

NORTHERN PILGRIMS' WAY PROJECT

IN HALKIRK/ CAITHNESS

**A COUNTRYSIDE RANGERS
PROJECT**

PAUL CASTLE



2025/26



Aim: to increase awareness and understanding of the Northern Pilgrims' Way and its cultural heritage through community engagement

INTRODUCTION

The Northern Pilgrims' Way is a long-distance historical route stretching approximately 113–120 miles across northern Scotland, from Tain in Ross-shire to Kirkwall in Orkney. Re-established in 2021, it recreates medieval journeys taken by pilgrims travelling to important religious centres, including the shrine of St Duthac and St Magnus Cathedral.

The route passes through Sutherland and Caithness, offering a rich combination of coastal landscapes, inland routes, and significant heritage sites. Along the way, it connects a network of ancient chapels, wells, standing stones and cultural landmarks that reflect both early Christian and pre-Christian traditions.

This project focused on raising local awareness of the route within the Halkirk area, helping communities connect with this lesser-known aspect of their heritage.



St Bridget's cross
made from rushes.



Project Overview



The project was delivered in partnership with the Northern Pilgrims' Way Group, who secured funding and commissioned High Life Highland Ranger Service as a delivery partner.

Activities centred on guided walks, educational engagement, and interpretation of key heritage sites within Caithness. The programme combined outdoor experiences with classroom-based learning to create a varied and accessible introduction to pilgrimage history.

Two guided community walks explored sections of the route

Two school sessions combined indoor learning and outdoor activity

Two blog-style interpretive pieces to extend engagement beyond participants

Together, these activities aimed to bring the story of the Northern Pilgrims' Way to life for local audiences.





Photo of St Bridget's chapel remains

Project Delivery

GUIDED WALKS

Two ranger-led walks explored a section of the route near Loch More in north Caithness, following a historic line of pilgrimage linked to St Duthac and St Magnus, and a walk around the village including the replica standing Skinnet Stone. The original Skinnet Stone was excavated in 1861 from the ruined St. Thomas's Chapel at Skinnet, near Halkirk, and is now on display at the North Coast Visitor Centre.

Participants experienced:

- A 5km guided walk through open countryside
- Interpretation of local heritage, including the settlement at Achscoriclate
- Exploration of St Bridget's Chapel remains and holy well site

The walks combined natural heritage with cultural storytelling, highlighting how pilgrimage routes were embedded in the wider landscape. Wildlife observations (including osprey, golden plover, wheatear and merlin) enriched the experience and demonstrated the strong connection between nature and historic travel routes. Participants also took part in a hands-on cultural activity, creating traditional St Brigid's crosses using locally sourced rushes – linking past traditions with present-day practice.





St Brigid's cross
made from paper

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Two classroom sessions were delivered at Halkirk Primary School, tailored to different age groups:

Session 1 (P4–5):

- Introduction to the concept of pilgrimage globally
- Interactive role-play exploring medieval hospitality customs
- Outdoor activity simulating pilgrims seeking shelter
- Craft activity creating St Brigid's crosses

Session 2 (P6–7):

- Exploration of pilgrimage traditions and artefacts
- Design and creation of pilgrim badges using clay
- Creative interpretation through standing stone design



These sessions introduced pupils to both historical and cultural aspects of pilgrimage, encouraging them to connect the concept to their own lives and places of importance.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Two blog posts were produced to document and share the project more widely. These captured:

- The guided walk experience and landscape interpretation
- School engagement activities and creative outputs

This ensured the project reached beyond direct participants, extending its educational impact.



Educational Benefits



Role playing Medieval Pilgrimage

The project provided a cross-curricular learning experience linking history, geography, outdoor learning and creative arts.

Heritage & Religious Studies

- Medieval pilgrimage traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices
- The significance and interpretation of local heritage sites (e.g. chapels, wells, standing stones)
- Cultural traditions linked to pilgrimage, including St Brigid's crosses and pilgrim badges

Geography

- Landscape interpretation and developing a strong sense of place
- Understanding how routes connect communities across Sutherland, Caithness, and beyond
- Exploring the relationship between natural environments and historic travel routes

Creative Arts

- Role-play activities exploring pilgrimage journeys and medieval hospitality
- Practical craft-making, including St Brigid's crosses and clay pilgrim badges
- Creative design work such as standing stones and symbolic representations



Visiting St Bridget's well

Key Outcomes

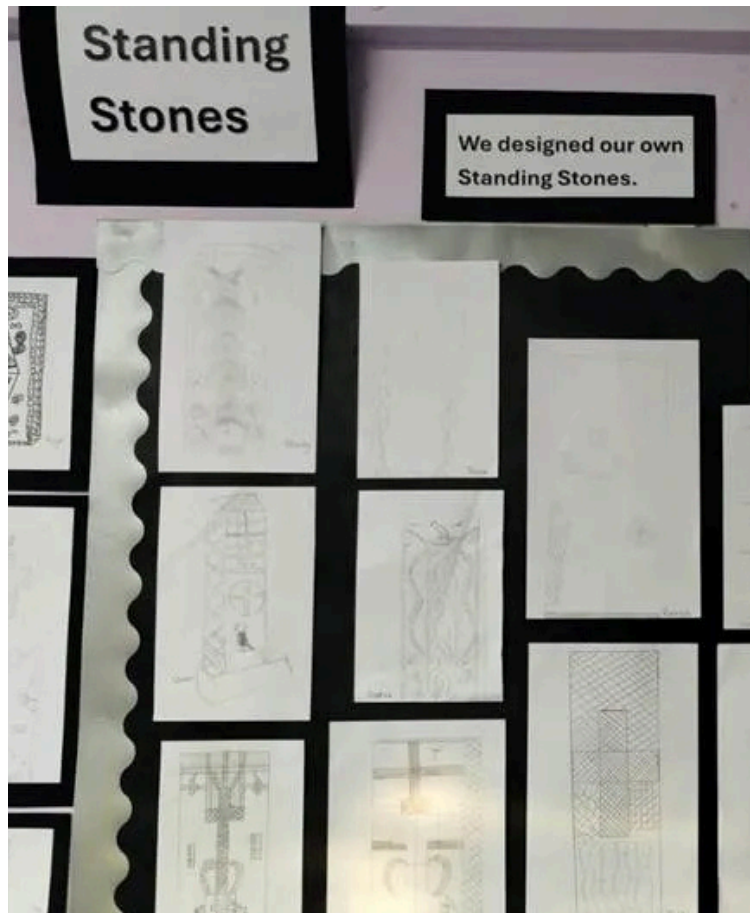
The Northern Pilgrims' Way project delivered a strong set of outcomes, successfully raising awareness of this important but relatively lesser-known heritage route within the Halkirk community. Participation levels were positive across all activities, with both adult attendees and school pupils showing genuine interest and engagement. Feedback consistently highlighted the value of combining outdoor experiences with cultural storytelling, demonstrating that the approach resonated well with a wide audience. The project also successfully integrated a new heritage theme into existing ranger service delivery, expanding the scope of interpretation work and reinforcing the role of ranger services in connecting people with place.

A key strength of the project was its innovative, blended delivery model. Experiential learning through guided walks allowed participants to physically engage with the landscape, while place-based interpretation at sites such as St Bridget's Chapel provided a tangible connection to history. Creative elements, including craft activities and design work, enriched understanding and encouraged personal reflection. The production of digitally accessed written content further extended the project's reach, ensuring that its impact went beyond those who attended in person.

The partnership between the Northern Pilgrims' Way Group and the High Life Highland Ranger Service was central to the project's success, enabling effective use of combined expertise, local knowledge and established community connections.



Conclusion



The Northern Pilgrims' Way project has done more than raise awareness; it has reconnected people with a powerful, living strand of Highland identity. By combining immersive outdoor experiences with creative and educational engagement, it transformed an overlooked historic route into something tangible, relevant and inspiring for the local community. Participants did not simply learn about pilgrimage, they went some way to experience it, reflect on it and connect it to their own sense of place.

The project clearly demonstrates the impact of confident, place-based heritage interpretation and strong partnership delivery. It provides a compelling model for future work and creates real momentum for embedding the Northern Pilgrims' Way within community life, ensuring it is not only remembered, but actively valued and experienced.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Northern Pilgrims' Way Group for securing Foundation Scotland funding and leading the project, and for the opportunity to work in partnership as a delivery partner. More information can be found on their website at: <https://www.northernpilgrimsway.co.uk/>

Thanks are also due to Halkirk Primary School staff and pupils for their enthusiasm and full engagement with the sessions, and to all walk participants for their interest and contribution. We are grateful to local land managers and estate staff for access and support, which made delivery on the ground possible.

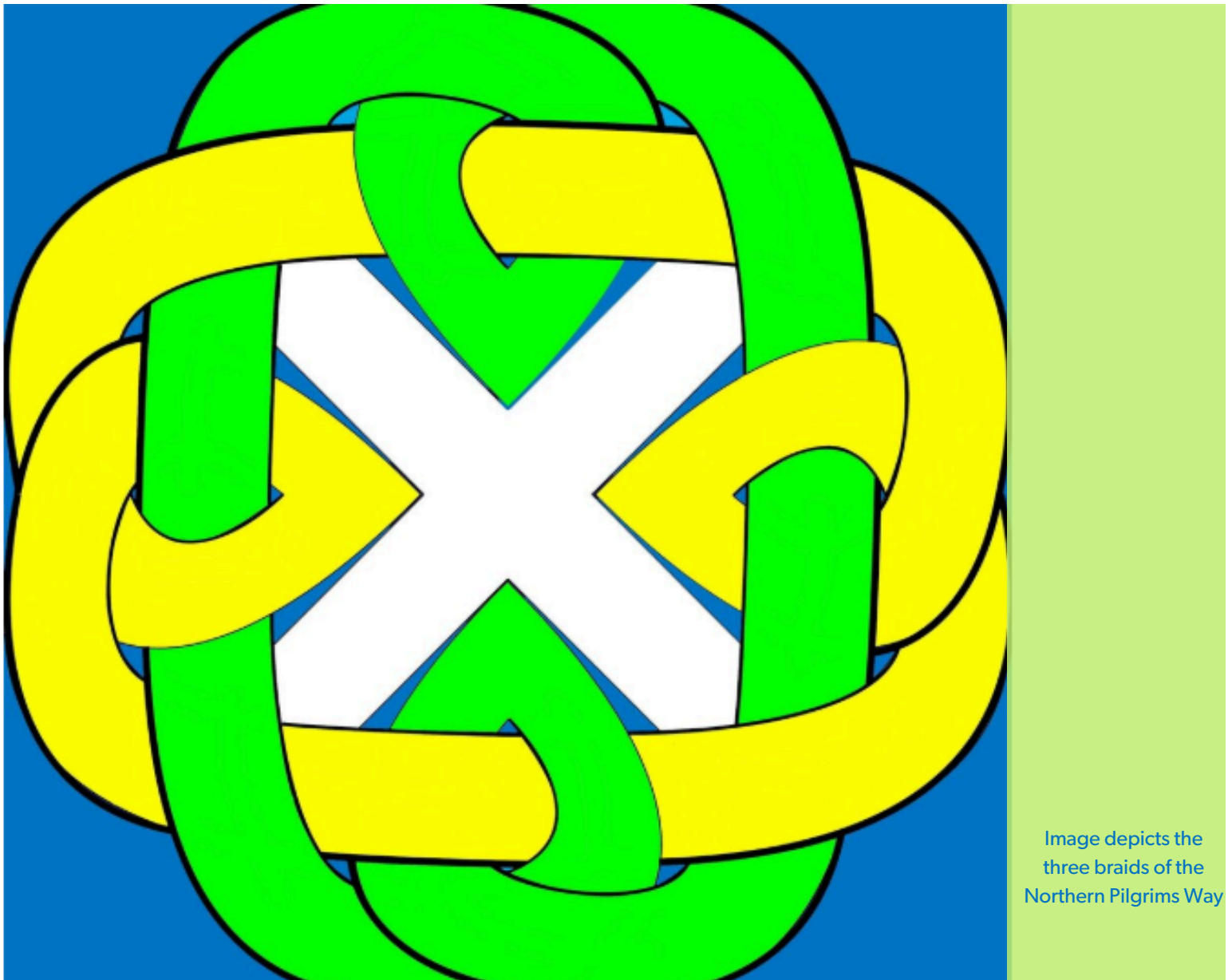


Image depicts the three braids of the Northern Pilgrims Way



highlife

highland
na Gàidhealtachd

**MAKING
LIFE
BETTER**



Photo of the Replica of the Skinnet Stone in Halkirk



PAUL CASTLE

paul.castle@highlifehighland.com