anecdotes of solidarity and friendships formed on the Camino routes to Compostela fill the many accounts of individual journeys.

atmosphere of a mild country walk rather than a religious journey. The patron is Saint Brieuc himself, a little off his familiar territory. A modern painted statue stands in the over-restored *fontaine* just below the church.



History is soon to interpose its mark. On the way into Plumelec we come up a curving track from the valley to pass the ancient Cross of Kervigo, commemorating a battle Bretons waged against invaders in 938. A nearby pond is called Mare ar sang (Blood Pool) for obvious reasons. This resistance to Viking violence did not prevent destruction in the area and shows the inland penetration of the raids, even away from main water courses. Suffering was severe, with crops and settlements devastated, inhabitants indiscriminately slaughtered, a pattern repeated in many parts of Brittany in the 9/10th centuries. A bishop of Vannes who fled inland to this area may have been a victim of the Norsemen at this time.

Plumelec is a place of memorial. On the approach, we pass a cross and oak trees planted in 2017 to commemorate local losses in WWI, with each of the 21 trees representing 10 men. Beside these are a re-located ancient standing-stone and dolmen. In the town centre we come face to face with the resistance memorial, a large bulbous menhir. The use of neolithic monuments for recording modern history is interesting. They are often thought to have been originally

intended to show connection with ancestors and a sense of continuity in human experience. In conjunction with notions of war-dead in our own annals, they give a new perspective of time's elasticity and ways of preserving memories of what has made us.

This Tro Breiz journey has given me many reflections about ancestors. I will have no direct descendants and I know very little about my past Welsh family, as my parents were rarely responsive to questions. We lived as an isolated family unit without any close sense of relatives. And yet I have a strong sense of my human ancestry, especially neolithic pioneers for their engagement with the land, and the Breton saints (or perhaps more accurately the communities founded by these celibates). Because I relate so deeply to place, the monuments of both these groups speak loudly in my ear as I pass through Brittany, listening attentively to the rhythms of the past. The saints in particular are a vociferous lot, telling their foundation stories, the roots of Celtic Brittany. The chain of existence between ancient origins and contemporary continuation is of enormous historical significance, but it is also important to me personally in grounding my own existence.

The busy Plumelec *bourg* is not a place to linger. There's nowhere open to eat and the bar, packed to the gills with men past their prime, stinks of smoke and body odour. Not an easy entry for strangers, but when we sit outside hoping for coffee, the service is very friendly. We take a quick look in the church, which honours Saint Maurice, a most un-Breton saint, and seems to have ditched old Melec. On the route out of town, the *Allée de la France libre* is the site of another reminder of tragic loss of life in the futility of war, this time for the 77 parachutists of the French SAS killed

