Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

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A Wallingford Circuit

A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

A walk around Wallingford, a market town rich in history. It would well deserve a little extra time for exploration, from the sections of Saxon burh walls that were once a defence against the Danes, to the remains of the Castle finally demolished by Cromwell (Wallingford was for centuries a key strategic crossing point). In between there are plenty of interesting buildings to look at in this historic market town, and eateries to enjoy.

For anyone who wants a longer walk, this route links to our 'Downstream along the Ridgeway', a route out of Wallingford running from Crowmarsh Gifford to North Stoke.

As usual, I got to Wallingford by bus: the X40 from Oxford is half-hourly, and takes about 50 minutes from Oxford High Street to the centre of Wallingford. But if you drive, there are good parking facilities. The relevant OS Explorer map is no. 170, 'Vale of the White Horse', and following the old county-boundary lines Wallingford is covered in the Pevsner/Buildings of England volume on Berkshire. (Crowmarsh Gifford and the other churches on the east bank of the Thames count as Oxfordshire.)

The route

The walk starts at the south end of Wallingford Market Place with the main town church of St Mary-le-More at the south end. On leaving the church, walk north along St Martin's Street, keeping the Market Square on your right, and use the pedestrian crossing to cross the High Street. Walk straight on down Castle Street, and a short way along you will find the Quaker Meeting House on your left. Directly opposite you will see All Hallows' Cemetery, site of the demolished All Hallows Church.

Walk back to Market Square, cross to the east side (St Mary's Street), and you will see the Roman Catholic Church of St John the Baptist set a little back on the corner of the square. Walk south down St Mary's Street towards St Leonard's Square, passing on your left the Church Office of the Ridgeway Church (the main entrance is from Wood Street, the other side of the building). In St Leonard's Square, where St Martin's Street and St Mary's Street converge, you will see Wallingford Methodist Church at the north end.

Walk on a little further down St Mary's Street, and turn left into the pedestrian footway into St Leonard's Lane, leading down to St Leonard's Church.

Leaving St Leonard's, continue down St Leonard's Lane and on into Thames Street. Walk on down this road until you reach the Baptist Chapel on your left, and then St Peter's Church (in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust) on your right.

From here, it is a short way out into the High Street, turning left, and from there left again into St Mary's Street and so back to the Market Square.

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Or you could extend your walk a little further by crossing the High Street, turning right, and walking down over the bridge across the Thames to visit St Mary Magdalene, Crowmarsh Gifford (For this and a longer walk with other churches along the east bank of the Thames, see 'Downstream along the Ridgeway, Crowmarsh Gifford to North Stoke'.) Or return to Wallingford, and spend a little more time enjoying what it offers

About the churches

St Mary-le-More

The Town Church of Wallingford, flint-built and with a broad stocky west tower. St Mary's was comprehensively rebuilt on older foundations in the nineteenth century, and the tower is in fact now the oldest part of it: it was originally built in 1653 after the former church was struck by lightning. Inside, the church has a spacious feel, with some rich furnishings. There is a marble pulpit (Onslow Ford, 1888) with bronze panels of saints inset, and a rood-screen which was given by 'Miss Hedges, of Wallingford Castle' in memory of her two sisters. Dedicated by the Bishop of Buckingham in 1925, it includes figures of saints associated in some way with the parish: Alban, Birinus, Nicholas, Osmond, and Frideswide.

Friends' Meeting House

A simple brick-built house erected in 1724, set back from Castle Street at the end of a short alley, with sash windows, a brick floor, and a single room without a women's gallery. It stands almost opposite the site of the disused churchyard of All Hallows, a medieval church adjacent to Wallingford Castle which (like the Castle) did not survive the Civil War. The grounds still preserve an early seventeenth-century monument to Thomas Bennett (d. 1616), a local benefactor.

St John the Baptist (RC)

The brick-built St John the Baptist's Church dates from 1799 when it was built as an Independent Chapel; it became a Roman Catholic church in 1924. It was apparently rebuilt behind in 1958, and further refurbished in 2000 (when a meeting room, accessed from Wood Street, was added), but it has retained its Georgian frontage looking out on Market Square.

Ridgeway Community Church

This church was originally built, in 1889, as a Primitive Methodist chapel. It passed into secular use, but was restored to a religious purpose at the end of the twentieth century. Today the main entrance is in Wood Street, and the entrance in St Mary's Street gives access to the church office.

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Methodist Church

Built in 1872-3 of brick and stone. The adjacent building, the former Free Library and Literary Institute (1871) was later annexed to the church, and there is now a glazed link between the two dating from 20-06-7.

St Leonard's, Wallingford

Another church with early origins, although some features (notably the west tower and the south arcade) are from an 1849 restoration. But there is real herringbone masonry on the north side, and inside there are wonderfully impressive tall arches between the nave and the apse. The decoration (with the exception of heads on each side of the inner arch) is geometric, with patterns of stars and saltires, and a basket-weave design on the abaci. I thought the whole effect of the east end astonishing.

Baptist Chapel

The chapel was founded in 1794, and then either rebuilt or enlarged in 1821. It looks almost directly across Thames Street to St Peter's Church on the other side of the road.

St Peter's

St Peter's, now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, is an eighteenth-century building, as is Wallingford Baptist Chapel just opposite. St Peter's was built 1760-9, and its distinctive pierced spire added a few years later, apparently at the behest of the great jurist, Sir William Blackstone (1723-80) as an eyecatcher from Blackstone's home of the Castle Priory. The Blackstone family vault was in St Peter's, and Blackstone himself is buried there. The spire certainly catches the eye, perhaps especially from the bridge as you cross the Thames into Wallingford.

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.

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About the author

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.