



# Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

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## **The Thames Path: Iffley, Sandford on Thames, and Radley** **A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles**

*A walk of just over 9 miles, from Folly Bridge to Radley via the Thames Path, crossing the river at the locks to visit St Mary's Church, Iffley and St Andrew's Church, Sandford on Thames, before the final destination of St James the Great, Radley. The walking time is about 4 hours, before adding on at least 10 minutes to look round each church, and perhaps more time to break for lunch at one of the pubs in Iffley or Sandford. There are also a couple of nature reserves adjacent to the Thames Path that would be worth stopping for. Or why not, when in Oxford, call into the Cathedral? This could easily be an enjoyable whole-day excursion.*

### **The route**

The walk is planned to end at Radley (there is a railway station there as well as frequent buses between Oxford and Abingdon), but the energetic could walk back to Oxford via the Thames Path (walking upstream gives you a variety of different views), on continue down the 3 miles or so to Abingdon by the same route. Somewhat frustratingly, you need two maps to cover the route: OS 180 for Oxford to Sandford, and OS 170 (Vale of the White Horse) for Radley.

Walk down St Aldates to Folly Bridge, and turn left down the steps leading to the Thames Path to walk downstream. At this point, path and river can be quite busy: the river with rowers and the path with walkers and cyclists (including the occasional coach monitoring a rower's style). On the further bank, a view of trees and water meadows gives way to a bank of boathouses with the arms of various colleges. After about twenty minutes you pass on your right a path leading to Longbridges Nature Reserve (note, these are water meadows, and after wet weather don't belie the name). Follow the path on under Donnington Bridge, and shortly after you will see on the river bank a warning about the weir, the first sign that you are approaching Iffley Lock. The square tower of St Mary's can just be seen lifting above the trees on the further bank. At this point you have covered just over one and a half miles.

At Iffley Lock, to see the church, cross the river and follow the path just over a quarter of a mile or so uphill to Mill Lane. Go up a short flight of steps and bear right; at the top of the lane you will find the entrance to the churchyard directly on your right. You can then, after looking at the church, either spend a little time in Iffley village, or go back down to the river, recross, and continue downstream on the Thames Path to Sandford on Thames (just over two and a half miles distant). To the right are Iffley Meadows, a BBOWT nature reserve noted in spring for a show of fritillaries. In May 2024, much of it is still waterlogged.

The path continues under the A423 section of the southern bypass and then passes beneath the railway. Beyond this, you come to the 'Fishes Gate', a metal gate with an elegant design of fish. At this point, you could take a right turn and walk up into Kennington, or continue on as I did on the Thames Path. Crossing an open water meadow, you go through a gate to a narrower wooded section of the path, the original gravelled surface of which has largely worn away: the first sign that you are c



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## **The route**

coming to a stretch where mud and wide puddles may require more careful negotiation (and a slower walking pace).

At the 'Fiddler's Elbow' set of islands the river divides and the Thames Path takes you left across a bridge to walk on down to Sandford. The final stretch is easier walking along an open grassy bank. At Sandford Lock, cross the bridge and follow the path through the garden of the King's Arms and car park to the road; turn left. Follow the footway up the hill and round. As you come round the final curve you see a long stone wall, and the entrance to St Andrew's Church is at the end.

The walk is likely to take about fifteen minutes each way, excluding time spent in the church, or indeed for taking refreshment at the pub.

Crossing back across the river, there is a choice between taking a lane up to Kennington (you could I think walk by road to Radley) or continuing on the Thames Path. I guessed that this stretch was most likely to be waterlogged and need careful walking, but decided that it was worth trying. This turned out to be a reasonable assessment, although there were points where it was a little challenging. My guide to The Thames Path in the Country calls this a 'lush, wild stretch' and says that 'the narrow path can be slippery in the wet', both of which assessments I would endorse.

I certainly had no regrets about continuing with the Path, but it was pleasing to reach the gate leading into the grounds around the boat houses of Radley College. Walking across the open ground, I turned up the lane, and at the top found a sign requesting you to 'Drive Carefully Through the Village' as well (more usefully from my perspective) a signpost to the right for the railway station. This stretch of lane ran down to a mini traffic island, with a green signpost indicating that the left turn was the required route. At the top of this lane, another sign takes you to the right. Walk up and over a railway bridge, and you come to a T junction with what is in fact Church Lane. Turn right, and follow up to its junction with the main Oxford to Abingdon road—and St James the Great, Radley, which stands on the corner. (For information, the distance from the Thames Path is just over one and a half miles.) Very pleasingly for me, a bus stop for the frequent Oxford-Abingdon 35 bus stands directly outside the church. I caught a bus back to Oxford City Centre, but an energetic person who wanted a much longer walk could go back to the Thames Path and either walk another 3 miles down to Abingdon, or simply walk back to Oxford. And the railway station provides another option.

Whatever choice you make, this is a walk with enticing churches that I would thoroughly recommend.

*By Elizabeth Knowles*



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## About the churches

All three churches are well worth visiting, and each has memorable features. St Mary's, Iffley, is an astonishing example of twelfth-century Romanesque architecture, with beakhead decoration and carvings of the lion, ox, eagle, and man to emblems of the apostles Mark, Luke, John, and Matthew, as well as other Christian symbols.

St Mary's is one of the jewels of Romanesque architecture among Oxfordshire's churches, but there are also modern additions to its furnishings that are worth spending time with. The 'Flowering Tree', a stained-glass window by Roger Wagner, shows the crucified Christ hanging on a blossoming tree with a river gushing from its roots. Angels guard the new aumbry by Nicholas Mynheer, and Wagner and Mynheer together designed the new font cover with a crystal dove at its heart, set in a circle of black marble with cut-out shapes of leaves. Around the rim run the words, 'The old has passed away Behold the new is born if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation.' It's also moving to notice the personal memorials – I liked the one to an eighteenth-century man who lived as a 'simple gentleman' and was a 'father to the fatherless' and a 'neighbour to widows'.

St Andrew's, Sandford-on-Thames was apparently once a 'modest' medieval building, but was added to in the nineteenth century, with what Pevsner calls an 'aggressively "Norman"' west tower' replacing a wooden structure in 1840, and a north aisle and new nave roof built in 1865. The porch is actually seventeenth-century, and has a tablet over it commending the benefactress, Eliza Isham, with the inscription 'Thankes to thy charitie religiose dame, which found mee old and made mee new againe'.

Inside, the church has a welcoming feel, and I was struck by how carefully memorials of the past have been preserved: the walls of the west tower deplored by Pevsner are studded with memorial tablets. The chancel houses what is presumably a particular treasure: a medieval alabaster relief of the Virgin. However, what really caught my eye was the war memorial on the south wall of the nave, or to be precise, the wording on the brass plate below it. This reads, 'This War Shrine was Dedicated by the Archdeacon of Oxford on Whitsun Day May 27th 1917 during the Great War. After remaining for more than two Years on a wall in this Parish, it was removed to the Parish Church in August 1919.'

I had never heard of a 'war shrine', or a memorial (other than one honouring an individual) set up during the course of the First World War. Further research, however, revealed a piece of wartime history. According to the Times of 16 October 1916, a 'war shrine' outside St Mark's Church, Kennington, was unveiled 'on Saturday afternoon by the Bishop of Kingston in the presence of a crowd'. The Bishop read aloud a message from Queen Alexandra saying that she had heard 'with much interest that the first of the war shrines inaugurated by the Evening News' was to be dedicated. There must, therefore, have been a specific campaign to have such shrines set up. (I wonder if some of the impetus had come from accounts of wayside shrines seen in France and Flanders?) Certainly, going by reports in the Times for 1916 and 1917, there must have been quite a number—mainly in London and the Home Counties, but there was one reported in Yarmouth.



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## **Three Churches by the Windrush: Cogges, Ducklington, and Witney**

A 'War Shrines Exhibition' (perhaps with ideas for design?) was held at Selfridges on 27 October 1916. In November 1916 the schoolboys of Chalfont St Giles were reported to be raising funds for a war shrine 'by the collection and sale of waste paper'. The shrines (unlike many war memorials) may well have recorded the names of those from a district who served as well as those who were killed; the description of the war shrine at Hale, Farnham reads, 'In the centre panel of the shrine appear the names of 56 men who have made the supreme sacrifice, and the outer panels contain the record of 820 men who voluntarily answered their country's call.' I think a similar pattern was followed at Sandford, since there are two lists of names: the longest at top, in two columns to each side of the crucifix, and a much shorter two-column list below, headed 'RIP 1914—1918'. Altogether I found it a fascinating sidelight on the First World War, and one I had never come across before. I wonder how many war shrines survived as this one does, and how many were simply superseded by official War Memorials?

*St James the Great, Radley*, with its low west tower, is another medieval church (if you visit it in springtime, the churchyard is studded with primroses). A south aisle was added in the fourteenth century, and inside this is divided off not by stone pillars but by a wooden arcade. (According to *Sherwood's Guide to the Churches of Oxfordshire* (1989) a similar aisle and north chancel were destroyed in the Civil War, when the church, fortified by Royalist troops, was attacked by Parliamentary forces.) Apparently at one time it would also have had an oak chancel arch, but this was replaced in a 1902 restoration. The notes on the church provided inside point out that at one time the interior would have seemed darker than it does now, but a major infestation of death watch beetle in 2008 necessitated the removal of a good deal of dark wood—there are new lighter oak chairs, a stone floor, and a number of replacement uprights. One of these had a feature I have never seen before, and rather liked. To commemorate what must have been a major and most expensive enterprise, there is a brass plate on one of the replacement uprights. Beside it, the carpenters who installed the new woodwork have placed a carving, showing a death-watch beetle. I thought that was rather a stylish response to what have must felt a disaster.

The great nineteenth-century benefactor of *St James* was Admiral Sir George Bowyer (there are a number of wall tablets commemorating various members of the Bowyer family). He presented the church with choir stalls (complete with misericords) from Cologne, and gave too a good deal of sixteenth-century heraldic glass which was set in the windows. On a sunny day, the colours are strikingly rich. Another example of early woodwork, which fortunately (like the choir stalls) escaped the depredations of the death-watch beetle, is the wooden canopy over the stone pulpit. This according to *Sherwood* was presented in 1653 by William Lenthall, Speaker of the Long Parliament, and is said to have come from the Speaker's chair at the House of Commons. I have no idea of how unusual (or frequent) it would have been for something like that to happen, but of course Speaker Lenthall was in a sense reasonably local, since he lived at was then Besselsleigh Manor.

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## **About the author**

*Elizabeth Knowles is a renowned library researcher and historical lexicographer who devoted three decades of her career to Oxford University Press. Her time at OUP began with contributions to the OED Supplement and the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Subsequently, she spearheaded the Quotations publishing program, solidifying her reputation as a leading expert in quotations and lexicography.*

*In 1999, Knowles assumed the prestigious role of Editor of the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, a position she held continuously until her retirement from OUP in 2007. Under her editorial guidance, the eighth edition was published in 2014, marking a significant milestone in the dictionary's history.*

*Knowles is a prolific writer and lecturer on the history of quotations and dictionaries. She has shared her extensive knowledge with both academic and general audiences, significantly enhancing our understanding of the role of quotations in language.*

*Beyond her work on the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, Knowles is also the editor of "What They Didn't Say: A Book of Misquotations" (2006) and "How To Read a Word" (2010). Her work continues to inspire and inform scholars, writers, and readers fascinated by the English language.*