

## **Mythwalker: A guide to the stories and legends of the South West Coast Path**

My name is Adam Skerrett, also known as 'Mythwalker.' I am a Celtic writer and storyteller, exploring the terrain where myth meets ecology.

I've recently returned from a pilgrimage to 'beat-the-bounds' of Dumnonia - that ancient kingdom of the Celts, which at its fullest extent included; Cornwall, Devon, parts of Somerset and Dorset. It was a bardic quest to walk the story-lines of the South West Coast Path, and to tune in to the 'spirit of the land,' with the hope of catching a word from the voice of the wild.

My walk was a round one. I took the reverse route around the South West Coast Path, and linked it up coast-to-coast to make a circle – more about that route I took later.

'Beating-the-bounds' is an ancient practice found in a number of traditions. In essence it is a ritual walk around the perimeter of one's land. This typically includes visiting places of significance belonging to that land, and making physical contact with them, with the intention of connecting to those sites in a meaningful way. It felt important as part of that journey to speak and remember the old names for these places. How many of us know these days, that when we are walking the South West Coast Path, we are traversing an ancient kingdom that once went by the name of Dumnonia?

Also, given that I live in the far West, my obvious starting point was Land's End, a mere six and a half miles from my home (as the chough flies.) So, my first day saw me walk out of my front door and follow the Mary and Michael Pilgrim's Way to Carn Les Boel, home to the Song-of-the-Sea rock arch and the beautiful white sands of Nanjizal. This to me, is the true Land's End. It is where the ley-lines make their landfall. The energy lines that run from the Norfolk coast in the utter East, to the farthest point West in the country, threading their way through such potent places as St Michael's Mount, Dartmoor and Glastonbury upon their way.

For those intrigued about the route I took to do this walk, it involved straying onto those unchartered territories North of Minehead! It was three days walk beyond in fact, which took me to the mouth of the river Parrett, near Bridgwater (by-skirting Hinkley nuclear power station and taking many inland diversions to navigate a path which appeared to have largely fallen into the sea!) I then followed the River Parrett Trail from mouth to source, tracing what was once the Eastern extent of Dumnonia's borders. That route met up with the Brit Valley Way at Cheddington, Somerset, and would then bring me out to re-join the sea and the South West Coast Path at West

Bay, near Bridport, Dorset. I turned right here, and made my way back South through Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, to finish my round walk in the twilight of the Mid-summer Solstice.

So, I have to confess, that I am not yet a 'completer.' I still have the West Bay to Poole section to go. But I have beaten the boundaries of Dumnonia, which is no mean feat. It involved fifty-seven days of walking, split into four quarters, averaging two weeks walking at a time, and a distance of approximately thirteen miles a day. That gave me plenty of time for 'stop off's' along the path, to explore the many mythic heritage sites en-route, including Tintagel of course, which according to legend was at one time, no less than the capital of Dumnonia itself!

In fact, if I were to give one piece of advice, I would say, don't rush it - unless of course you specifically going for a record attempt! Otherwise, I'd say it's not about getting from A to B as fast as you can. Controversially, I'd say it's not even about 'completing' the path. It's about the journey. And it's about the company too – those wonderful coast-path conversations I came to treasure - maybe you were one of the lovely people who stopped to chat with me on the path? If so, please do get in touch! And even if you are walking solo, like I did, then it can be the company of the path itself, the living landscape you are walking through, which responds to the one who takes time to engage with it. So, go and explore that secret cove, open the door of the poet's hut, take a morning dip underneath that waterfall! Don't be the one who says, 'I'd have loved to have swum in that cove, but I didn't have the time.' Become a myth-walker, lean in to your imagination, and you may find yourself beginning to tread through the soft centuries, and entering into 'myth time.' And as we take these outer journeys, I think we often travel within as well. Treating the SWCP as a pilgrimage, can give us back that sense that we have agency within the storied landscape of our lives, that we can myth-walk through those moments in the narrative that we feared we had become stuck in.

It is poignant that I started the trail at the far end of Cornwall, because in the Celtic tongue, this place is known as Pedn an Wlas, which translates as 'the end-of-the-end.' And what is that, if not a place where new beginnings might be made? However far into your walk you are when you reach that magical stretch of the West Penwith peninsula, it is worth taking a moment to be present, sit yourself down on a good piece of granite, sink in to the landscape and listen to what it has to say.

So, what set me out in the first place? Well, the South West Coast Path runs like a song-line through many of the great myths of our land. As a scholar of myth, how could I not be tempted to walk it?! I enjoy writing very much, but I am not the kind of person who can stay cooped up in his writer's hut for too long. I need experiential research as well as academic, and there is no substitute for getting out there, and

taking one's self on an adventure. And walking the South West Coast Path is most certainly an adventure!

Do you remember that point during the first lockdown, when we were told that it might be considered reasonable to travel up to seven miles from our home for daily exercise? Well, I live six-and-a-half miles from Land's End, so not only was I lucky enough to have fifty odd miles of coast path within my government approved stomping ground – I live right in the heart of the West Penwith peninsular - but the legendary land of Lyonesse, sunk beneath the waves, was also within my remit! So, I just started walking the coast path by day, and reading the myths and stories by night. It wasn't with any intention to make a livelihood from it at this point. I had just moved from Devon down to Cornwall and fallen in love with the coast. Well, to be truthful, I already loved her. She was my childhood sweetheart, who I remembered well from Cornish holiday romances. My earliest memory is of toddling along the ridge path that leads up onto Castle Point, near St Genny's Church and Crackington Haven. And it was a wonderful rekindling of affections. It felt requited. My evidence for that, was the amazing encounters and experiences I had in that liminal space between sea and land; whales breached seaward of where the ley-lines made their landfall, seals surfaced beside me in the bay where I swam, and the choughs - which myth says, contains the spirit of King Arthur - settled upon the rocks at every Celtic cliff castle I visited. Once the Covid restrictions lifted enough for me to broaden my horizons, I crossed the estuary at Hayle, and headed up-country and the walk was able to begin in earnest.

Well, they say you can only truly know a place, by walking through it.

I am following in the footsteps of the 'Droll Tellers' – storytellers who walked the land, earning a living through their artistry.

It's hard to select and describe in brief what my most memorable moments were, that is why I have decided to write an entire book about it! But highlights would have to include; swimming through the Song-of-the-Sea rock arch at Nanjizal, hearing the first cuckoos of Spring, singing from the roof of R S Hawker's hut and walking through meadows of green-winged orchids near Golden Cap.

And as for my favourite section of the trail? Well, living in Penwith, you might expect me to plump for the coast path between Land's End and St Ives, but I have to say, I have a soft spot for the South coast of Penwith, it's the stretch between Land's End and Mousehole that has me in its thrall. Perhaps it is the combination of the granite and the turquoise waters? Or those Celtic cliff castles where the choughs can often be sighted? Either way, it feels like the Wild West down here, a place where the magic still clings on, and even with the OS map in hand, one can still get piskie-

led, if you don't show your respect and offer libations to the mythical beings of the land!

I have been asked a number of times, about what discoveries I made on my walk, I would say the thing that struck me most, was how wild and magical the coast of England still is in this day and age, despite all that we are told and led to believe. It is pleasantly surprising, to find that there is still much beauty that we have not yet squandered, and therefore it is important that we speak up for it, and defend those ancient springs for future generations to enjoy. I joined the SWCPA before setting out on my walk, as it felt like a small way to offer something in return for all the joy the trail has given me, I hope the book, the guided walks and all the work that is to follow will be a continuation of that giving back.

Another question I'm often asked, especially by those intending to walk the path in its entirety, is what advice I might give. I'd say this. Take a staff. A walking stick is of great practical help, but not just that, it is also the age-old sign of a pilgrim or traveller; and why not attach some meaning to your walk, whether that be a charity fundraiser, or a personal challenge. For when we take an outward journey, there is often an inner one we are taking too - you are unlikely to return exactly the same as when you started it. If nothing else you are likely to shed a pound or two, and perhaps acquire some blisters in return – though a good pair of woolly socks might be the best prevention for that.

And if taking a staff, why not go in style, there's nothing like a hand whittled hazel stick. Mine had a beautiful fox's head carved onto the handle.

So, Foxy and I finished on the Summer Solstice, back where I had started at Carn Les Boel, to make my closing circle at the place where I began, feeling like I had returned with a deeper, visceral knowledge of the place I am of.

My quest now complete, I have begun walking the path of the page; a book full of wonder tales is coming into being.

My forthcoming book is a guide to the stories of Dumnonia; from the mermaids and the smugglers' coves, to the great Arthurian epics. It is a wonder tale, the story of my walk, woven in with the stories of the land; those places of truth and beauty through which I have travelled, and the people of truth and beauty which I met along the way, and who figure in the landscape of the story. Part travelogue, part magical autobiography, *Mythwalker* is an old-fashioned romantic quest, to see what still lives and breathes and has its being amongst the fabled coasts of this land.

I'd describe it as being like a *Salt Path* for the mythical realm. It is a re-wilded storytelling, to rekindle people's sense of wonder, beauty and the mythic imagination.

If you enjoy authors like Robert McFarlane, it might well be your cup of tea.

I invite you to join me as the tale unfolds. You can follow the story here:

<https://www.instagram.com/mythwalker/>

<https://www.facebook.com/AdamJamesSkerrett/>

But *Mythwalker* is more than just a book, it is a call to adventure. This season, I began offering 'Myth Walk Experiences' in Cornwall. Part pilgrimage, part storytelling event, these were guided walks like no other, filled with poetry, myth and the opportunity to experience a felt connection to place. The aim was to re-enchanted people with the natural environment, through bringing the local mythology to life. As these were myth walks, we leant in to the magic, entered in to the imaginal world; where the stories are living beings who delight in hearing their tales told back to them in the places where, they say, they happened!

The walks will return in 2023. I am currently applying for Arts Council funding to transform them into theatrical storytelling experiences with a cast of actors and musicians to animate the Coast Path. Expect to be guided on an immersive journey through the wild storied landscape of Cornwall, and become re-enchanted with the legends, traditions and heritage of the mythic ground beneath our feet. You are invited to catch a word from the language of the wild. Truth will be written, beauty will be spoken, there will surely be dancing and gatherings by the driftwood fire.

These theatrical wild walks, will be centred around the most captivating myth I came across on my journey. For many, the big myth of the South West might be that of King Arthur. It's certainly hard to visit Cornwall and not come across his name at some point. But for me, the most fascinating myth is another one which springs from the same period in Celtic antiquity; the epic of Tristan and Isolde. So many scenes from that story are located within the Cornish landscape, and are places that one travels through when walking the coast path; Tintagel, the river Fowey, and the fragments of lost Lyonesse, which are the rocks and islands off the Penwith coastline are just a few examples. For me, Tristan and Isolde is the myth which most resonates. It is old enough, that as well as containing human dramas which we can relate to, has characters which also correspond to animals and to celestial bodies like the sun and moon. It speaks of how to be in right relationship to the natural world,

and that to thrive in all areas of life we need to treat the land as if it were our beloved. In the language of myth, your first marriage is to the land, only then can the kingdom and your household truly flourish.

Stories like Tristan and Isolde emanate from the land itself, and are one of the ways in which the landscape has chosen to express itself; through the flora and fauna of its ecology, yes, but also through the stories, through its mythology.

And the listening individual, can connect with these stories, can enter in to participation with the living world. These are the ways of the old arrangement, too often forgotten, but not yet lost.

You can view the archive of the 2022 seasons walks here:

<https://www.airbnb.co.uk/experiences/3456456>

<https://www.airbnb.co.uk/experiences/3463526>

<https://www.airbnb.co.uk/experiences/3737287>

A professional short film about my work, entitled *Mythwalker*, is about to be premiered as an official selection for the World Trails Film Festival 2022, held on the island of Skiathos, Greece - a proper mythic destination, where they say, the locals worship Dionysus; god of festivities, theatre and wine. So, I shall break open a bottle of good Greek plonk, and raise a glass to celebrate! But if you aren't sunning yourself in Greece, you can still watch the film by visiting the Mythwalker YouTube channel where it is available to view for free - and other mytho-poetic offerings are also available to view (please do subscribe if you enjoy what you see.)

<https://youtu.be/YhW8rZHi-JU>

I recommend anybody to do this, to go myth-walking. Why not venture outside and connect with the land, because it is there, waiting for you. Thanks to charities like the South West Coast Path Organization, we can access these beautiful places. I would repeat what the poets have always said, that beauty wants to engage with us. And that doesn't require you to commit to walking the whole path, I think participating is something that is open to all of us. You just need to step out, open your senses and listen.

To me, 'myth-walking' is essentially a way of walking which treats the time spent on the path as an invitation to lean in to the wonder, to take the imagination seriously, and to experience the magic that is still afoot in the wild places of this land.

The South West Coast Path is a storied landscape, and when you walk it, it can sometimes feel as if you have entered in to those stories. I think we remember the myths and legends of old, because they still have something to say to us in these times. Here is your opportunity to find out what that is for you!

Adam Skerrett is Myth Walker; a man of myth, poetry and adventure.

Adam is a trained actor and theatre-maker, and has an MA in Myth and Ecology, studying with renowned storyteller Martin Shaw.

"Adam is exploring the terrain where myth and landscape collide. You may find him in the folds of a fairy tale or on the darkening path to the Grey Wethers stones."

- Dr Martin Shaw, storyteller and mythologist.

"Adam's takes the audience on a spellbinding adventure of magic, mystery and fun! He brings forth the qualities of inspiration and mysticism like the Bards of the ancient traditions."

- Jackie Juno, Grand Bard of Exeter 2012 – 2019

You can follow Adam's story at:

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Or get in touch:

[adam.skerrett@gmail.com](mailto:adam.skerrett@gmail.com)