

August 2023

Finding Data Pathways Through the ‘Pandemic Pilgrimage Boom’: Embedded-like Research, COVID-19, and the British Pilgrimage Trust

Eleanor O’Keeffe
National Centre for Social Research, UK., eleanorokeeffe@me.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp>



Part of the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O’Keeffe, Eleanor (2023) "Finding Data Pathways Through the ‘Pandemic Pilgrimage Boom’: Embedded-like Research, COVID-19, and the British Pilgrimage Trust," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 11: Iss. 4, Article 8.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/B92A-8D11>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol11/iss4/8>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](#).

Finding Data Pathways Through the ‘Pandemic Pilgrimage Boom’: Embedded-like Research, COVID-19, and the British Pilgrimage Trust

Eleanor O’Keeffe

National Centre for Social Research.

eleanor.okeeffe@natcen.ac.uk

This article reviews claims that the United Kingdom experienced a ‘pandemic pilgrimage boom’. It contributes findings from an ‘embedded-like’ research project, which drew on data created by the British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT) – a heritage and wellbeing charity that hosts a website hub to support pilgrimage action in the UK – to debate about the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage practice. These findings show how a set of uses and meanings about pilgrimage, particularly its affordances for mental health and emotional wellbeing, have resonated during the pandemic, especially at moments of heightened social stress. This has generated greater social traction for pilgrimage, and there may be potential for further growth in response to twenty-first century crises, such as the increasingly apparent impacts of climate change. Learning from the experience of COVID-19, this article encourages research investment in longitudinal data-driven approaches to study the individual and social affordances that pilgrimage offers in view of its modern adaptations and applications.

Key Words: COVID-19, data, social value, post-secular, United Kingdom

Introduction

COVID-19 was devastating for the religious tourism industry, but the impact of the pandemic on pilgrimage is far from clear cut. Just as the world’s major shrines turned away pilgrims, images of their eerily deserted environs achieved global media circulation and a considerable cultural presence, communicating something of the enormity of the disruptions to collective life. In some contexts, too, practices seem to have flourished. The United Kingdom celebrated a ‘pandemic pilgrimage boom’ (Stanford, 2021), characterised by heightened media presence and an apparent burst in popularity of the ritual form. This development has already attracted scholarly interest. Anne Bailey, for instance, argued that the pandemic deepened a new ‘post-secular’ trend in ‘micro pilgrimages’ (shorter, more manageable journeys) due to the widespread social or psychological needs created by lockdowns and recourse to the outdoors, and the ‘stratagems’ of pilgrimage interlocutors (Bailey, 2022a & b). Aside from media reportage or interviews, however, we have little reliable evidence to clarify the scale of grassroots growth and interrogate the relationship between what may be increased adoption and the COVID-19 context.

This is partly a problem of evidence. Finding good data pathways to analyse pilgrimage activity is not a new challenge for scholars, but it has been sharply illuminated by the COVID-19 pandemic as the imperative to rapidly test the temperature of social and cultural shifts has increased. The ability to source data influences the kinds of questions asked, and the explanatory narratives proposed, about pilgrimage in the pandemic. So much of the understanding of its impact on European practices, for instance, is based on data produced through major shrine or route infrastructures, such as Lourdes and the Camino. And whilst studies have indicated that the pandemic occasioned a major shift – a relocation of pilgrimage activity to lesser-known routes and locales with potentially significant consequences for growth elsewhere (e.g., Mroz, 2020) – studying such routes during the COVID-19 crisis is hugely resource intensive; reliant on ethnographic lenses or the fortuitous existence of strong partnerships across practitioner-academic worlds.

This is a particular problem when examining the United Kingdom, which in recent years has seen the development of diffused, but fragmented, pilgrimage infrastructures across the country. Researchers have probed these through their institutional locales. Some

have recognised Cathedrals as primary loci for pilgrimage action (Dyas, 2020). Multi-disciplinary academic partnerships have engaged Cathedrals as heritage and place-making agents (alongside artists and digital creatives) to explore new ways to bring social traffic and meaning to rural landscapes (Clarke, 2020). Outside the institutional, informal networks or associations have undertaken a good deal of the organising work behind pilgrimage growth. This effervescence – sometimes called a ‘pilgrimage boom’ before COVID-19 – has been singled out by pilgrimage scholars and European research centres (Eade, 2020; Post, 2022). Yet, the scale and nature of grassroots growth is difficult to interrogate because of the range of stakeholders involved and lack of centralised apparatus. During the pandemic, with greater media coverage, knowledge of pilgrimage practices and its cultural presence became rapidly blurred.

Case studies can elucidate these processes. This article examines data from the British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT), a heritage and wellbeing charity that advocates for pilgrimage in the UK. Founded in 2014, the BPT has built a reputation through ritual-style walking events, which blend pre-Christian and Christian traditions with eco-politics, ideas of wellbeing and new age psychologies, and the cultural heritage of the UK. This innovative and creative approach to invigorating pilgrimage as a solution to the challenges of modern life has piqued academic interest, which has focused on analysing its performative ritual acumen (Eade, 2020; Barush, 2022). However, it is its more recent development as a website hub for pilgrimage activity – its provision of 200+ pilgrimage routes across all areas of the United Kingdom – that provides the context for this article. It is this, and the facility of the BPT as a portal for individual and collective pilgrimage activity, that causes it to be cited as a feature of the growth of pilgrimage in the UK (Bailey, 2022a) and in European analyses (Post, 2022).

I argue that how the BPT harnesses (if not centralises) elements of UK infrastructure and activity makes it a uniquely valuable portal to examine pilgrimage activity and the impact of COVID-19. Through its data we can understand better the social and therapeutic significance of pilgrimage during a time of uncertainty and stress. But this approach also offers considerable potential to probe the structures upon which that engagement

has depended, including mediatisation, and the leisure and cultural ecologies that, to some degree, resource pilgrimage activity in the UK. This article prefigures others that will come through this and other academic partnerships with the BPT in the future. Pilgrimage practitioners and heritage stakeholders have always been valuable collaborators in researching the trajectories and the potentials of pilgrimage. The pandemic experience, however, highlights the value of building embedded academic partnerships and flexible data infrastructures, which can generate reliable data to understand pilgrimage adaptation in future emergencies.

‘Embedded-like’ Research in the Pandemic

The pandemic disrupted much research activity, but it also made possible new alliances between researchers and practitioners through resource availability and redistribution. In the UK, funding bodies offered unprecedented levels of emergency finance to identify and find solutions to the pandemic’s social and cultural impacts. The research in this article is predicated on work undertaken as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project – *British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19* (known as *BRIC-19*) – which investigated how people adapted their ritual lives to meet personal, psychological, and social needs in response to social distancing and lockdown (Edelman *et al.*, 2021). Whilst much of this research investigated the shift to digital formats via a survey probing ritual efficacy, case studies also examined social or material adaptations in specific ritual contexts. With pilgrimage so prevalent in the media and in early pandemic scholarship, this became a particularly important ritual transformation to study (O’Keeffe, 2021a & b).

If the COVID-19 gave more academics impetus to ask questions of pilgrimage, it also pushed practitioners to examine their activity more systematically. For the BPT the pandemic catalysed a process that had been underway for a few years. Since early 2020 Dr Guy Hayward, co-founder and Director, has focused on building the BPT as a hub for pilgrimage action to guarantee its longevity and encourage growth. Its website now hosts over 200 routes, developed by or with practitioners, small volunteer, or community groups, and available to download for free. Achieving charity status in 2016, the BPT now wins

contracts to deliver pilgrimage routes and advises on building infrastructure. Its social media channels possess dedicated and significant followings, sharing videos or images – of landscapes or signifiers of journeying – in which Hayward is less prominent as a figure and ritual mediator than he was in the BPT's earlier days (e.g., Barush, 2020:205).

That the BPT now operates in the heritage environment, and appears more like a heritage organisation or arts and health company than an eco-ritual movement, has spurred its generation of systematic data insights on pilgrimage. Alongside managing the website hub, Hayward became interested in understanding more about who engaged with the BPT and their reasons for doing so. For audience insights, the BPT attached a small survey to the website route downloads process in 2018, which has tracked interest and engagement since. They added a Google Analytics facility in March 2020, in expectation of the launch of their first major book scheduled for that year (Mayhew-Smith & Hayward, 2020). As this article details, the engagement that followed in the aftermath of the pandemic brought them instead up against the impacts of COVID-19. Aware of the heightened significance of these data pathways, and no stranger to facilitating academic research, Hayward co-ordinated the data-sharing agreement with BRIC-19 to develop these insights for academic research and to inform decision making.

The data are therefore, part of the BPT's 'heritagisation', which Hayward has continued to balance carefully with the original libertarian ethos of the company. The analysis here cannot be conducted separate from this context. To some degree, working on any data agreement is itself not dissimilar to the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Eade or Barush. The agreement gave BRIC-19 access to data. The BPT remained open to what might be sourced through the data – it did not get involved in what questions might be asked of its yield. Inevitably, however, the raw data reflect the assumptions and dynamics of their origins. Working on the data, exploring their provenances, and confronting their fissures, gave rise to conversations about the BPT's operational approach, its decision making, how it sees the pilgrimage landscape and its

place within it, and its ambitions for the future.¹ The data became a foundation for conversations about the nature of pilgrimage work and practice, and its possible future directions, which has informed the approach and findings of this article.

Such an approach is 'embedded-like': it shares several characteristics of embedded research practice (more often employed in public health settings) including the aim to support strategic, evidence-led decision making by involving decision makers in the research process and addressing context-specific challenges that practitioners themselves understand (Gharfar *et al.*, 2017). In this case, a data sharing agreement conducted these dynamics, and facilitated the sharing of insights to a broader audience. This article recognises the situated nature of the research, reflecting on the methodological lessons of researching in a public health emergency as much as how this evidence pathway informs our knowledge of pilgrimage under COVID-19. It thus acknowledges the nascence of this evidence, as well as interrogating the future potential of the approach. This data do not cut a neutral pathway through the 'pilgrimage boom'; the analysis carries with it the story of its origins and the concerns of its originators. What has happened to the BPT over the past two or three years, however, is symptomatic of wider trends in pilgrimage in the UK before 2020 and revealing of the question of ritual adaptation ('from below') within this national context. It is one route to pilgrimage activity, but it is an important one that can be contextualised with other evidence to gain a picture of the ritual landscape.

This article explores the findings drawn from three data sources examined under the data-sharing agreement between the BPT and BRIC-19: Google Analytics, route download activity, and survey responses (Table 1). First, Google Analytics data provide insights into patterns of website use, some demographic information about the BPT's audiences, and location of website user activity. Second, analysis gleaned from the route downloads data – especially patterns of use (how many downloads, regional spread) – can tell us more about how COVID-19 affected pilgrimage activity, as well as where in the UK (regionally) BPT engagement is growing. Third, perhaps

1 The conversations between the author and Dr Guy Hayward that informed the research and this article's findings occurred between February 2021 and May 2022.

Table 1: Summary and Description of BPT Data Sources

Data Sources	Description
Google Analytics	Pageviews (n2005409) 2020–2021 User (n321978) activity. Demographics of users (location, gender, age)
BPT website data	Download activity (n16428) by users (n8302) Downloads by country (England, Scotland, Wales) and region (south east, south west, east and west midlands, eastern England, north east, north west)
Survey data	Demographics of respondents: age (n4717) and gender (n4534) Motivations selections: multiple choice, 13 options. (n6167) Motivations: free text box responses (n220) Place & site preferences: multiple choice, 11 choices. (n4014) Social group preferences: multiple choice, 5 choices (n3646)

most interesting for pilgrimage scholars, the survey that BPT attached to the route downloads yields insights into key areas of debate (including motivations and cultural preferences) that elucidate how pilgrimage has met needs of people during the pandemic. This survey has produced a substantial dataset, which allows us to look at changes and continuities over the pandemic period. It tests many of the assumptions made about the pandemic’s pilgrimage ‘boom’.

Data drawn from such organisational mechanisms carries caveats. Organisations or associations cannot entirely pivot towards research if they are not resourced for that purpose. The route downloads and survey data, analysed here, omit important months from the COVID-19 pandemic, which were entirely lost due to accidental reconfiguration of website settings. Whilst it lacks a full data picture for 2020, therefore, there are complete insights for the pre pandemic period (2019) and another pandemic year (2021) that can be compared. The context of the funding, too, created an artificial and unwanted caesura on the analysis. The UKRI’s emergency routes for studying COVID-19 prioritised the immediate emergency context and what turned out to be short term impacts, in view of the long *durée* of the pandemic. BRIC-19 officially ended in September 2021 after a year, leaving its subject (ritual adaptation) very much still in motion. This article reflects labour undertaken after those deadlines, when additional data could contextualise and enrich the study. The scale and scope of the data, however, has potential above and beyond the study of

COVID-19. A comprehensive analysis awaits future publications from this and other projects, authored by academics equipped with different specialisms.²

Yet the BPT, and other similar organisations, have considerable advantages over scholars in creating productive data pathways that enrich and inform the big debates that have excited pilgrimage scholarship in recent years. First, they have almost instinctive understanding of their users, their motivations and needs, gleaned from years of their own ethnographic investigations. Second, as the BPT’s example shows, using their organisational apparatus to produce data can examine questions longitudinally and on an ongoing basis. Pilgrimage motivations, for instance, are a clear example of where scholars capture a snapshot appreciation of place and time, and then must reassemble questions or studies to test and review hypotheses (e.g., Farias *et al.*, 2010). Ongoing data generation allows us to investigate, as this example shows, how shifting social contexts inform pilgrimage use and meanings. This, and the BPT’s media reach, generates larger data pools to examine pilgrimage and question how malleable and adaptive these practices may be.

2 In early 2022 Dr Guy Hayward redeveloped the survey and fielded a new set of questions in collaboration with Dr Jaeyeon Choe, as well as input from the author. Dr Choe’s work with the BPT will generate new and productive routes for analysis of cultural motivations, the relationship between pilgrimage and leisure practices, and its perceived benefits for local communities and economies.

The Pandemic's 'Pilgrimage Boom'?

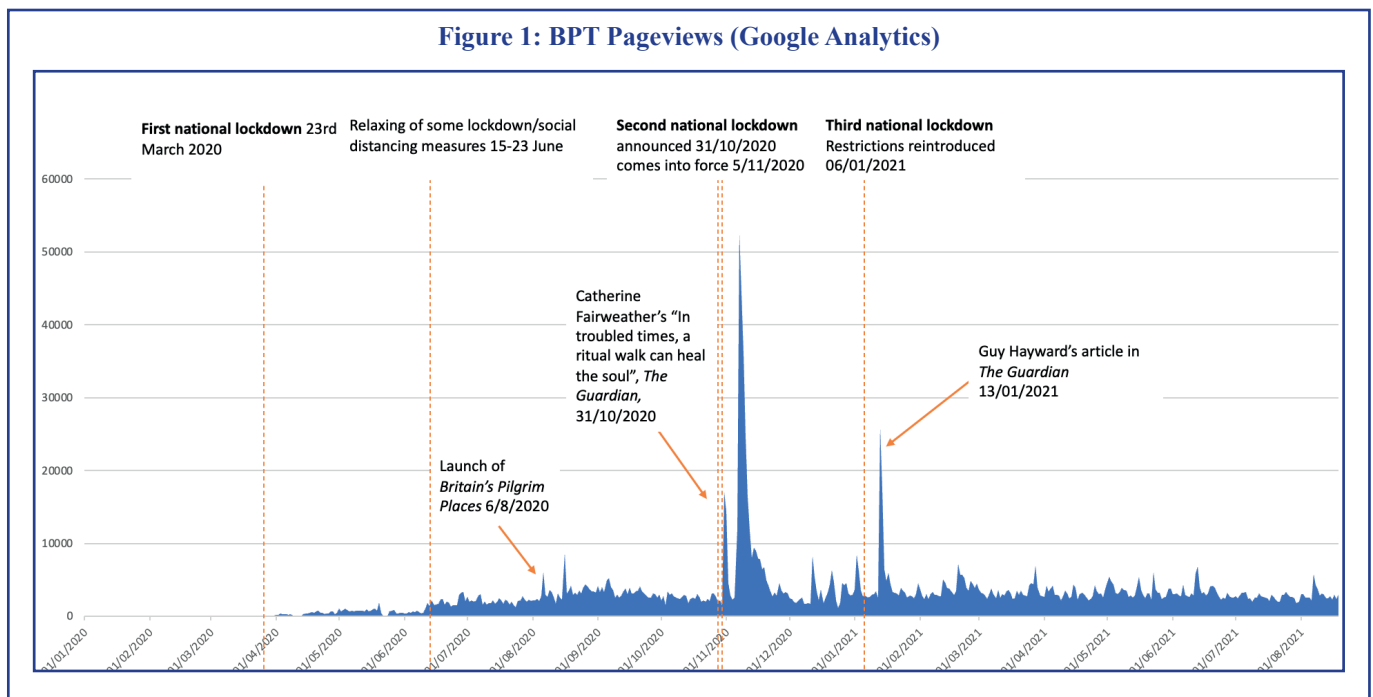
For the BPT, the pandemic period has seen considerable growth. This is particularly evident in its website engagement. From a slow start in the spring and early summer of 2020, page views reached nearly a million by the end of the year, with proximate figures reached for the year after. Google Analytics identified that over 300,000 users generated this activity, most of them geolocated in the UK. These statistics have translated into a media narrative of exponential growth during the pandemic, but the relationship between this engagement and pilgrimage is a complex one. People may draw on the BPT's content to inform virtual journeying or shape their imaginary of pilgrimage. Like many organisations and associations, it created its own cyber pilgrimage outputs, but by far its most visited webpage was its hub of 200+ routes. A minority of these users proceed to download routes, but people obviously use the hub for inspiration, planning, or as a cultural text to learn more about the meanings invested in sites and the cultural heritage of locales.

The Google Analytics data complicates some of the assumptions and current understanding of why pilgrimage (both actual and imaginary) has resonated in the pandemic. Commentators have tended to portray this as cause and effect, with pilgrimage positioned as a spiritual/therapeutic solution to the existential or

mental health crisis created by COVID-19, or as part of the widespread social shift to outdoor pursuits and arenas under lockdown. The Google Analytics data elucidates the structural underpinnings of pilgrimage activity, namely the influence of mediatisation on BPT engagement, and presents a way to test what meanings of pilgrimage have achieved traction and (importantly) when. Plotting website activity (Figure 2) traces the peaks and troughs generated through media prompts, which elucidate key narratives that have resonated with people enough to drive website activity and, to some degree, cycle into practice during the various stages of lockdowns and re-openings that characterised the UK's pandemic experience. Here we can locate the 'pilgrimage boom', find its chronologies, measure its scale, and appreciate better its tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences.

These data support the overall thesis that pilgrimage practice has increased in tandem with crisis contexts of the pandemic, but it demonstrates the febrility of this response. What might be interpreted as 'boom' is better described as a disjointed series of shocks or peaks of cultural luminosity, occurring through and around moments of heightened social stress. The long spring and early summer of 2020, which saw a spate of fair weather in the UK and some return to social activity, for instance, shows relatively little website engagement. This is despite the launch of the BPT's first major publication

Figure 1: BPT Pageviews (Google Analytics)



in August 2020 – *Britain’s Pilgrim Places*, an anthology of ritual and sacred spaces written in collaboration with Nick Mayhew-Smith – and the favourable conditions for walking. Instead, engagement grew in the lead up to, and immediate aftermath of, the announcement of the UK’s second national lockdown, with COVID-19 cases peaking and rising public anxiety and speculation. Another peak came in the wake of the third national lockdown and closure of schools in January 2021.

Media interlocution stimulated much of this engagement, elucidating the mediatised nexus of pilgrimage activity, and the growing importance of entrepreneurship in the media as much as in the ritual space. The push created by Guy Hayward’s article in *The Guardian* (Hayward, 2021) in January 2021 shows that practitioners shape pilgrimage meanings at societal level and that guiding and ritual mediation extends into networked media. Hayward affirms pilgrimage as a therapeutic tool, noting its historic function in dealing with periods of shock transformation, and highlighting the facility of the BPT to offer ‘local’ paths across the country in the context of national lockdowns. Travel writer Catherine Fairweather (Fairweather, 2020) had earlier promoted similar ideas of pilgrimage’s value in ‘troubled times’ in her piece for *The Guardian*, which can also be seen to have triggered a rush to the BPT’s website. She, too, focused on the ritual availability of the landscape in the United Kingdom and the accessibility of sacred spaces for the UK population. Narratives that the BPT had already been articulating, then, became redeployed in the pandemic media context.

If the therapeutic value of pilgrimage has appealed more during the COVID-19 crisis, however, wider cultural contexts have also increased engagement with the BPT. By far the most influential prompt of website visitation resulted from a post from the BPT’s Twitter account – advertising a job for Project Manager of the Old Way (one of its major routes) – which went viral in November 2020 (Picture 1), two days after the second national lockdown came into effect. The tweet’s popularity drove considerable traffic to the website, peaking at over 40,000 page views in one day. For many of the people who interacted with, replied to, or retweeted it, the post was their first encounter with the BPT and its work. They shared it because it encapsulated commonalities in experience of COVID-19. For some, the desire to eschew



corporate priorities and ‘follow your dreams’ in the world of work. For others, the revelation that pilgrimage even existed in the UK, and there was an organisation dedicated to it, which you could work for, was clear evidence that the world had indeed gone mad. Pilgrimage thus ‘boomed’ partly because it articulated a set of common (albeit different) responses to the strangeness of the world under the ‘new normal’.

How mediatisation and a growing cultural relevance of pilgrimage in pandemic times generated growth in material practice is necessary to ask, but all too difficult to answer. The BPT’s data testifies to the increasingly virtual and media-driven ways that people engage with pilgrimage, as well as the hybrid nature of pilgrimage in the digital media age (Van der Beek, 2019). A greater volume of website activity has produced more route downloads, however, which, for 2021 were 80% up on 2019 patterns, with some months seeing far greater rises. Engagement in December 2021, for instance, rose 120% on the same period in 2019. User activity patterns and free text responses from the survey show that a few users batch downloaded routes as material for their own cultural or research projects. But for most, the download patterns record a small number of routes per user and are more suggestive of use for pilgrimage practice. Unlike the Google Analytics data, this growth is hardly worthy of the descriptor ‘boom’, but it does show that the BPT has catalysed pilgrimage activity in the UK and especially for new audiences: 59% of users reported they were ‘new to pilgrimage’.

Demographics, Needs, Motivations.

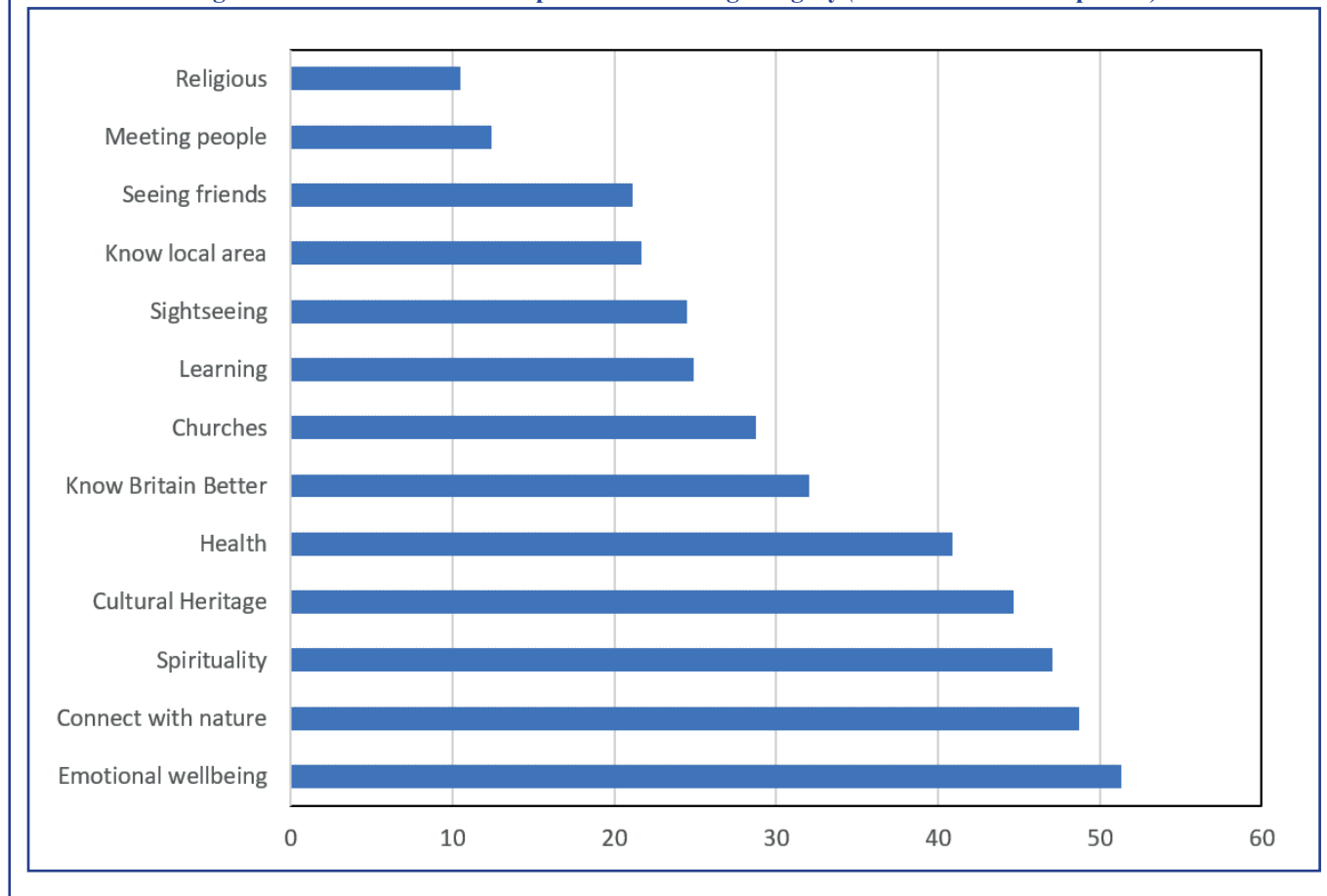
Hardened pilgrims, then, did not then ignite the boom. Yet stability of the demographic profile of respondents during this period suggests that growth came from groups that normally constituted BPT's audiences. Although there is clearly information we cannot glean from this survey, which did not probe ethnicity or socio-economic factors, the data that exists indicate that the BPT kept to its existing demographic trajectories: it continued to attract across age-group cohorts and drew relatively equal male and female participation during the pandemic, as before 2020. Importantly, despite the global availability of BPT website content and widespread assumptions that the rise in virtual journeying occasioned by the pandemic would globalise pilgrimage events and communities, the Google Analytics data locates most of its users in the United Kingdom. The route download patterns, alongside the regional breakdown that Google Analytics supplied, shows that most people who engaged with the BPT during the pandemic, as before, were located (or enacted pilgrimage) in the south east and south west of England.

Only to some degree, do these data affirm the 'regionalisation' or 'surrogation' thesis proposed for the pandemic period: the argument that pilgrimage activity flowed into lesser-known routes (i.e., the UK) during COVID-19, due to travel restrictions, closures of shrines, and the heightened risk of disease (Mroz, 2021; Mroz *et al.*, 2022). This is no doubt an important context for BPT growth, but there is no clear connection between a rise in BPT engagement with the relocation of the pilgrimage impulse at scale. Evidence from the qualitative free text responses during 2018–19 shows that the BPT has previously been used as a test ground for preparing for pilgrimage overseas, so the practices it inspires in the UK have always related somewhat to those on the continent. But the use of BPT routes as a substitute for enacting pilgrimage elsewhere did not become pronounced in the data during 2020–2021. Two respondents stated that their engagement was premised on travel difficulties and that, as one wrote, 'Covid has stopped me going to the Camino'. Certainly, however, the organisation, already established to promote pilgrimage availability in the UK, has seen more interest in the context of COVID-19.

The question of whether and how the pandemic itself has created the driver for this increase aligns with existing concerns in pilgrimage scholarship. Recent research points to the need to test the therapeutic benefits of pilgrimage (now increasingly accepted) within these less established and 'less "branded" routes' (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2020). The survey did not directly elicit data on the benefits that participants gained from pilgrimage, but it did ask them to explore whether, and how much, the therapeutic effects of pilgrimage mattered to them during COVID-19 as part of its motivations question. Patterns of participation are themselves suggestive. The continued engagement of more vulnerable and risk averse older populations with the BPT's pilgrimages during the pandemic may demonstrate the benefits of this diffused model of pilgrimage infrastructure compared to other, busier sites. A slight gender disparity between male and female engagement for 2020 may also implicate the inequalities of domestic labour in the pandemic's impact, although this interpretation is complicated by the uneven response rates to this question across these years.

The survey facilitates investigation of any shifts in motivational patterning during the pandemic, via one of its questions which invited respondents to select any or all of 13 separate fields that reflected known social and cultural motivations for pilgrimage action (Figure 2). Although these were framed differently from other academic survey-based studies, the categories referenced many of the same social and psychological benefits attributed to pilgrimage, including health, emotional wellbeing, accessing nature, community ('spending time with family and friends'), connections with tourism and sight-seeing, and acknowledged spirituality and religiosity as separate motivational features (Farias *et al.*, 2019). This question received a high response rate, creating a set of 6167 responses across these years. In addition, 220 respondents took advantage of the free text facility of the 'other' box within this question to explore their needs and experiences in more depth.

Out of the 13 motivational fields (Figure 3), there is clear clustering of responses within five motivation choices, which appeal to respondents across demographic categories: emotional wellbeing, connecting with nature, spirituality, cultural heritage, and health. These categories were already differentiated in the data as central

Figure 2: Motivation: % of respondents selecting category (Based on n.6167 responses)

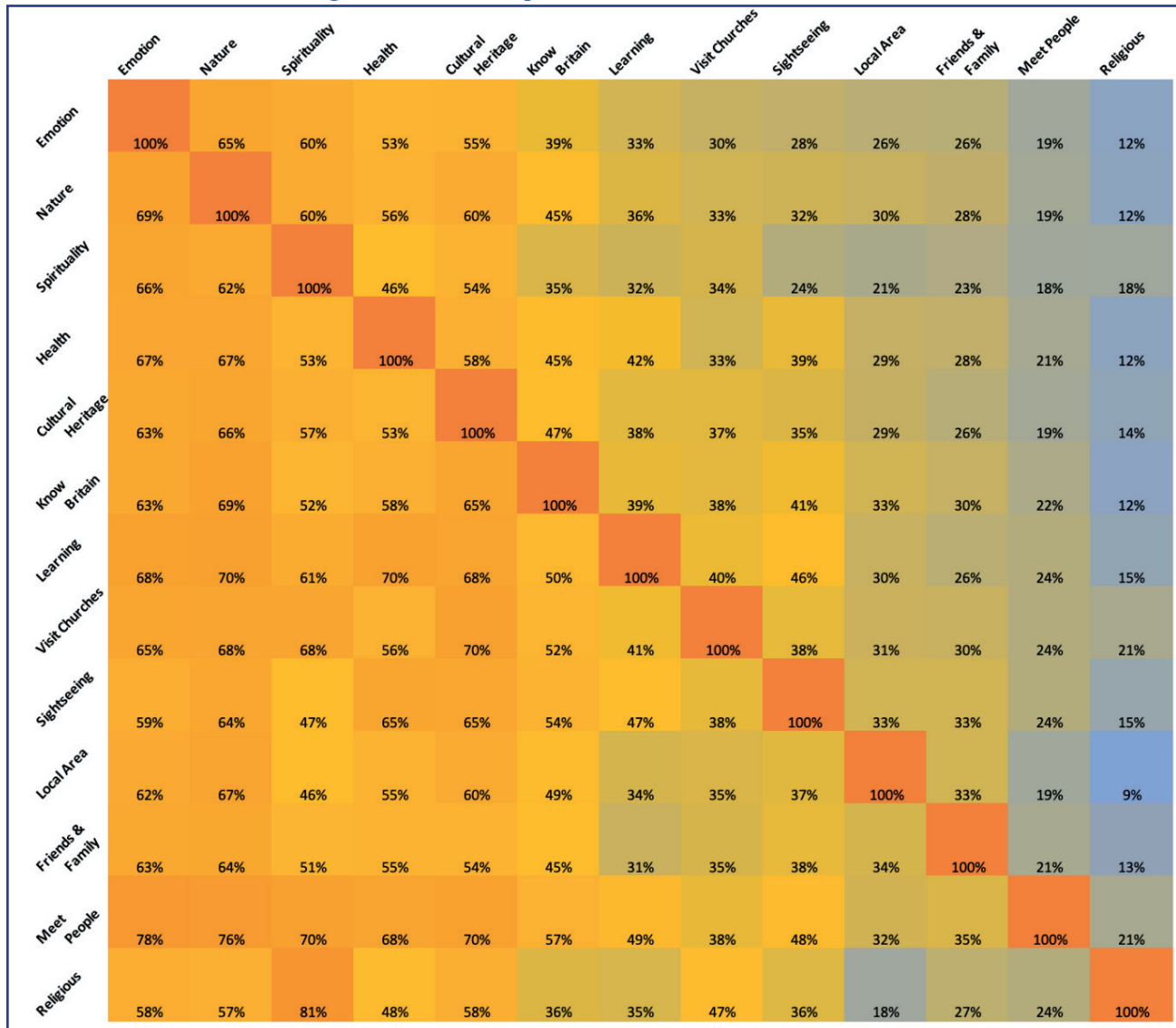
motivations before the pandemic, and their popularity has become slightly more pronounced during the period 2020–2021. There are also clear relationships between each of these five, although the connection between nature and emotional wellbeing is the strongest. Qualitative studies during the pandemic have demonstrated that it is precisely these aspects of the pilgrimage experience that provide therapeutic affordances for managing mental health during the unique stresses of COVID-19 (Bhalla *et al.*, 2021). The BPT’s data, therefore, suggests that the facilities that the BPT already offered (e.g., pilgrimage as a therapeutic solution to the problems of modern life) has achieved greater reach, and met a greater need, in the context of COVID-19.

The qualitative free text responses, however, illustrate the difficulty of untangling whether pilgrimage action met the needs created by the pandemic or addressed others arising during it. Many 2018–2019 responses resonate with the context of 2020–21, showing the potential applications of the BPT routes for the pandemic that followed. Users described the therapeutic value they

took from pilgrimage, ranging from journeying as part of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) recovery to dealing with stress after a personally (not pandemically) ‘turbulent year’ well before COVID-19. One 2019 respondent used pilgrimage to ‘take a break from my wife and family (and give them a break from me)’, an admission that pre-dates the feelings of domestic confinement during COVID-19. Yet, specific references to the COVID-19 context are markedly absent during 2020–2021, even in areas where relevance might have been anticipated. ‘Walking with grief,’ as one respondent described pilgrimage, is not more pronounced in the data during the pandemic, and respondents during these years do not refer at all to the widespread collapse of ritual structures (e.g., lack of effective funeral provision etc.).

Neither is it clear whether or how pilgrimage created substitute social spaces, considering the widespread shift of leisure and social activity to the outdoors. The importance of community (or what studies sometimes call connecting with ‘social others’) is less clear in these motivational fields than in other research that assesses

Figure 3: Relationships Between Motivations Selections



The heatmap is one way of visualising the relationship between categories in % of responses. It reads horizontally from left to right. For example, of the respondents who chose Emotion, 65% also chose Nature; whilst 69% of respondents who chose Nature, also chose Emotion.

Categories offered: Emotional Wellbeing; Physical Health; To Connect with Nature; Cultural Heritage; Spirituality; To get to know Britain better; To get to know my local area; To visit Churches; Sightseeing; Learning; To meet new people; To spend time with friends and family; Religious observance..

pilgrimage’s therapeutic affordances (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2021). The multiple-choice motivations question offered two pro-social fields (‘seeing family and friends’ and ‘to meet new people’), which received lower uptake compared to experiential or health-seeking motivations. Another question (n3646 responses), however, asked how many people accompanied them whilst journeying. Most people answered that they ‘do’ pilgrimage with others, although (as we shall see) this varies according to life stage and gender. These response patterns did not

shift significantly during the pandemic. Sociality was not then often selected as a core motivation for enacting pilgrimage, but it was a fundamental constituent of the experience for most people. The opportunity for ‘seeing friends in a socially distanced way’ was also one of the few qualitative responses that referenced COVID-19.

The murkiness of the data, the difficulties in interpreting the findings, points to the multi-directional drivers of pilgrimage action. Many BPT users, like scholars, see

pilgrimage as a complex and multidimensional practice that evades simple categorisation (Eade, 2021): for example, 24% of all users (31% of those who answered the question) chose 6+ categories to describe their reasons for embarking on pilgrimage. It would be unwise to centralise the individual, emotional therapeutic value of pilgrimage without recognising the ways that this co-exists with, and depends on, other facets or needs that people seek to address. The qualitative free text responses demonstrate those dependencies, especially in other areas where the BPT has declared interests, namely advocacy for the development of pilgrimage in the UK or, as one respondent put it, the notion that ‘you don’t need to leave the country to do [pilgrimage]’.

This highlights the importance of cultural identity and the UK context. The place of ‘cultural heritage’ within the central motivational fields is clear: there is also an association (of over 55%), for instance, between those who select ‘emotional wellbeing’ and ‘cultural heritage’. Free text responses demonstrate that searching for lineage and feeling closer to the past – to ‘connect with ancestors and their land’ or ‘to walk upon ancient paths’ – remained important to people. This feature of response resonates with pandemic-impact research in heritage studies, which shows how important these concepts and environments are for creating ‘ontological security’, feelings of agency and ‘notions of capability’, all of which predicate wellbeing (Sofaer *et al.*, 2021). The intrinsic relationships between these experiential and identity needs are rarely studied in relation to pilgrimage motivations in ways that recognise the specificity of national contexts: varying terminologies (e.g., ‘tradition’) do not capture the laden meanings attached to ‘cultural heritage’ in the UK, where journeying to affirm belonging has become energised in the context of fraught identity politics (Sethi, 2021).

The lack of a demographic question on ethnicity or socio-economic status prevents an in-depth analysis of how cultural needs are met in the BPT’s pilgrimages. But there are discernible differences in how cultural preferences are expressed by the different demographic groups that are captured within this dataset. The survey included one question invited respondents (n 4014) to select one or more of 11 different options regarding what ‘sites’ of pilgrimage mattered to them. More respondents chose not to answer this question compared to the question on

motivations (42% compared to 26%). Of these, younger age groups were more prominent, which itself throws light on the ongoing question of the significance of site vs journeying in pilgrimage activity and how this is shifting across generations. For those who did respond, age and gender delineated the responses, to some degree. Christian and pre-Christian sites were selected across age groups. However, the symbolic significance of the natural features of landscapes (e.g., river mouth) were more important to younger age groups and selection of these features clearly diminished with age. Men over fifty were more likely to choose Christian sites than other demographic groups.

Post-secular trends thus manifest in the data differently according to life stage and this may also reflect wider social or cultural influences. Men in younger age cohorts in the BPT data, for instance, are more likely to report undertaking pilgrimage alone, with women in these age groups preferring groups of two to three. These patterns reverse somewhat for older age groups. Men in their sixties, for instance, reported preferring groups of two to three; greater proportions of women in their fifties select lone walking. This may point to the influence of life stage – e.g., women engaging more in leisure or interests after having and raising children – but also the role of societal expectations and cultural narratives about how each age group might undertake journeying for self-discovery or adventure. Younger men, for instance, have clear cultural exemplars that model self-realisation through walking – Hayward himself may belong in that lexicon; for women, such activity may represent ‘culture fixes’ and journeying for self-revelation in later adult life or middle age (see ‘eat pray love’).

Although the survey did not elicit questions about ethnicity and socio-economic status, structural and longstanding inequalities are implicated in the BPT’s engagement, ones now recognised in wider research into access to nature and the countryside (Holland, 2021; CPRE, 2021). One question regarding faith affiliation received a very low response from minority faith communities, although this is complicated by a generally low response rate for this question. The BPT’s Google Analytics audience data, and the concentrations of route downloads by region, indicate that pilgrimage enactment is layered onto culture and leisure participation in the

UK. Route download activity, for instance, synergised with areas of high cultural participation in the south west and south east England, which is itself spurred by socio-economic factors (such as white middle class cultural tastes) and connected to the wider issues of inequalities in access to the arts (DDCMS, 2019; 2020). How much gleaning therapeutic benefit from pilgrimage is predicated on class and race seems an inescapable question in the UK context.

Acknowledging that the BPT currently lacks a lens to understand the social base of its audiences and elucidate its potential applications in diversifying landscapes, there is good reason to believe it encourages unusually ecumenical cultural practices within the UK context. The multi-generational demographic assemblages within the BPT's audience may be like those of pilgrimage routes, such as the Camino, but they are remarkable when compared to other cultural locales in the UK. The BPT gathers younger audiences associated with creative arts and culture with the older age groups of museum and heritage (Audience Agency, 2018). It also fields a relatively equal ratio of male and female participation, whereas arts and culture participation, and particularly creative walking practices (to which pilgrimage could be compared), can be more female dominated (Rose *et al.*, 2022). There are clear instances where 'pilgrimage' has facilitated multicultural community relations in the UK during the pandemic with positive effects (Dowson, 2020; O'Keeffe, 2021c), indicative of its known place-making power and community applications (Clarke, 2020). With heritage and culture promoted for community cohesion and transcending divisions of modern Britain, understanding pilgrimage's social, as well as therapeutic, facilities may be a next frontier for pilgrimage scholarship in the UK.

Conclusion: Pilgrimage Futures

This article highlights the importance of recognising national contexts when considering the impacts of COVID-19 on pilgrimage practice, but it also demonstrates the importance of generating robust data to analyse pilgrimage adaptation in response to a modern crisis. The evidence indicates the therapeutic significance of the BPT's version of pilgrimage (as a solution to the challenges of modern living) has achieved greater traction

during the considerable societal shocks created by the pandemic. The BPT may well find that engagement rises further as other periods of stress and crisis are layered onto the aftermath of COVID-19, such as the energy crisis, rising cost of living, and the unfolding impacts of climate change. If 'post-secular' pilgrimage holds therapeutic value for those who undertake it, however, its cultural bedrocks, availability, and the different ways it is used by people must be better illuminated. Access and inequalities become important issues to resolve.

COVID-19 provided considerable opportunity for the BPT to extend its work in these directions. Since 2020, its growth, although still concentrated in the south east and south west of England, has flourished in other areas, especially Yorkshire and Scotland. With greater awareness of social health inequalities arising from the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement and the death of George Floyd, the BPT's strategic direction has also shifted. The BPT's invitation to 'bring your own beliefs' to the pilgrimage journey always promoted pilgrimage as an accessible practice available to all, but Hayward is more invested in overcoming the social and cultural barriers to pilgrimage practices. Fostering interfaith collaborations and widening its networks is not new to the BPT's work. Reflecting on the ritual availability of its work, however, has become more pressing in view of these societal concerns and the growing engagement with the BPT.³ Research partnerships continue to inform the organisation's understanding of the pandemic and audience trajectories, and represents an important part of that development.

These challenges are not unique to the BPT. Stakeholders and practitioners face a collective challenge of cultivating pilgrimage growth whilst not denuding benefits through state-led heritagisation or imposing normative uses. Appreciating the social value of pilgrimage and how this relates to therapeutic benefits (and for whom) is central to endeavour. Academic researchers can support practitioners to clarify the cultural specificity of 'post-secular' pilgrimage; to learn how social and embodied aspects of pilgrimage experience inform therapeutic effects. Embedded approaches, by their nature, recognise the specificity of pilgrimage communities and locales.

³ Notes from author's conversation with Dr Guy Hayward, 17 May 2022.

But developing flexible, networked infrastructures from these could enhance understanding of pilgrimage ‘beyond the “officially” sacred’ (Giovine & Choe, 2019) for academics and practitioners alike, and prepare researchers to rapidly assemble the interdisciplinary expertise needed to examine pilgrimage within other crisis contexts. Resourcing knowledge infrastructures is as important as creating walking infrastructures when it comes to ensuring pilgrimage futures.

References

- Audience Agency (2018). *Museums Audience Report: What Audience Finder says about audiences for Museums*. <https://www.theaudienceagency.org/asset/1995>
- Barush K (2020a). As Coronavirus curtails travel, backyard pilgrimages have become the way to a spiritual journey. *The Conversation*. 10 August.
- Barush K (2020b). The Afterlife of Becket in the Modern Imagination. *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 173 (1), 204–217.
- Bailey A E (2022a). Micro Pilgrimages: A New Post-Secular Trend? *Religions* 13 (7) no. 7, 665.
- Bailey A E (2022b). Pilgrimage during COVID-19: Impacts, Adaptations, and Recovery. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 10(1), 16.
- Bhalla R, Chowdhary N, Ranjan A (2021). Spiritual Tourism for Psychotherapeutic Healing Post COVID-19. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 38 (8): 769–81.
- Clarke C. (ed) (2020). *The St Thomas Way and the Medieval March of Wales: exploring place, heritage, pilgrimage*. (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press).
- Choe J, Bailey A E (2022). Why you might want to consider a pilgrimage for your next holiday or day trip. *The Conversation*. 20 January.
- Choe J, Geovine M A (2019). Geographies of religion and spirituality: pilgrimage beyond the officially sacred. *International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment* 21(3): 361–383.
- CPRE. The Countryside Charity (2021). *Access to nature in the English countryside*. Report. August.
- DDCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport) (2019). *Taking Part Survey: England Adult Report, 2018–2019*.
- DDCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport) (2020). *Taking Part Survey 2019/2020 – Heritage*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-heritage/heritage-taking-part-survey-201920>
- Dowson R (2020). A Discussion of the Practical and Theological Impacts of COVID-19 on Religious Workshop, Events and Pilgrimage, from a Christian Perspective. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 8(7): 33–51.
- Dyas D and Jenkins J (2020). *Pilgrimage and England’s Cathedrals: Past, Present and Future* (Palgrave Macmillan).
- Eade J (2020). The Invention of Sacred Places and Rituals: A Comparative Study of Pilgrimage. *Religions* 11 (12), 649.

- Eade J (2021). Professor John Eade reflects on the results of the project 'Reinventing pilgrimage in Europe'. Camino Academie YouTube channel. November 20. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIkIuWErDW4&list=PLr-3sntL1qD8uRA9NJE-9_gpKzwLxDU_1&index=15
- Edelman J, Vincent A, Kolata P and O'Keeffe, E. (2021) *British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19*. (Manchester Metropolitan University).
- Farias M, Coleman T, Bartlett J, Oviedo, L, Soares P, Santos, D, and Del Carmen Bas M (2019). Atheists on the Santiago Way: Examining Motivations to Go on Pilgrimage. *Sociology of Religion*. 80 (1): 28–44.
- Fairweather, Catherine (2020) In troubled times, a ritual walk can clear the mind and soothe the soul. *The Guardian*. 31 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/oct/31/in-troubled-times-a-ritual-walk-can-clear-the-mind-and-soothe-the-soul>
- Ghafar A, Langlois E V, Rasanathan K, Peterson S, Adedokun L, and Tran N T (2017). Strengthening health systems through embedded research. *Bull World Health Organ*. 95(2): 87.
- Hayward, Guy (2021). How intention turns a walk into a pilgrimage – 5 British pilgrimage trails. *The Guardian*. 13 January. <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2021/jan/13/how-intention-turns-a-walk-into-a-pilgrimage-5-british-walking-pilgrim-trails>
- Holland, Fay (2021). *Out of Bounds. Equity in Access to Urban Nature*. (Groundwork UK).
- Jorgensen N, Eade J and Ekeland T (2020). The Processes, Effects, and Therapeutics of Pilgrimage Walking the St. Olav Way. *The International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*. 8(1), 6.
- Mayhew-Smith N and Hayward G (2020). *Britain's Pilgrim Places: The First Complete Guide to Every Spiritual Treasure* (British Pilgrimage Trust).
- Mroz Frank (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimages and religious tourism in Europe during the first six months of the pandemic. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 60 (2): 625–645.
- Mroz F, Rucquoui A and Roszak P (2022). Historical and Contemporary Forms of "Surrogate Pilgrimage" on the Camino de Santiago. *European Journal of Science and Technology* 3: 43–57.
- O'Keeffe E (2021a). Case study: British Pilgrimage Trust in Edelman, J. *et al. British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19*: 63-67.
- O'Keeffe E (2021b). Case study: Virtual Pilgrimage - A View from the UK in Edelman, J. *et al. British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19*: 58–62.
- O'Keeffe E (2021c). When St Mungo met the Blessed Imam Hussain. New urban heritages and practices of pilgrimage under COVID-19. Conference paper. European Association for the Study of Religions, 8 September.
- Post P (2022). In het spoor van de camino. Verkenning van hedendaagse pelgrimsroutes in Europa. (Camino Cahier; Vol. 6B). Camino Academie. <http://Post-In-het-spoor-van-de-camino-essay-Camino-Cahier-6B-2022.pdf> (caminoacademie.nl)
- Preston V (2021) We are Pilgrims. Journeys in search of ourselves. (Hurst: London).
- Rose M, Heddon D, Law M, O'Neill M, Qualmann C, and Wilson H (2022). #WalkCreate: *Understanding walking and creativity during COVID-19*. Walking Publics/ Walking Arts Public Report. May.
- Roszak P and Huzarek T (2022). The Challenging Future of Pilgrimage after the Pandemic: New Trends in Pilgrimage to Compostela. *Religions*. 13: 523–532.
- Sethi, A (2021). *I Belong here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain*. (London: Bloomsbury).
- Sofaer J, Davenport B, Stig Sorensen M, Gallou E, and Uzzell D (2021). Heritage sites, value, and wellbeing: learning from the COVID-19 pandemic in England. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 27 (11): 1117–1132.
- Stanford P (2021). All Hail the pandemic pilgrimage boom. *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 April.
- Van der Beek S (2019). Post Camino Storytelling: Navigating transformation in a digital age. In Hoondert M and Van der Beek S (eds) *Ritual in a Digital Society* University of Groningen: 65–79.