



LET'S EXPLORE *St Piran*

YOU WILL NEED

Good shoes or boots for walking on rough paths, a drink and a snack, a camera on a phone.

THEMES

St Piran's Day, Celtic saints, wildlife, church, Cornish history, Celtic cross.

DISTANCE

4 km or 2.3 miles. This pilgrimage is across sand dunes with one steep climb up to the large cross.

St Piran was a 5th century saint who travelled to Cornwall from Ireland and made his home here amongst the dunes. Piran is the patron saint of Cornwall and tin miners, and the black and white Cornish flag is named after him – he is celebrated in Cornwall on St Piran's Day (March 5) when, every year, hundreds of people gather at **Penhale Sands** to walk the very same pilgrimage trail that you are about to follow.



The pilgrimage begins and ends at the parking laybys, on the lane between **Perranporth** and **Mount**.



Go through the gate and into the **Penhale Sands** nature reserve, following the well-marked path straight ahead leading towards the cross on the horizon. This is the largest dune system in Cornwall, covering almost 2,500 acres, and is home to the tallest dunes in Britain, reaching 90 metres in places. Dune systems like this are some of the rarest habitats in Europe and are home to all sorts of wonderful wildlife that you can only find in this type of habitat.



See if you can find some of these special sand dune species as you journey onwards.

Early Gentian - This small purple flower can only be found in the UK and nowhere else. Penhale Sands is one of only two places where it can be found in Cornwall.



Cinnabar Caterpillar & Moth - Look out for these striped yellow and black caterpillars whose bright colours let predators know they're poisonous. They build up this defence by munching on the toxic Ragwort plant, which is the best place to look for them. The caterpillars overwinter as cocoons before emerging in the spring as black and red Cinnabar Moths. These moths are often mistaken for butterflies, as they fly during the day.



Peregrine Falcon - If you're really lucky you'll spot one of the few pairs of Peregrine Falcons that nest along the cliffs here. Peregrine Falcons are the fastest animals on the planet reaching speeds of up to 200mph!



The Legend of Saint Piran

Saint Piran was expelled from Ireland by an angry and jealous chief, who had him chucked into the ocean with a heavy millstone around his neck.

Miraculously, the mill stone floated, and St Piran rode the waves across the Celtic Sea to beach on the other side of these dunes – which makes him the first surfer in Cornwall!



Climb to the top of dunes marked with the huge cross. This cross isn't ancient but is fairly modern and made of concrete – it stands proud above the dunes guiding pilgrims to the remains **St Piran's Oratory**, which you can now see below you.

Ready for a rest?

Pilgrims and Holy people often climb to high places seeking peace and solitude, they're a great spot to pray or meditate.

Why not stop for a few minutes and take it all in?



Head down the other side of the hill towards the ruins of **St Piran's Oratory**, the small chapel which Piran built to live and worship in when he first arrived here. This tiny ruin is one of the most ancient Christian sites in the UK, possibly dating back, in parts, to the 5th or 6th century, and is often referred to as the birthplace of Christianity in Cornwall. The building was buried for hundreds of years in the sand before being dug out again in the Victorian era. This however caused problems as tourists and treasure hunters nearly wrecked the site and it cost increasing amounts of money to keep the sand at bay – this is when the very ugly concrete wall was built around it. For this reason, the decision was finally made to re-bury the oratory in 1980, and then in 2015 they dug it up again!



It is said that to begin with, Piran's congregation was made up of a badger, a fox and a bear, but that word soon spread of the saint's faith and wisdom, and people came flocking from all around to hear Piran preach. A small community quickly built up here in the dunes and eventually a larger church was built a few hundred yards inland, which is the next stop on the pilgrimage.

Keeping the MOD fence on your left, follow the path up through the dunes and over the ditch until you come to the foundations of the Old Church, which was built in the 10th century after the sands had consumed the Oratory. This church has been an important place of pilgrimage for over a thousand years as Pilgrims from Ireland, Wales and Cornwall stopped here on their way along the Santiago Compostela. They came here because the church held the remains, or relics, of St Piran himself. This church was protected from the sands by a stream that sadly dried up due to tin mining, and so by the 19th century, it too had succumbed to the dunes.



The people decided to take the church apart brick by brick and carry everything several miles inland where they rebuilt it at Perranzabuloe. Archaeological evidence shows that there was a small settlement of several houses and farms around this church, but all that now lies beneath the sands.



Take a few minutes to stop and sit in the old foundations. Try to imagine what it would have looked like before the church was taken apart. Think about the generations of people over thousands of years who came to this sacred place, who prayed, and meditated, and worshipped here together.

A few metres away from the church you'll find the last site along this pilgrimage before the path takes you back to the road. This cross is perhaps the oldest Celtic cross in Cornwall and was probably erected to mark the way to St Piran's Oratory. Be sure to stop here, place your hand upon the ancient, lichen covered granite and join the thousands of pilgrims throughout history who've travelled from all over the world to visit this very site, drawn here by the legend of St Piran.



Follow the path back through the dunes to the road. You did it - Well done, Pilgrim!

DON'T FORGET TO POST & TAG YOUR PHOTOS ON INSTAGRAM: #PILGRIMEXPLORERS



*Join us for
another pilgrimage
adventure soon!*

