

We left Deddington on 25th May 2011, with the choir of the Deddington Deanery. These first five days in Sweden were amazing, with worship, mini-pilgrimages around Jönköping and fellowship with one another and our Swedish hosts. We felt Sweden was a very special place, so peaceful with its clean fresh air, woodland, and lakes. The highlight of these days for us was the Sunday morning Högmässa in Sofiakyrkan when our choir joined the combined choirs of Sofiakyrkan and Dalvik kyrka to sing Swedish and English music and our vicar gave a sermon in Swedish.

After the service most of our group departed for England, leaving five of us to continue our pilgrimage to Vadstena. On Sunday evening we were driven by the kyrkoherde of Sofiakyrkan to the Vida Vättern Motel situated on Lake Vättern north of Jönköping between Gränna and Ödeshög. After breakfast on Monday 30th May we gathered together and held prayers for our pilgrimage, together with some meditations from a Swedish book for pilgrims relating to the attributes of the pilgrim (hat, staff, shoes, rucksack, tent and so on). These prayers would be a focal point for the start of each new day, together with midday prayer for encouragement and evening prayers to give thanks for our safe arrival at our destination.

Some of the journey was done in silence to allow us to be open to God's Spirit and to take in God's wonderful creation around us, as we walked next to Vättern, the second largest lake in Sweden. We followed the Franciskus Pilgrim Trail towards Alvastra. This first was to be our toughest, physically and mentally exhausting. The path took us through dense woodland and was at times difficult, but we had the most glorious weather with amazing scenic views, and the peace of walking in silence sustained us. That night we stayed at the Ombergs Turisthotel in Alvastra, a beautiful hotel overlooking the lake and surrounding countryside. We had a most wonderful welcome and a five course evening meal with a different wine at each course. What more could a pilgrim ask for?!!!

The next day, Tuesday 31st May was the feast day of the Visit of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth. We visited the ruins of Alvastra monastery, the first Cistercian monastery in the Nordic countries, founded at the foot of the Omberg in 1143. It was built by monks and lay brothers from the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux in France. We then walked across the Omberg mountain. We took the easier crossing. This was to be our hottest day, with sweat, tears and even a little blood flowing – but also laughter. At midday we found a picnic bench overlooking a huge valley, where we celebrated a Eucharist for the Visitation. It was very peaceful, moving, “uncluttered”. We then ventured on to the Roman Catholic Convent of the Sacred Heart, and attended Vespers. The sisters sounded like angels singing. This was an experience that none of us would have missed. That night we stopped at Borghamn at the bottom of the Omberg and stayed at the youth hostel. We all helped to prepare our evening meal, which was very enjoyable, then walked around the harbour before retiring for a good night's sleep.

The next day, Wednesday 1st June we set off for Vadstena. This was to be the easiest of our walking days. We travelled mainly on narrow roads through small villages and farmland overlooking Vättern. From the top of a hill we were greeted by the magnificent view of Vadstena with the abbey and castle on the skyline. This was an amazing, moving, joyful experience; our Holy City was in reach.

Coming into Vadstena we followed the footsteps of thousands of pilgrims before us to the abbey where the relics of St Bridget are preserved. St Bridget, who lived in the 14th century, is one of the patron saints of Europe. She was noted for her moral example and her mystical visions. She was a shining light and a vessel of grace; goodness overflowed from her. The

prayer of St Bridget now particularly promoted at the abbey is “Lord, show me your way and make me willing to follow it.” The abbey, the design of which was given to Bridget in a vision, was beautiful, peaceful and awesome.

The next day Thursday 2nd June was Ascension Day, so we went to a morning service in the abbey, at which a visiting Danish choir sang. The whole service was wonderful and moving. Later we went to the abbey museum and then for a walk around Vadstena. It is a most beautiful place. We watched the sun set over the lake in the quiet and stillness of a warm summer evening.

Friday 3rd June came too quickly. It was time to head for home and tears were close as we said farewell to this holy place. We had a short stop in Linköping to see the cathedral, then on to Gothenburg and the flight home to England.

The pilgrimage has left a lasting impression on us .Despite the difficulties (35 miles walked in three days, falls, cuts, bee stings and insects bites) we found the journey rewarding and fulfilling and felt we had drawn closer to one another and to God.

Bryony Fenemore, Jenny and Judy Ward