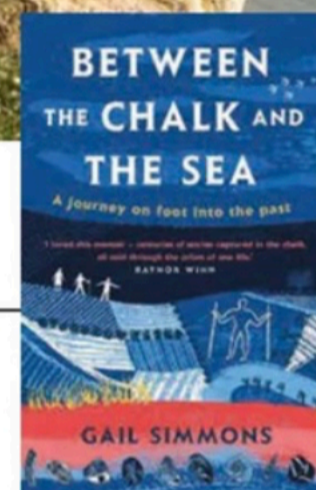




The chalk cliffs of Beachy Head and its famous lighthouse



## *Between The Chalk and The Sea*

by Gail Simmons

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HOW LUCKY we are to live in a country whose landscapes display millennia of human history. Any walk in Great Britain might take in mysterious brochs, windblown hillforts, tumuli, ancient churches, henges and holloways. We can enjoy our time on the trail all the more if we approach it with human history in mind, scanning the landscape for stories, traces and mysteries.

This is what makes *Between The Chalk and The Sea* such a joy to read. Travel writer Gail Simmons has us join her on a multi-season walk along an ancient pilgrimage route from Southampton to Canterbury. As she guides us through some of England's most striking landscapes – Downs, cliffs and Weald – she also leads us through thousands of years of human history. It is a compelling story.

Simmons' journey starts with the Gough Map, a 14th-Century map of Britain. A network of routes on the map appears to

present itineraries for pilgrimages, including a red line tracing an arc from Southampton to Canterbury. Named the Old Way, the 250-mile route tracks through important medieval settlements like Chichester, Lewes and Winchelsea. Simmons' interest is piqued – and so starts her journey, broken into stages across a calendar year so she can see the route in all four seasons.

Like many ancient routes in Britain, the Old Way leaps from abbey to priory to church, each Christian site itself tracing a link with Anglo-Saxon, Roman or Neolithic sacred sites. Simmons is able to bring this centuries-old dance of time and belief to life, introducing us to an array of fellow travellers as she tells the route's story: Margery Kempe, an extraordinary 14th-Century pilgrim and writer; Thomas Becket, slain in Canterbury in 1170; even Henry VIII, who hovers over Simmons' landscapes like a psychopath, tearing down monasteries and desecrating abbeys.

But this is no straight history book. Simmons is a travel writer first and foremost, and she is able to write arresting descriptions of the English landscape that should have you pining for the trail. Her deep love and experience of the Middle East finds its place here too: once you read about the South Downs rippling out like Jordanian sand dunes, it is hard to shake the comparison's imaginative and affecting impact.

Our guide also has no qualms about making arguments about modern culture's impact on nature and heritage, and the challenges that still face too many solo women hikers. But there is no hectoring here: the author makes a great walking companion, sharing opinion, nostalgia and wit in warm tones. The Old Way deserves hikers' attention and love; we are lucky to have a chronicler as companionable as Simmons to tell its story. **Andy Wasley**