Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

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Towards the Downs: Wantage, Letcombe Regis, and Letcombe Bassett
A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

A walk of approximately five miles that can be completed in around three hours, offering the pleasure and interest of an historic market town, two attractive and distinctive village churches, and the opportunity to visit a BBOWT nature reserve. The route offers the alternative of sticking to made surfaces (albeit with some road walking), or taking the footpath through the nature reserve. This makes for an enjoyable walk, but you need to be both mobile and sure-footed.

The route

At the bus stop for the S9 at the west end of Wantage Market Place, walk on down the narrow road that is the continuation of Market Place for the short distance before it intersects with The Cloisters and Church Road. SS Peter and Paul, Wantage, is straight ahead of you. After looking at the church, follow the path across the churchyard and out on to Priory Road. Turn right and walk past St Michael's. At junction with Portway, cross, and take narrow footpath slightly to the right, running uphill, signed for Letcombe Regis (1.2 miles).

At junction, bear right following sign 'To Ridgeway', walk through a wooded stretch, and cross a footbridge. Begin to see open fields to your right, and after that come into open country. A well-placed wooden seat on the left allows you to sit and admire the slope of the cornfield. At the end of the path, exit into Kings Close and walk down to cross the Hungerford to Wantage road into Courthill Road straight ahead. Follow this road down into Letcombe Regis, and at the crossroads you will see St Andrew's, Letcombe Regis on a slight eminence across the road and to your right.

The right turn itself is marked for Letcombe Bassett, so when you have explored the church, return to this road and walk down it. Follow a sharp turn round to the left, and walk on until you reach a turn in to Blandys Farm on your right, and opposite a track down past Blandys Cottage on your left.

Road route

At this point you have a choice. The most direct way to Letcombe Bassett, and certainly the easiest (although after this there is no footway, the road is very quiet) is simply to keep straight on for about a mile. You will walk uphill for a short distance, continue along a flat stretch, drop down to cross a bridge over watercress beds, and finally walk uphill again into Letcombe Bassett. As you come up the final stretch, you will notice a turn into 'Rectory Lane' on your left. Pass this, and shortly after you will come to a second turn to the left with a signpost signalling 'The Downs' and 'Church'. Walk a short way up this road and turn right: you will see steps up to one end of the churchyard, with St Michael and All Angels, Letcombe Bassett at the far end.

Route through Nature Reserve

This makes for a very pleasing footpath walk (and would be especially good in spring and summer when the chalkland flowers are in bloom), but you need to be reasonably mobile and sure-footed for the later section. If you decide to take it, walk down the track by Blandys Cottage, cross a footbridge

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The route

over a clear chalk stream, and bear right as you see the 'Welcome to Letcombe Valley Nature Reserve' sign. Follow a narrow made track running down the right edge of the open land, with trees on your right, and continue across a grassed-over stretch. Exit through a wooden gate straight ahead. (Ignore a gate to your left leading to a 'Wildlife Walk'.) Continue on narrow path running up into woodland. (The footing here is slightly less even.) Looking down to the right you can see the stream you crossed earlier. Leave the copse via a footbridge and come to the slightly more challenging part of the walk. Go up a flight of wooden steps set into the hillside (there is a handrail but they are steepish), go through a gate at the top, and turn right. At this point the path is narrow, muddy in places, and studded with tree roots, so you need to tread carefully. Looking down to the right, you can see the road to which you are walking roughly parallel. Exit finally on to the tarmacked surface of 'Rectory Lane', walk the short distance to the road, turn left, and walk up to the turn signed for 'The Downs' and 'Church' (see above).

There is not a great difference in distance covered and time taken between the two routes, although the road is probably quicker walking. You could choose one or the other, or even make it a circular route from Letcombe Regis to Letcombe Bassett and back. And of course, you could do the road walk, but choose to visit the Nature Reserve on the way. Whatever the choice, from Letcombe Regis you retrace your steps along the footpath to Wantage.

B*y Elizabeth Knowles*

About the churches

SS Peter and Paul, Wantage
A handsome town church which is architecturally quite complicated. Originally a thirteenth-century cruciform church, it was rebuilt and enlarged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and then significantly restored by both Street (1857) and Butterfield (1877). Inside there are some notable brasses, including one of a priest in vestments.

It is always worth, when visiting a church, walking round it and looking at the exterior. If you do so at Wantage, you will find on the north side a (restored) memorial tablet telling you that in 1832 'between this wall and the pathway' the bodies of sixteen people who had died in the epidemic of 'Asiatic cholera' that had ravaged the town. The outbreak was part of a pandemic that spread across the world, reaching Britain in the early 1830s: it must have been devastating to a small community, with the added fear that comes from a previously unknown disease—something we experienced with COVID. The memorial marks what must have been a hugely significant event for Wantage.

St Andrew's, Letcombe Regis
The church consists of nave, chancel, and west tower (the lower stages, which the guide to the church calls Transitional Norman, are the earliest part of the church).

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About the churches

There are elements from a number of centuries (including fragments of fourteenth-century glass set in the east window), but what caught my attention most were memorials.

On the south wall, a tablet commemorating Harriet Ellen Silver (died 1879 at the age of 24) describes a young woman who might have come from the pages of a Charlotte Yonge novel. According to the inscription, it was put up by her grateful fellow parishioners and others 'in token of their sense of her devotion to their best interests and especially those of the young people whom she delighted to instruct in the ways and works of God'.

The other memorials that interested me were brass war memorials commemorating the dead of the First and Second World Wars. Usually the balance of those lost tilts decisively to the First World War, with a much smaller number recorded for 1939-45. In this case, the figures were much closer: 14 to 11. The tablets also record the specific theatres of war: they included Turkey in 1916 (I would assume Gallipoli), Dunkirk in 1940, and (for a Flight Lieutenant in the RAF), the Irish Sea in 1944.

St Michael and All Angels, Letcombe Bassett

The oldest part of this whitewashed church is the Norman chancel; the nave was rebuilt in the fifteenth century, and the west tower added in the thirteenth. When you step inside, there is a feeling of clarity and simplicity, looking east down to the Norman chancel arch, before you notice the south aisle, added by Butterfield in his nineteenth-century restoration.

Coming up to the chancel arch itself (through which you get a good view of Butterfield's characteristic floor tiles and reredos with a marble cross) you see the detailed carving on the abaci of the responds, with clearly defined leaf trails. Within the chancel on the north wall there are marks which look as though there has been some kind of alteration: this signals the (blocked) Norman door into the chancel, which Pevsner says has probably been reset. From the outside, it is well worth looking at, and you can still see close up the four signs of the Evangelists, eagle, man/angel, bull, and lion carved on the faces of the scallops of the four capitals.

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.

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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.