

Birds of passage at Bradwell

It's a flat land and the road is straight. It could make a runway. But I don't fly. One foot after another, like so many before me, I walk upon this Roman road.

It's a large sky, with sea beyond. And nearer, a high building takes shape.

One foot after another – a thousand paces. A Roman mile. Roman Othona – I repeat the rolling words as I walk. They built a fort here with their flat bricks nearly two thousand years ago, at the end of their empire. Enemy to the east were invading.

And now here I am before St. Peter's church; having walked, a sort of pilgrim, although a confessed unbeliever. Peter: he – the rock upon which the church was built – who doubted, and who sank...

The sudden flight of a flock of lapwings breaks up my thoughts – wide-winged, painted peewits circling, then disappearing behind the high roof, over the dyke and away, over the sea.

St. Cedd, another sort of invader, came by sea to spread Christianity some two hundred years after the Romans left. The new church, now one of our oldest buildings, was built with those old bricks. A fortress to fight off Saxons and Vikings became a church dedicated to love and peace.

As for me, I arrived by walking. Not by sea. Certainly not by air.

Other flocks, wide-winged and painted, flew from here, away over the water. Grass now grows in the nearby runway. I read that between 1942 and 1945, 121 members of allied air forces flying from here failed to return.

My little sojourn is over. I emerge from the cool silence of the simple church into the open air.

There's no sign of a flock of lapwings as I retrace my steps on the Roman road. Roman Othona, Roman Othona – the words return to roll off my tongue.

I turn to take a last look at the church, to see a lone lapwing coming back to land.

The walker returning home finds himself slightly changed.