



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964

Town and Country: Thame and Towersey **A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles**

A walk of approximately six miles between Thame and Towersey, incorporating visits to their respective churches, can be comfortably completed in around four hours. However, the rich history and architectural interest of both churches, as well as the charming town of Thame, warrant a more leisurely exploration. The walking is gentle, with predominantly level paths and only a few stiles. While there are sections of road walking, the main stretch is along a quiet single-track lane.

The route

If you walked directly without diverging between these two churches it would be about six miles, but the interest of Thame itself, and allowing yourself to break off for refreshment from one of its eateries, can easily add another mile or so to the total. You could do it quite easily in four hours, but I'd allow another for enjoying the route.

The route itself is very straightforward for walking: no stiles to negotiate, and a clear track marked. I like to have an Ordnance Survey 'Explorer' map with me; a little annoyingly, for this route you need two, both the 180 and the 181. Thame is well served by buses from Oxford on the Aylesbury route (280, X20), which can be caught in Oxford High Street at the stop just below Turl Street. Get off in Thame in the Upper High Street, the first stop after you pass the turn to Church Lane on your left. Walk back, and turn down into Church Lane. St Mary's Church is at the far end.

On leaving, return to the High Street, cross, walk a little further up towards the town centre, and then turn right down Southern Road. Follow the road as it curves round to the left, and then take a right turn into Moreton Lane. At this point Elms Park Playground is on your right. Walk down to the end of Moreton Lane, through the built-up area, and past the 'dead end' sign where the lane narrows. After a short distance you come to an intersection with the 'Phoenix Trail', National Cycle Route 57. A blue signpost tells you that you are $\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the town centre, and the left-hand fingerpost indicates that it is 2 miles to Towersey (and 7 to Princes Risborough). Turn left in this direction and follow the track. The Phoenix Trail at this point is a broad straight tarmacked route running between verges with long grasses and bushes. In origin, it follows the line of the old Thame to Princes Risborough railway. At intervals, you will come across artworks inspired by the railway connection and the local landscape.

In the course of the first mile or so you pass under a couple of road bridges: for the B4012 and the B4415 respectively. Shortly after the second you will see ahead that you are coming to the Ring Road; fortunately there is also a pedestrian crossing controlled by lights. Cross and walk on, passing the sign that marks the perimeter to Thame. Shortly after that you begin to see roofs on the left, and then come to the point at which you need to leave the track, just before it crosses a bridge over a road. An encouraging sign 'Great British pub this way' indicates a (not too steep) footpath on the left leading down to the roadside. Walk down it, turn left, and walk up towards the village. (At this point there is no footway, so be careful of traffic.)



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The route

To the right after a short distance there is a sign for the Three Horseshoes, set back from the road. Walking on past it, you arrive at a crossroads. Go straight across, and you are in Church Lane. St Catherine's, Towersey is on your right at the top, with a pleasing sign at the entrance to the churchyard, 'Church open daily'. After you have seen it, simply retrace your steps back to Thame.

By Elizabeth Knowles

About the churches

St Mary's, Thame

A town church on a grand scale. It is cruciform, with a fine central tower, and inside the rounded piers and pointed arches are elegant and tall. Local magnates of earlier periods enriched it with fine monuments and brasses. Thame has always been important: Buildings of England says that there was an early Mercian foundation belonging to Dorchester diocese that may have been a minster church. Nothing of that is left: what we have dates from the twelfth century and onwards, when Thame was part of Lincoln diocese, and the Bishop of Lincoln was laying out the new town.

Thame flourished, and by the memorials the sixteenth century must have been a particularly successful period. Lord Williams of Thame (d. 1559, and still commemorated in the name of a local school) and his wife Elizabeth have a tomb in the centre of the nave with alabaster effigies. According to BoE, these were damaged in the Civil War, and repaired 'in 1661-2 by William Byrd of Oxford, including new greyhound and unicorn supporters for the effigies'. I liked the unicorn particularly, although it did look to me rather more like a horse. Perhaps the horn has once more been lost. Today there is a careful notice asking you not to touch the memorial in case sweaty fingers damage the alabaster.

The Thame brasses, including the late-medieval brasses of the Quartermain family, are well known, but looking round I was particularly taken with some of the smaller and less famous items. One of these was the brass inlay to the monument to Sir John Clerke (d. 1513), who is shown in his heraldic tabard. According to a helpful caption, he 'fought at the Battle of the Spurs in 1513', where he captured the Duke of Longueville. I confess I had to look up this battle, finding it to be part of that long-running conflict the Italian Wars, and while it's not clear to me how significant the action is, Sir John himself clearly did quite well out of it as regards royal favour. Not far from his monument, there is a later brass commemorating Edward Harris MA (d. 1597), who was the first Headmaster of Lord Williams' Grammar School (he was apparently there for thirty years). According to the notice, 'It is said to be the only brass of a Headmaster in a church.'

St Catherine's, Towersey

A delightful village church at one end of a short avenue of pollarded limes, entering by the south door below the square tower. Inside the church is peaceful and welcoming, with a broad pointed



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chancel arch. The present building dates mainly from the fourteenth century, but there was an extensive nineteenth restoration, including the removal of a bell turret and two-storey porch and the building of the current tower.

According to the guidebook, it was in the thirteenth century that Towersey was joined with Thame to form a new parish; today (having been separate from it in 1841), it is now part of the benefice of 'Thame with Towersey'. It is clearly another church which has always had significant local support: in the nineteenth century the Griffin family were key local benefactors, and Edward Griffin planted the lime avenue and paid for the building of the tower. At the end of the twentieth century, a new stained glass window showing life in rural Towersey was inserted in the north wall of the nave to mark the Millennium.

By Elizabeth Knowles

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.