

Curiouser and curiouser...

A HANDBOOK FOR JUNIOR
RIDE AND STRIDERS

Clive Fewins



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INDEX

BAMPTON

BERRICK SALOME

BROUGHTON

BURFORD

CASSINGTON

CHALGROVE

CHARLTON-ON-OTMOOR

CHILDREY

CHISELHAMPTON

CHIPPING NORTON

COMBE

COMPTON BEAUCHAMP

EWELME

HAMPTON POYLE

HORLEY

KELMSCOTT

KENCOT

KIDLINGTON

LANGFORD

NORTH LEIGH

SHORTHAMPTON

SOUTH NEWINGTON

SPARSHOLT

STANTON HARCOURT

STANTON ST JOHN

STANDLAKE

SWINBROOK

UFFINGTON

WATERPERRY

WEST HANNEY

WHEATFIELD





BAMPTON: ST MARY

A RIGHT ROYAL BATTLE IN THE CHURCHYARD

The date is 1142 and the battle is raging all around Oxfordshire. Somehow – we know not how or why – the fighting spread as far as Bampton.

On the one side of the town, followers of King Stephen, born a Frenchman and the crowned King of England. On the other forces loyal to Matilda, daughter of the late King Henry 1, and his appointed heir to the throne.

Whatever the circumstances, the old parish church was badly damaged during this civil war skirmish. And inside you can see the results of that conflict.

If you look carefully you will find what is, in effect, a 'tower within'. You can tell it is very old – it dates from the 900s or 1000s – and you may detect that much of this structure was originally outside the building.

What happened was this: In 1142 the previous stone church was damaged in a battle. It was part of the war between Stephen and Empress Matilda. The war between them

ravaged the country between 1135 and 1153 and for several years raged in the countryside around Oxford.

The 'inside tower' that you see is what was left of the old church after the fighting. It has some very old stone masonry in the style known as 'herringboning' (see picture). This is a style of laying stone typical of the Saxon period.

We now get into the subject of Saxon churches. There are several very good examples of churches with a lot of Saxon work in them in Oxfordshire. Apart from Bampton you will find North Leigh and Langford featured in this series.

The Saxon period lasted from the sixth century until 1066. The last Saxon king was King Harold, who was defeated by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings. King Alfred, who was born in Wantage, was the most famous of the Saxon kings.

The 'inside tower' I have been talking about contains a massive staircase that leads to the ringing chamber in the main tower. If you ever have an opportunity to get into this room, take it. The staircase up has been dated to about 800, which means that the



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ringing chamber must be one of the oldest in the country.

Bampton church is one of the oldest and finest in Oxfordshire. So why not include it in your list of churches to cycle or ride, especially as it is in the middle of delightful but flat Upper Thames countryside?



An ancient window high up in the old tower inside Bampton church



Herringboning in the Saxon tower inside Bampton church!



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BERRICK SALOME: ST HELEN

THE STRANGE TALE OF THE BEE WINDOW

This is a curious little church and at first sight from the outside it appears as though there is little that is really old about it.

Not that there is anything wrong with this, though it has to be said that the older a church building is the more likely there will be a large number of curiosities in it.

Inside this little church – it is only about 65 feet long including the tower – you will find one of the oldest and loveliest stone fonts in Oxfordshire, some curious carving in the stone brackets supporting the gallery, and some very old floor tiles at the far end of the building in the chancel.

The gallery itself is interesting. It has a date of 1676 on it and the names of the two churchwardens at the time it was built carved into the front.

Now turn round and walk towards the altar – the east.

Can you spot the bee window? It's quite hard because it is very faint. But most of the other glass in this church

is plain, so, with luck, you will succeed

To my mind this window is the greatest curiosity in this little church. This is not only

because it is the oldest piece of stained glass in the church – it probably dates from the 13th century – but because it is the symbol of the only English Pope – Nicholas Breakspear.

Nicholas Breakspear was born in 1100 in the parish of Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire and became a monk at St Albans Abbey. He studied in France, became a bishop and was Pope for five years, dying in 1159.

The symbol of the bee appears in his crest (he became Pope Hadrian 1V) and was later adopted by the Brakspear family, who were in the licensed trade in Oxfordshire. Latterly the Brakspear family ran the brewery in Henley-on-Thames. It ran from 1773 until 2002, when brewing ceased. The company still exists however, has its headquarters in the town, and the bee is still its symbol.

It is not known whether the Oxfordshire Brakspears were related to the Breakspears of Kings Langley,

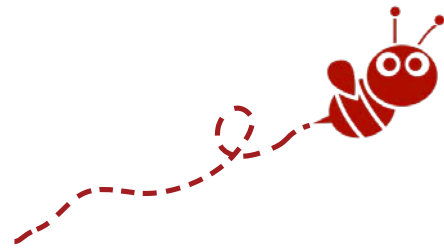


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but Berrick Salome lies directly on the old route from Dorchester Abbey to St Albans.

Isn't it strange how you can find all sorts of curiosities by walking or riding round some of Oxfordshire's old churches!





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BROUGHTON POGGES: ST. PETER

CAN YOU FIND THE CHURCH?

This church has a wonderful name – but can you find it?

The first time I went I gave up, parked the car, took to my feet and finally asked a local who told me where it is.

So the task for you – riding or striding – this September is to find the church.

Before that you have to find the village. And when you have found it, why not find out why it has such an unusual name?

Once you have found the church you will find it fascinating. It is obviously very old – early 1100s – and so, having been built quite soon after the Norman Conquest, very Norman in style.

Norman churches are known for having massive walls, small windows, usually with rounded heads, and rather fat, often squat, square towers.

This church has all three, plus two early Norman doorways, with characteristic rounded arches, both with a tympanum (see section on

Kencot) and a tower with a pitched roof. This is known as a saddleback tower.

Broughton Pogges is a very good example of a small but largely complete church dating from the early 1100s, which makes it quite unusual. If you become really interested in church buildings and want to try and find out more about churches built in the Norman style it is an excellent place to start.

But first you have got to find it!



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The outside of the church of St Peter, Broughton Pogges. Obviously someone has managed to find it!



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BURFORD: ST JOHN BAPTIST

RED INDIANS IN A FAMOUS OXFORDSHIRE CHURCH?

Who would associate a famous English parish church with Red Indians? If you find this of interest why not visit the magnificent church of St John Baptist, Burford if you are able to do so on Ride and Stride day this year - or on a day out?

Once you have found the memorial (see photographs) try to find out the story behind it. It is very mysterious.

Can you find out to whom the memorial is dedicated? It is believed to be the first representation in Britain of inhabitants of America – it was known in this country at the time (1569) 'The New World.'

This magnificent church – one of the finest in England – is a treasure house of memorials and architectural gems. So if you go to Burford there are many more questions you will want to ask yourself.

I shall ask you just further one: ***can you find the name of the patron saint of orchards and small gardens?***

If you are not too bowled over by the huge variety of amazing things to be seen in this huge church, do take a quick look at the churchyard before you leave Burford.

Being in the Cotswolds there are some very finely carved stone tombs. They are known as chest tombs, and the ones with curved tops are bale tombs, which are very typical of the area.

It is thought that these curved tops – most of them date from about 1700 – possibly represent cloth, because the people they commemorate were very often merchants who dealt in the high quality woollen cloth being produced at the time in and around Burford.

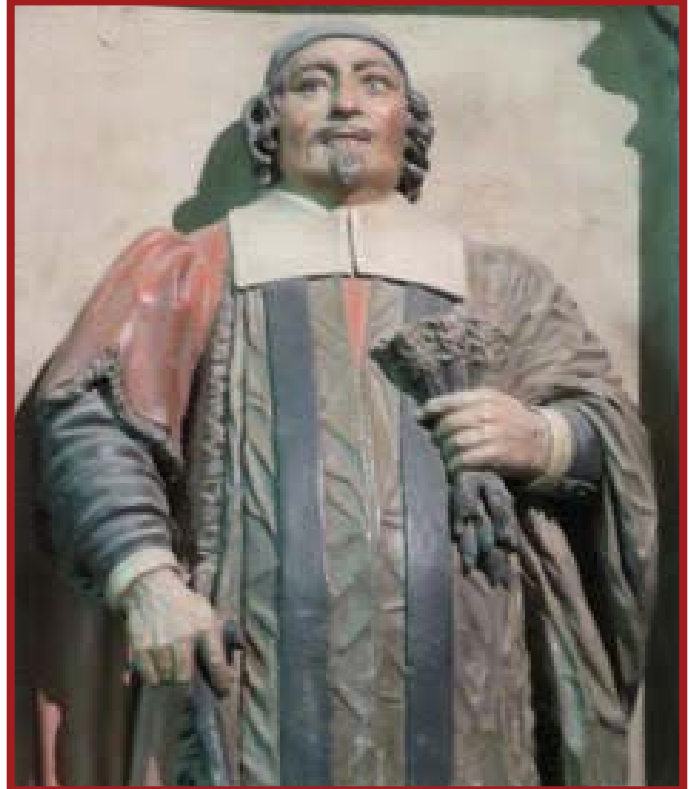


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The Red Indian memorial



Memorial to John Harris (1596-1674) a tailor born in Burford who became Lord Mayor of Oxford



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CASSINGTON: CHURCH OF ST PETER

LOOK FOR THE FUNNY FACES!

You can't really miss the funny faces peering down at you from roof level at this wonderful old parish church. If you can't work it into your Ride + Stride then try to get there some other time. There are lots of unusual features inside.

The stone faces can be seen on either side on the outside of the church and form what is known as a corbel table – really it is a row of stone supports for the rafters where they form the edge of the roof. The Cassington corbel table is one of the finest in Oxfordshire.

Because they have been there about 900 years the stones are very worn and it is hard to see what some of them depict.

But when I last went I spotted a man with what looked like toothache, two odd-looking animals positioned on either side of a roof drain pipe and a man with a deformed face that appeared to a lion coming out of a cave, two odd heads on either side of a bell (Cassington used to have its own

bell foundry) and a sheep's head.

Inside there is a fine collection of very old benches. They date from the 1400s. They are gnarled and rustic and very much the sort of seating that existed in old rural churches 600 years ago. Can you find them? How many are there? They date from the 1400s.

Something else that might fascinate you inside are the consecration crosses. ***Can you find four of these painted on the walls.*** They are rather faded, but easily recognisable. Consecration crosses date from the time of the dedication of the church by the local bishop so that it became fit to be a place of worship, so they are often as old as the church. A full set comprises 24 – 12 on the outside and three on each of the inside walls. They are usually circular. At Cassington four interior crosses remain. If you want to see some fine exterior examples the parish church at Uffington (see Uffington in this series) is the place to go.

The church is open during daylight hours, so even if you do not get there on Ride and Stride day you can go in a gaze at the superb Norman chancel arch. You can tell it is Norman (yes, just after 1066) because it is round-



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headed. Together with the other semicircular windows and the external corbel table this is a sure sign that much of this church dates from the 1100s – the later Norman period.





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CHALGROVE: ST MARY

CAST YOUR IMAGINATION BACK 700 YEARS

Can you imagine what it was like inside our parish churches 700 years ago? It very different from today.

There was usually a dark and sombre atmosphere, punctuated by the murmur of priests praying at altars, some chanting, and also quite a lot of coming and going as people entered and left before and after the many services. Everywhere there was the smell of candle wax. The constant flicker of the candles that lit both the building and the many altars and niches that existed in churches in those days added to the gloomy atmosphere – and also added to the air of mystery.

All those candles helped illuminate the paintings that covered the walls, but they also added a heavy layer of wax to the walls and ceiling.

So the flickering images of the paintings of bible scenes, saints, apostles, martyrs and decorative designs painted to most of the walls, and quite often the stone pillars as

well, added greatly to the mysterious, mystical atmosphere, which was intended to be deliberately devotional

Spooky? Well, it was all very different from inside churches today.

You have to imagine this sort of atmosphere when you enter the chancel at Chalgrove parish church to view the newly restored wallpaintings.

They are a fine set by any standards: not only one of the most complete set of church wallpaintings in the Oxfordshire but also of national importance.

You can see them much more clearly since the recent work on them, but also because most of the candles have gone and the stained glass in the chancel windows, which was designed hand-in-hand with the wallpaintings, has also disappeared. It probably matched the wallpaintings in its magnificence, but it also served to keep out much of the light.

In Chalgrove's famous chancel the paintings are in three tiers, row upon row. They were all created at the same time, using the best available craftsmanship and probably paid for by the lord of the manor – we



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are talking about the early 1300s – who also employed top craftsmen for creating the rest of the chancel interior.

It is all very exciting, and the wallpaintings were skilfully restored as part of the recent £1.2m repair and refit project undergone by the church.



If you look carefully at the bookstall at the rear of the building there is an excellent children's I-Spy Quiz on the church

If you can't get there on Ride and Stride day but would like to go you will usually find the church locked. However the key is available at the Londis store, which is in the main street through the village.





CHARLTON-ON-OTMOOR: ST MARY

A HIGHLY UNUSUAL BIG GREEN CROSS

When you enter the splendid church of St Mary at Charlton-on-Otmoor there is one feature that strikes you immediately. It is the big cross of box branches that stands on top of the elaborate wooden screen that separated the nave from the chancel.

You will not see anything like this in any other church in Oxfordshire.

Why not? Because this is the only Oxfordshire church where they still observe the ancient custom of dressing the rood-loft with garlands and branches during church festivals. Rood loft? What's that?

Well, in several of these pieces there has been reference to the screen (usually wooden but occasionally of stone) that separated the nave from the chancel in ancient churches.

Very often there was a big loft on top of that screen. It was ascended by a staircase, often of stone and quite frequently built into one of the tower walls. It was used for worship, especially on high days and holidays.

The central feature of the rood loft was the rood itself. This was a carved and painted crucifix (representation of Christ on the cross) erected on a beam behind the rood screen and with the Christ figure flanked

on either side by the figures of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist. These figures were usually mounted on the beam.

Complete rood lofts are very rare in churches nowadays because, together with the great roods they supported, they were removed on the orders of King Henry VIII at the time known as The Reformation. This was in the 1530s and 40s when many of the fixtures and fittings in churches – they were all Roman Catholic at the time – were ordered to be taken down and destroyed. This resulted in the birth of the Church of England

So not only is the beautiful and colourful screen and rood loft in this church – it all dates from about 1500 – in this church very rare, but so is the decoration, which is very rich in both texture and colour. "Sumptuous" is a word some experts have used for it, especially its gold-coloured vine-leaf frieze.

Back to the greenery. This is a permanent feature, but it is renewed twice yearly, on May Day and in September.

What does it symbolise? Well, Charlton-on-Otmoor is one of those rare places where folk and religious festivals are intermingled. In 1548 the medieval rood figures would have been removed and destroyed. Here, at Charlton, it appears there was some attempt to replace them, in the form of a cross of greenery, perhaps symbolising the fertility of Mary the mother of Jesus.



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So if you get to this rather out-of-the way church (but it is flat countryside if you are cycling!) do take a look at this amazing survival – and I hope this little article has helped you to understand what it is all about.



The huge green cross of box branches that stands on top of the screen at St Mary's, Charlton-on-Otmoor





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CHILDREY: ST MARY

SPOT THE FONT!

This church is well worth a visit because it has a very ancient and highly unusual lead font. It is believed to date from the late 1100s, so is extremely old. It is thought to be the oldest of its type in Oxfordshire.

There are only about 40 lead fonts in churches in England and four of them are in Oxfordshire. The other three are at Woolstone, in the Vale of White Horse and quite near to Childrey, Long Wittenham, and Dorchester.

The Childrey font is fun. It is round and on its sides is a frieze of 12 moulded abbots (one expert called them 'cartoon-like bishops') in clerical garments, each with a crozier (staff of office) in one hand and a book in the other.

How many other old and interesting fonts can you find (and photograph?) on your Ride and Stride travels?





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CHISELHAMPTON: ST KATHERINE

PLAIN AND SIMPLE – AND PRETTY

The small church of St Katharine at Chiselhampton is probably one of the most unusual you have visited on Ride and Strides. This is because it is built not in the medieval style and is very plain and unadorned.

The date is 1762. It is built very simply in the style of the day, and is very attractive to passers-by, set between two gateposts across a lawn from the road. Fortunately it is frequently open because it is no longer in regular use and is in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, the national charity that cares for churches at risk. Their staff try very hard to keep most of the 350 churches in their care open as much as possible.

So if you find the road past very busy and are not able to visit on Ride and Stride Day in September you might be able to visit on some other occasion.

Inside you will find high box pews – probably originally created individually for specific local families – a high desk for the clerk of the parish, and a tall reading desk

All these features are typical of the time, but unusual in Oxfordshire churches because, although they may have been constructed in many, they were largely removed in Victorian times. In the days when the four King Georges were on the throne (1714-1830) they were very much the fashion. Most churches would also have galleries like Chiselhampton's, although many of these were also later removed.

Outside the most striking feature is the wooden clock turret dated 1762.

Originally this church was built by the grand family at the adjacent mansion. On a Sunday morning the church would have been crammed with members of the family and their estate workers at the main Sunday service.

All very different from nowadays!



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CHIPPING NORTON: ST MARY THE VIRGIN

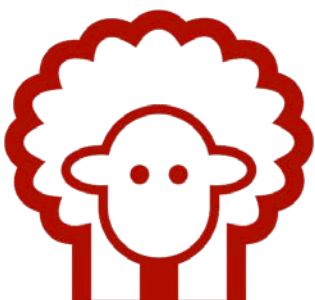
FUNNY FACES AND A STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Part One:

The parish church at Chipping Norton is very fine, with lots of memorable features. But young church explorers will probably find the porch the most fascinating part.

***So don't skip through it... and do
LOOK UP!***

There are lots of funny faces up there. Can you see a sheep overpowering a wolf? And a lion sticking out his tongue?





CHIPPING NORTON: ST MARY THE VIRGIN

FUNNY FACES AND A STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Part Two:

Most people find the green man up there the most interesting of the carved figures. Chipping Norton is just one of a number of churches in Oxfordshire where this mythical figure appears. He is not always easy to find, so be on your mettle while riding or striding. You will find him concealed in all sorts of odd places!

This is also one of the Oxfordshire churches where you will also find a 'stairway to nowhere'. Can you find it? And can you spot where it comes out higher up in the church masonry?

Can you find out why it is there? It must have led to somewhere, after all...





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COMBE: ST LAURENCE

THE CHURCH THAT MOVED

The village of Combe near Woodstock is about as near as the Cotswolds get to Oxford. It is a delightful place and has a beautiful church on a sloping site that looks out over a cricket field on one side and open countryside and woodland to the other

But the church was not always there. It was originally situated in the valley of the River Evenlode below but in 1395 it was rebuilt on its present site by the monks of Eynsham Abbey, when the village moved up the hill, presumably because the site was liable to flood.

This is the great interest of the church, but there is no point in asking you to find out because you need to be told! If that is not of sufficient interest to draw you to the church then consider some of the other features that might fulfil this role.

Combe is one of a handful of churches in Oxfordshire to have a Doom, a painting of the Last Judgement presided over by saints and angels and the figure of Christ. The Combe Doom has quite a lot of the original surviving.

It was probably painted in the late 1400s, and shows Christ seated on a rainbow in the centre with the Apostles on either side. At his right hand the blessed rise from their graves and are admitted to heaven, while at his left sinners are driven into the mouth of hell by red devils with forks.

There are several other wall paintings here, so St Laurence would be an interesting place to Ride or Stride to. And don't miss the rare and very unusual stone pulpit, which also dates from the 1400s. It is of the type found in the refectories (eating places) of monasteries because it is mounted on the wall with its base supported by a beautifully carved stone corbel (bracket). In monasteries pulpits like this one were used to read the scriptures from to the assembled monks while they ate.

There is lots more that is of interest in St Laurence's, which many people consider to be one of the finest parish churches in Oxfordshire.



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COMPTON BEAUCHAMP: ST SWITHUN

SPOT THE BIRDS

If you ride or stride anywhere near this pretty little chalkstone church, hidden beneath the Berkshire Downs, be sure to take a look at the curious interior, in particular the chancel.

In the early 1900s it was decorated in an extraordinary and highly unusual fashion. Painted vines ramble across the walls and lilies and roses can be seen in the window openings.

Can you spot any bats, dragonflies or unusual birds? What is the bird perched on top of the wall monument to the Langleys?





EWELME: ST MARY

A GRUESOME MEMORIAL TO A GREAT LADY

Alice de La Pole, Duchess of Suffolk in the 15th century, founded, with her husband, one of the oldest grammar schools in England. The building still houses the village school in the village of Ewelme, at the edge of the Oxfordshire Chilterns.

Alice was such an important lady that when she died in 1475 it was decided to erect not one but two memorials to her. They come in the form of exquisitely carved effigies, but the lower one is a surprise. Alice appears not clad in all her finery, as in the upper memorial, but as a skeletal figure - a decaying dead body. This sort of memorial is designed to remind everybody that we all die one day.

You can see the effigy close up by getting on your hands and knees. If you are very clever you will be able to spot some faint painting on the ceiling of the tomb chamber above her head.

Any idea what this shows?





HAMPTON POYLE: ST MARY THE VIRGIN

A RARE 'HEART STONE'

Have you any idea what a heart burial is?

You will gain a better idea if, on your Ride or Stride, you manage to get to the small and rather tucked-away church of St. Mary at Hampton Poyle near Kidlington.

On the north side – the side farthest away from the door – you will see an arched recess, and inside it a stone about 21 inches long and 10 inches deep and 6 inches high. Its carved front is decorated with what look like 13 miniature 'pillars'.

It is known by the worshippers at the church as 'the heart stone' and it is believed that it is a rare example of a heart burial.

There is much mystery attached to heart burials. They are thought to date from the time of the Crusades, when knights went out with their retinues from England and France to fight in what we now call the Middle East.

When a knight died on a battlefield overseas it was often very difficult to transport his body home, so it was usually buried on foreign soil. But sometimes the dead man had willed that his heart should be removed and returned to his own village church in England for burial. It is believed this request was usually carried out.

In Oxfordshire there are other examples of what are thought to be heart burials at Buckland near Faringdon, and the nearby church of St George at Hatford.



The stone that is thought to have contained a heart burial



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HORLEY: ST ETHELDREDA

FIND THE GIANT WALLPAINTING

In this ancient church close to the Warwickshire border you won't have any difficulty finding the huge wallpainting of St Christopher fording a river with the Christ Child on his back. ***But have you any idea of what it is all about and why it is on the north side of the church?***

The answer is that St Christopher is the patron saint of travellers and his colourful image is often found near the entrance to the church or opposite the main door. This is thought to be because travellers wished to gain the blessing of St Christopher as they either arrived in a church or went out of the building in the next stage of their journey. Travelling in the 1400s, when this great wallpainting was created, was a risky business and so it was wise to remain under the patronage of this great saint.

The reason why St Christopher is regarded as the patron saint of travellers is based on the famous legend that he carried a child who was unknown to him across a dangerous river and when they reached the other side the child revealed himself as Christ. Even to this day some Christians who travel a lot carry small images of him in a pocket or wear images of him round the neck or as a bracelet.





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ST GEORGE, KELMSCOTT

A FAMOUS MAN'S GRAVE

Funnily enough, one of the main items of interest that draws many people to this famous little country church is outside the building in the churchyard. It is the grave of William Morris,, designer, writer, poet, pamphleteer and craftsman.

Morris was one of the most influential people in the 19th century. He was born in 1834 and died, worn out, 62 years later.

He had a huge influence on literature, design, architecture and the way many people thought in this country and his influence is still felt today.

He was buried in the churchyard at Kelmscott because for many years in the summer he rented the manor house here – 'The old house by the Thames' as he called it. It was his country retreat, and the immediate vicinity of the riverside property provided him with the inspiration for many of his designs of wallpaper and fabrics.

His grave is also of great interest because it takes the form of a ridge-shaped stone supported on blocks.

The design is adapted from Viking-style ridged tomb-houses because Morris was very fond of the medieval sagas and poetry of Iceland, many of which inspired his long poems. He also translated old Icelandic verse.

If, you come away from this quiet place keen to learn more about the life of William Morris it will have been time well spent.

Do take time however to spend a few minutes inside this simple small country church.

Inside the church there are some wonderful wallpaintings that date from the 1300s. ***Can you find the painting of Adam and Eve?***



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KENCOT: ST GEORGE

A MOST UNUSUAL CARVED DOORWAY

While riding or striding round Oxfordshire churches you will quite often come across the word 'Norman', or, to give the architectural style its correct name, 'English Romanesque'.

Churches built in this style are old. They were built in the style of the Normans. And every schoolchild knows that it was King William the Conqueror, who led the Norman conquest of England in 1066.

So some of these churches are approaching 950 years old!

Nobody knows precisely when the church at Kencot was first started but we do know that the doorway there is Norman. It is semi-circular – a sure sign that the doorway dates from this period – and above the stone doorway is a semi-circular space known as the tympanum.

The Norman church builders were very fond of carving and you will find all sorts of designs in these semi-circular spaces above the doorways. At Kencot they carved an archer (Sagittarius) shooting a monster, but on the equivalent space on the inside, as is often the case, they carved nothing.

Then, 900 years later, some members of the church had a bright idea of celebrating the year 2000 by having a fresh carving made on the inside of the doorway. They hit in the idea of 'Christ, the Lamb of God' and so there it is, carved in new stone for all to see.

Can you find out the name of the Saint that is commemorated in this carving and the name of the man who carved it?





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KIDLINGTON: ST MARY

MISERICORDS ARE NOT MISERABLE!

A misericord. That's a funny name isn't it? Know what it means?

It means a special tip-up seat, for a monk in a church chancel. It has tiny ledges on the underside and these were designed to help keep the monks awake during long services, often held in the middle of night. The other name for misericords is 'miserere stalls'.

Not very cheerful is it?

Well. I can't say I am ever particularly cheerful if I am roused at three o'clock in the morning, even if it is to say my prayers!

Despite this misericords are a source of endless fascination to lovers of old churches and they are found in churches in many parts of England.

Anyway, there were colonies (usually called 'colleges') of canons, or monks, only in important monastic churches, and the fact that St Mary's Kidlington is so large and has these stalls means that it was an important church from possibly earlier than the 1330s, when most of the present church was probably built.

The Kidlington misericords are very old – in fact experts think they date from the 1200s and are amongst the oldest examples in the country.

The interesting thing about the Kidlington misericords (there are five of them beneath ten very old benches in the chancel) is that they are very plain. This is in great contrast to, say, Swinbrook, also featured in this booklet, where there also five and they show, amongst other things, a woman with a funny hat, a grotesque animal head and a flower head.

The best collection in the county is probably that in the chapel at New College Oxford.

Misericords often show odd and unusual subjects that provide a lively picture of what life in the middle ages was like. If you become really interested in misericords you will come to appreciate the wonderful carving and discover the great wealth of subjects they portray. These vary from grizzly monsters to men-at-arms, figures on horseback, huge fish, mermaids, lions and other rare beasts, green men, old musical instruments and many other odd and unusual subjects. But you will have to travel outside Oxfordshire to see many of these.



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LANGFORD: ST MATTHEW

LOOK UP TO SEE A VERY RARE EARLY CARVING

If often pays to look up when you approach an old church, and never more so than in the case of St Matthews Langford.

If you make it on foot or by bike across the flatlands of south-west Oxfordshire for Ride + Stride you will be following in the footsteps of the many thousands who have visited this celebrated church over the years.

So look up and view what is probably the greatest treasure in this great storehouse of stone, much of which dates from the Saxon period.

It is a square stone sculpture midway down on the south side and experts think it supported a sundial that some believe to date from before the Norman Conquest in 1066. It shows two dancing figures facing one another and cut in low relief. They have short beards and are wearing what look like kilts. Their raised arms used to support the semi-circular sundial but this has largely worn away over the years. It is said that a small part of the metal section above

existed until 1886, but this is not there now.

A sundial dating from the period before the Norman Conquest – Saxon times – is incredibly rare.

The church is also famous for possessing – also outside – two stone sculptures, believed to date from the the 900s –that you won't see anywhere else in England. Again, they are quite likely pre-Conquest. Both sculptures show Jesus, one of them with two other figures. You can see them set into the walls of the south porch

Inside I suggest you walk slowly through the massive crossing between nave and chancel, turn round and look back. It is an enormous structure and experts think this site was an important Christian centre well before the Norman Conquest

Before you go try to get a copy of the very helpful little guidebook. It will explain a lot more about the treasures of this church, including the two outside sculptures.

And can you spot the unusual wall plaque dated 1691 that begins: ***"Within this little Howse..." Whom***



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was it commemorating?

With its extreme old age and wealth of unusual features this church is one of the most exceptional buildings in Oxfordshire.

If you plan going there be sure to take binoculars so you can take a close look at that very rare sundial!





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NORTH LEIGH: ST MARY

SOME FASCINATING TELLTALE ROOFLINES

People who make a hobby of going round old churches and discovering their secrets are often known as church crawlers.

It's a strange name because one of the first things church crawlers are taught is to walk round the outside of the church and observe. It would certainly be odd if you were to spot, on your travels, a whole group of people crawling on their hands and knees right round the outside of an old church!

The church of St Mary, North Leigh is highly recommended to Ride and Striders. The reason will soon become apparent.

If you go be sure to walk round the outside first. Stop on the path as you approach from the road and look carefully at the tower. Then walk to the other side (the west) of the church, walk onto the grass, and observe again.

Can you see a similar feature high up on both these sides of the tower?

Yes, you can. It is a V-shaped piece of continuous stone, the shape of the roof and a few feet above the present roof line.

Do you know what this shows? Well, if you have already been to St Mary's, which, incidentally, is a magnificent church in a wonderful position on a hillside looking over the Evenlode Valley, you will probably have guessed correctly. The V-shapes indicate an old roof line.

So what happened? The answer is that the tower, which is very old and thought to date from soon after the year 1000, was once at the centre of the building and the roof ridges were higher.

How do we know the tower was built 50 years or so before the Norman Conquest?

Well, look at the blocked-up openings.

Can you see the outlines of several small round-headed windows?

These are reckoned to be pre-conquest and would have been without glass and closed by using shutters. Window glass was rare in Saxon times. On the west side just below the former roof line you can see a blocked-up high doorway. These



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odd doorways high up are a strange feature found only in churches of the Saxon period. Experts are divided as to what they were for.

If you stand on churchyard grass on this west side and look very carefully you can also see the outline of a wide archway that led westwards from the tower. The wall that blocks this former opening is now occupied by a tall pointed window.

All this evidence is that this tower was at the centre of the pre-Norman, or Saxon church.

So now you know what a Saxon tower looks like you may like to seek out others in Oxfordshire. I won't give too much away, but next time you are in central Oxford why not take a close look at the tower of the church of St Michael-at-the-Northgate?

Now enter this splendid country church. You will discover a startling interior. It contains a wealth of features that provide much that is of interest to church. crawlers of all shapes and sizes.





SHORTHAMPTON: ALL SAINTS

DID YOU KNOW THERE IS A PATRON SAINT OF HOUSEWORK?

This ancient small church on the River Evenlode, a couple of miles to the west of Charlbury, is full of exciting wallpaintings. Can you spot the one dedicated to St Zita, the patron saint of housework?

Clue: look near the windows and see if there are any copies of the very helpful little guide book to hand.





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SOUTH NEWINGTON: ST PETER AD VINCULA

A COMIC STRIP IN A CHURCH?

Unlikely? Maybe, but try the church of St Peter ad Vincula at South Newington near Banbury.

This little church contains some of the finest wall paintings of any church in Britain, and amongst the finest is the comic horror strip depicting the murder in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 of Archbishop Thomas a Becket. One of the four knights sent by King Henry II is seen slicing off the crown of his head and revealing his brains. Blood is spraying everywhere.

What is especially remarkable is that the head of St Thomas has not been defaced, because King Henry VIII, in his battle with the Church, ordered that all pictures of the saint's head should be disfigured. This particular head escaped because it had already been covered over in medieval times. This alone makes it very rare.

But this is not all. Almost as gory is the painting to the east of the Becket martyrdom.

It is the execution of the man who led a rebellion against King Edward II, Thomas Plantaganet, Earl of Lancaster. Poor old Lancaster had the misfortune of having an inexperienced axeman, and it took several attempts to separate his head from his body. The executioner's frenzied attempts are well depicted, with blood spouting from wounds in Thomas's neck. It is a spine-chilling picture

Can you also find, in this church full of paintings, the crane (bird) which represented the Cranford family, lords of the manor from the 13th to the 15th century, or the lion on the shield of the appropriately named William le Scissor, who was King Henry III's tailor and had land in South Newington? Can you also find an eagle in the same window?



SPARSHOLT: CHURCH OF THE HOLY ROOD

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!

Part One

Just imagine it. The date is 1350 and you are on the run. You have been accused of the theft of food from your neighbour's house and there is a hue and cry. The villagers are after you. You might be killed, or at least badly injured.

What do you do? You run to the nearest church that offers the right of sanctuary and if you make it in advance of your pursuers you stay in there for up to 40 days unharmed. During this time you you hope to use the good offices of a community leader – probably the priest – to negotiate on your behalf.

If that doesn't work and the matter is thought to be more serious you can submit to trial and take the consequences. The alternative is to confess and leave the kingdom, swearing never to return without the King's permission. The system of church sanctuary lasted until the 1700s

The immunity from arrest started as soon as the fugitive touched the sanctuary knocker. Not all churches had one, but the amazing thing is that if you are standing at the ancient church door at Sparsholt near Wantage it is by pulling on the sanctuary ring that you will more than likely let yourself in.

The ring is photographed here. It is not the only fantastic thing to be seen in this wonderful church that lies beneath the Downs.

When you are in the chancel take a look upwards. Can you see a carving in stone depicting a kneeling man with a dog on his back tugging at the man's hair?

What can you see happening in the other carvings above you? Why are they there?

You could fill a small book answering the last question. These are corbels – brackets. They support something – often the roof – and are seen both inside and outside the church. They are frequently carved, often with rather wild and often grotesque figures and designs.



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SPARSHOLT: CHURCH OF THE HOLY ROOD

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!

Part Two

Before you go take a look at the three extremely rare wooden effigies – two are female – dating to the 14th century. They are situated in the north transept. Less than 100 of these wooden effigies are said to remain in English parish churches. Can you see the lion carved at the foot of the male figure?

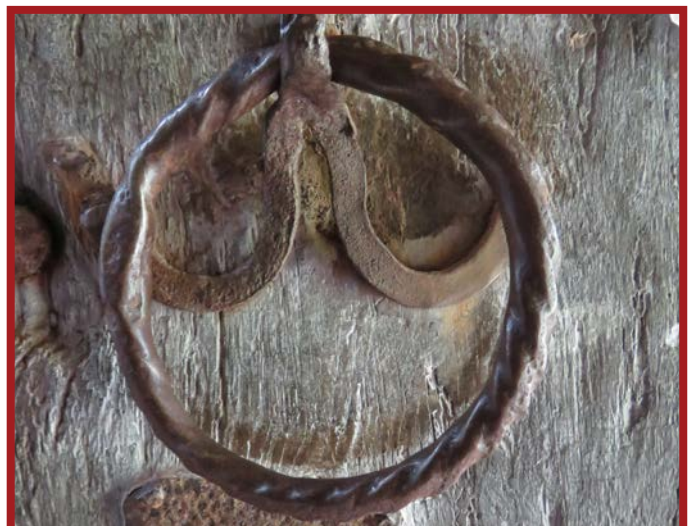
There is also some wonderful early medieval stained glass.

Finally, can you find the (SEE PIC) the game of the Nine Men's Morris board scratched on a soft piece of stone to the right of the ancient door on the south side of the chancel? It is rather fun to wonder what the fine nobles who paid for these lovely tombs would have made of this. Nine Mens Morris was a popular medieval game, played on a board like later generations might play chequers or chess. Again, this is incredibly old. If this design was made for playing the game it must have been made when the stone it is carved into was in a

horizontal position and before it was placed in this wall in the early 1300s. Phew!



Sparsholt: The outline of the game of Nine Men's Morris, scratched on a soft piece of stone on the side of an old door on the south side of the chancel



The ancient sanctuary ring on the door of Sparsholt church



STANTON HARCOURT: THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL

A RARE 'WARS OF THE ROSES' STANDARD

Part One

Are you fascinated by the Wars of the Roses, the conflict that raged all over England between the years 1455 and 1485 and divided many families in their loyalties because some decided to follow the White Rose – the Yorkist party – and others the Red Rose – the House of Lancaster?

It was Henry Tudor, who defeated the Yorkist King Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 that eventually unified the country and adopted the Tudor rose – a combination of the Red and the White Rose – as his heraldic emblem.

Why all this? Well, because if you visit St. Michael's Church, Stanton Harcourt, packed with splendid examples of English history if ever a church was, you will be able to see a grandfather and grandson who were divided in this way, hanging on the wall in the special Harcourt Chapel, there remains of the standard of the founder of the Tudor Dynasty, the future King Henry VII.

If your ride or stride brings you to this church you will find the unusual spectacle of a locked chapel dedicated to the members of a great dynastic family buried there. The chapel is locked because it has been subject to vandalism. It contains a great rarity – the remains of the standard carried at the Battle of Bosworth by Sir Robert Harcourt, the standard bearer to the victorious Henry, Earl of Richmond, at the Battle of Bosworth. His effigy lies to the left of the altar, wearing the double S badge of the Lancastrians. Above him lies the tattered standard. On the other side of the altar lies his grandfather, Sir Robert Harcourt, a prominent member of the Yorkist party, who died in a skirmish with the Lancastrians in 1470.

There are several more great rarities in this extraordinary church. They include the shrine to St Edburg, an Anglo-Saxon saint from the 7th century, which was rescued in 1537 from Bicester Priory before the building was destroyed by King Henry VIII's men.



STANTON HARCOURT: THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL

A RARE 'WARS OF THE ROSES' STANDARD

Part Two

The wooden screen that divides the nave from the chancel, punctuated at its lower level by all manner of odd-shaped openings, is thought to be the oldest in Oxfordshire.

Can you find out, by walking around the church, approximately how old the screen is, what is the purpose of the mysterious holes in it, and who was Alexander Pope, who wrote an inscription carved in stone on the outside south wall of the church.

(Clue: Hewett and Drew)?



The Harcourt Chapel



STANTON ST JOHN: ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

THE STORY OF A STONE

Now here's a remarkable story for you. It will involve riding or walking to the very beautiful church of St John the Baptist at Stanton St John, to the north-east of Oxford.

The story concerns the altar, a huge, and incredibly heavy, solid slab of stone that is believed to date from the 1300s.

Tradition has it that it was thrown out into the churchyard in the 1600s at the time of the Civil war between the Cavaliers and the Roundheads. Somehow it came to be used as a tombstone in the 1700s, then later it somehow found its way into the nave of the church. Members of the church congregation, in the way that things happened in those days, decided to use it as a paving slab.

In 1867 it was thrown out again, to be left standing at the rear of the building until the 1950s, when it was restored to its rightful position and reconsecrated.

An amazing story indeed!

The unfortunate thing is that you will not be able to examine the altar stone closely without permission because it is covered with an altar cloth.

However, if you get to this church on Ride and Stride day there may be a steward there who will permit you to remove the cloth and see the stone altar (correctly called a mensa) close up

If that is the case you will see that the massive stone - how on earth it was moved outside the church and then in again remains a mystery to this day - has its original five consecration crosses. You can read about consecration crosses in the sections on Uffington (external examples) and Cassington (internal examples) in this series of articles. As well as finding consecration crosses on church internal and external walls however they can also be found on stone altars. You may have to look very closely, but they almost invariably have five engraved crosses one at each corner and one in the centre.

The stone altar at Stanton St John is a very fine example. Hopefully you will get an opportunity to look for the five crosses.



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STANDLAKE: ST GILES

CAN YOU WORK OUT THESE MYSTERIES?

This church has an extraordinary number of former gaps in the stonework that have been filled in.

Take a walk round the outside and round the back of the chancel alone you will see a blocked door and two blocked windows, including a very ornate one.

That is three for a start. ***How many more can you find?***

Now try to work out why they have been filled in. Then, if you feel really adventurous, read the guidebook and try to work out the answers! It's fun!

A final thought. As you are leaving the building stop inside the porch and

take a hard look at the walls. Any idea why there are so many scratchings lower down on both side walls?

The answer appears to be unknown, but if you take a look at the style the porch is built in it dates from the 1500s. The 1530s and 1540s were a time of great strife in the country because King Henry VIII ordered great destruction in many of the church buildings, which were all Roman Catholic up until this time. It was also a time of new beginnings – particularly in education.

Now- just suppose the porch was used as a schoolroom. There is some evidence for this. Firstly, it is known that many church porches were at some stage used for the purpose of teaching the children and young people of the village. Secondly, it is known that there was a school somewhere in Standlake



The writing on the wall. Are these the scribbles of village children who were learning to read and write in the 1550s when the porch might have been used as the village schoolroom?



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in 1672. There is also a letter dated 1846 in which the curate at the time wrote to the Oxford colleges holding land there stating that the only school in Standlake was a small school for boys 'held in the church'.

Do all those faint scratchings on the porch walls represent the attempts of village children to learn reading and writing all those years ago?





SWINBROOK: ST. MARY

SOME VERY FAMOUS TOMBS

Part One:

How good a junior church explorer are you?

If you go to the small (but famous) church of St. Mary at Swinbrook, in the Windrush Valley near Burford and take a walk around the outside you might notice a rather odd flat stone projection on the north side and occupying most of the length of the chancel.

Why is it there?

Now enter the building and all will be revealed.

All along the chancel north wall and lying in tiers one above the other, and bathed in light from the large east window are the most sumptuous monuments to six reclining gentlemen in armour. They represent six generations of the same family – the Fettiplaces.





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SWINBROOK: ST. MARY

SOME VERY FAMOUS TOMBS

Part Two:

The left hand monument is the earlier of the two and was commissioned by Edmund Fettiplace (died 1613) for himself, his father and his grandfather. The right hand monument was commissioned by another Edmund Fettiplace, who died in 1686, for himself and his father and uncle.

The Fettiplaces were local grandees, a branch of a famous family that owned land and houses in many parts of Oxfordshire and Berkshire between the 13th and 18th centuries.

This church also has a rather odd tower. ***Why is it odd? Can you discover the date when it was built?***





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UFFINGTON: ST MARY

AN ALMOST COMPLETE SET OF EXTERNAL CONSECRATION CROSSES

The large parish church at Uffington in the Vale of White Horse – St Mary's – is well known for many reasons.

It is almost an exact small-scale replica of Salisbury Cathedral. I say 'almost' because the spire collapsed in a storm in 1740 and was rebuilt slightly differently in 1746. It is possible that this large parish church was built by the same team of masons that worked on Salisbury Cathedral. This theory is thought plausible because of some of the very grand features incorporated in the building, which is often called 'The Cathedral of the Vale.'

It has a famous interior, but if you pay a visit on Ride and Stride Day take a walk round the exterior and count the round 'holes' in the walls. When you get to 11 you will have spotted them all.

But what are they? And why are they here at Uffington? Do you see similar features on the outside of other churches.

The answer is that they are the remains of exterior consecration

crosses, 12 markers placed there and anointed by the bishop who originally consecrated the church with holy water as a form of blessing. In most Christian churches there would also have been 12 interior painted crosses, often high up on the walls, and similarly anointed with holy water.

It is quite rare nowadays to find interior painted consecration crosses, although quite a lot of ancient churches still have one or two that are still visible. However, exterior consecration crosses and round stone markings such as the 11 at Uffington are very rare.

The Uffington exterior consecration crosses were cut out of sheets of metal and fixed in the centre of the round stone circles. You can clearly see (see photo) the holes where the metal crosses were fixed to the stone. Over the years the metal has been stolen or worn away, but the places where these crosses were fixed to the walls, some 700 years ago remain.

The presence of these 11 remnants of the 12 consecration crosses that would have originally have been there is another reason why Uffington church is rather special and a very good reason for visiting it on Ride and



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Stride day.

...

Sir John Betjeman, former Poet Laureate, critic and architectural campaigner, loved this church and was a regular worshipper and church warden here during some of the 11 years he lived in Uffington.

Betjeman was an expert on churches and wrote about them a great deal. He was almost certainly the inventor of the phrase 'church crawling' for those who make a hobby of exploring old churches, and he wrote many poems on the subject. In 1954 he wrote Diary of a Church Mouse.

It ends

"it's strange to me

How very full the church can be

With people I don't see at all

Except at Harvest Festival"

As a newly-fledged church crawler it's possible you might spot the odd church mouse during your travels on Ride and Stride day!





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WATERPERRY: ST MARY THE VIRGIN

A TRULY AMAZING INTERIOR

The small church of St Mary the Virgin is hidden away in the grounds of Waterperry House, and for that reason alone is a delightful place to visit on Ride and Stride Day. You don't have to pay to go into the gardens and you don't have to buy anything at the shop. In addition there is a cafe where you can get refreshments. Altogether a delightful place to visit!

The exterior of this church is not hugely appealing. The wooden tower looks slightly dull compared to the rest of the building, and when you go inside you will see that this is indeed the case, because St Mary's Waterperry has one of the most exciting church interiors in Oxfordshire.

When you gaze at the arch that separated the main body of the building (nave) from the east end (chancel) you will see there are, in fact, two arches. The pointed one lies beneath the older, rounded arch, which dates from before the Norman Conquest and means that the original church on the site was Saxon.

I have mentioned a lot of Saxon work in Oxfordshire churches like Swalcliffe near Banbury, and St Michaels at the Northgate, Oxford as well as major Oxfordshire Saxon churches like Langford, Bampton and North Leigh.

Gradually by reading these short articles and visiting these churches you will be able to recognise the features that indicate these churches were built before the Norman Conquest. In the case of Waterperry the partly blocked rounded arch clearly visible above the later pointed arch indicates that there was probably a small pre-Conquest church that was later altered in Norman times. The stonework on either side of the arch, alternate long vertical and short horizontal stones, also gives a strong clue that this is Saxon -that is, built before the Norman Conquest.

Waterperry also has some fascinating monuments, mainly to the Fitz Elys, who held land from the twelfth century until the 16th. There is also some extremely old and wonderfully coloured glass, especially again the glass to the Fitz Elys in the south window above their tomb.



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But its greatest treasure lies beneath the larger of the red carpets on the floor of the nave. This is the brass memorial to Walter and Isabel Curson, whose descendants held the manor of Waterperry. Eight tiny sons huddle together below the male figure. And you can see the spot where the brass memorial to seven daughters used to lie just beside it.

Fifteen children! But that is not the main reason for the excitement that this brass creates so much interest. The reason for the excitement is that this brass has been reused. It began its life in a London church in the middle 1400s but was at some stage taken up, sold on and reused about 100 years later by the person creating the brass for the Cursons in the 1530s

The top half of the brass to Isabel Curson was made on the reverse side of the original. That original is now face down on the floor, but you can see what the original brass looks like as there is a moulded copy of it just on the other side of the chancel arch on the right. If you look carefully at the female figure you can clearly see a thin line around her waist. It marks where the brass was cut in order to put in place the new top half.

I wonder what other tricks they got up to in those distant days!





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WEST HANNEY: ST JAMES

SOME VERY FINE CHURCH BRASSES

The church of St James, West Hanney, near Wantage is fascinating for a number of reasons, so do try to call in there if you are in that area on Ride and Stride Day.

Can you find the monument to a lady who died in 1718 at the age of '124 years'? What was her name?

The church is famous for its brasses, one of the finest collections in this part of England.

Church brasses are a form of memorial. They are flat metal plates, engraved with a figure or figures and an inscription and were usually fixed fixed to a large upright square tomb, the floor or sometimes a wall in memory of local gentry.

The brasses in Hanney are in the chancel. You are welcome to go through the altar rail and look at them as long as you do not stand on them, because this could cause damage and the brasses are irreplaceable.

You can easily tell which is the oldest brass because of the dress of the subject. He is Rector John Seys, he is

in full mass vestments and the brass dates from 1376 so it is nearly 650 years old! This brass is on the north side of the chancel.

The other brasses are later and experts say they are of unusually high quality for their dates. Can you find the brass with a lion with two tails depicted on it? And can you count the total number of children that feature in the brasses? There are ten sons and four daughters depicted on one of them.

It is also interesting to study the style of dress in the brasses. The ruffs worn by the ladies and gentlemen and the ladies' headgear places most of them in the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1, though some of the people depicted died shortly after, in the reign of King James 1.



The oldest brass in the sanctuary at St James, West Hanney. It depicts Rector John Seys in full mass vestments. It dates from 1376



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WHEATFIELD: ST ANDREW

A CHURCH ALL ALONE IN A FIELD

Why should a small parish church stand all alone in a field? That is the question you might like to try and answer if your meanderings on Ride and Stride Day take you to Wheatfield, four miles south of Thame and close to the M40.

The church of St Andrew is a charming little building, set on a parkland slope dotted with beautiful trees and in the lee of the Chilterns.

So why is it all on its own?

You will have to walk across a field to get to the church. As you walk take a look at the humps and bumps in the unploughed ground and think. ***Do they suggest anything to you?***

They are, in fact, indications that buildings once surrounded the church.

Yes! You've got it! The church once stood in the centre of a village, but the village has gone.

There is insufficient space here to explain the demise of the village, which was once a thriving farming community, but it is known that in 1801 there were 89 inhabitants and that a great fire took place at the nearby manor house on New Year's Day 1814.

The fire destroyed the great house and all that remains are some outbuildings and the former rectory.

The church, originally medieval, has a delightful interior, with some interesting monuments and lovely furnishings. It is often kept locked, but hopefully it will be open on 9th September.

Wheatfield – what remains of it – is a place full of atmosphere and mystery. Fascinating!