



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

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Below the Ridgeway: Childrey, Sparsholt, and West and East Challow **A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles**

This is really a circular walk with two optional spurs. The route I chose was to use the excellent S9 bus service from Oxford to Wantage and walk from there to Childrey. At that point you can walk a further mile and a quarter west to Sparsholt and back, before bearing north-east to West Challow, and then following the course of the old Wilts and Berks Canal to East Challow. From there, it is slightly over a mile to walk back to Wantage. You might however choose to start from Childrey and walk the circuit from there, or begin and end at Sparsholt. I'd note that of course Wantage is in itself well worth seeing, including the splendid church of SS Peter and Paul (see our '[Towards the Downs](#)' walking route). The OS Explorer 170 map for the Vale of the White Horse is particularly good for this walk; all the paths are well marked, and you can trace the line of the old canal that in its day was such an important means of transport. Walking as I did out from Wantage and back covers between six and seven miles; adding the side trip out to Sparsholt would take it to nearer nine.

The route

Leave Wantage Market Square by Mill Street and walk downhill, passing Wantage Baptist Church on the right. At foot the road curves round to the left past open space 'The Wharf' on right, with Letcombe Brook running along its right side. Across the road on the left what must once have been a warehouse. Continue up the hill, and at the top cross Denchworth Road (being careful of the traffic) and bear round to the left, with the wall of St Mary's Convent on your right. Follow the footway along the A417 road to Faringdon and continue on out of the town. Cross at the pedestrian crossing just before King Alfred's West Site on the left to keep to the footway. Keep straight on with open fields to your left and a view of the downs. The road curves to the right and begins to drop as you come to the sign for East Challow. Take the left-hand turn signed to Letcombe Regis (you are now on Letcombe Hill), cross road, and almost immediately take a right turn up a track leading to a wooded path. It is rough underfoot, and can be slippery. At the top, you reach a built-up area with the junction of Windmill Place on the left and Sarajac Avenue on your right. Keep straight on, passing St Nicholas CoE Primary School, East Challow. Continue on up a bridleway signed for Childrey. Past Cornhill Farm on your right, the track narrows slightly. Looking a little to the right you can see the tower of St Mary's Church, Childrey, in the distance.

Keep straight on, cross a lane (actually running down to West Challow), and a short distance beyond on the right you will see a footpath sign marked 'Childrey ½' directing you to a path running diagonally across the field. Follow its course across this field and the next, and step down on to a grassy path between fences with a stile at the end. Follow the path round the extreme right edge of a property with a hedge on your left between you and the garden, and with a solid wooden fence to your right. The path descends to a point where you can see water to your left, and then rises. Continue up the hill and out on to a gravelled stretch and bear left to reach a lane. (At this point, note a footpath sign to the right marked 'West Challow ½'.) Turn left, and follow the lane down to the green and beyond it the main street. At this point you will have Childrey Methodist Church Centre on your right, and will see the brick-built former Working Men's Club and Reading Room on your left.



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Towards the Downs: Wantage, Letcombe Regis, and Letcombe Bassett

The route

Turn right down the main street, after a short distance passing a turn to your left signposted 'Sparsholt ¼'. Walk on down what is now Church Row, and at the top turn left and walk up to the church, set back on the right-hand side.

When you leave the church, you have a choice. If you wish to extend your walk to take in Sparsholt, take the road indicated by the signpost, and simply follow it down. As you near the village, the road begins to drop ('Pulpit Hill' on the map). Don't be tempted by a footpath across the field to the right marked 'Sparsholt only' as that will take you to the wrong end of the village. Instead walk down to a junction, turn left, and walk up a short distance to the church which is on the left-hand side. Afterwards, simply walk back the way you have come.

If you prefer to leave Sparsholt for another day, then when leaving Childrey, simply retrace your steps and walk along Chapel Way to the footpath sign marked 'West Challow ½'. Walk on to the end of the lane and take the bridleway straight ahead, with a thick hedge on your left and fenced fields on your right. The path runs downhill, and after rain may be slippery or wet in places. At the foot, it crosses what was once the Wilts and Berks Canal. Follow the footpath across a field, and you will notice to your right the double bellcote of St Laurence, West Challow.

The footpath exits on to a lane. Turn left and then take the first right turn and follow the lane round until you come to the church lychgate on your right.

On leaving the church, turn right and walk round the perimeter of the churchyard and back up to the fieldpath leading to the canal. Instead of crossing, turn left and go through a gate marked 'Public Access'. Walk on down the path with the canal course on your right. The path can be a little muddy or slippery in places, but is reasonably broad and flat. Go through a wooden gate to reach the lane running up from West Challow. (From this point the footpath narrows and may be muddy; it is worth noting that in wet weather an alternative would be to follow the lane uphill until it intersects with the higher footpath back to East Challow.)

Assuming that you continue along the canal, simply cross the lane and continue along the canal course. A footpath sign is marked 'East Challow 1 mile'. As you reach the final stretch you will begin to hear traffic (and see glimpses of buildings). The last section of the path is enclosed by a hedge on one side and a solid fence on the other. Exit from it to find yourself back on the A417, with a turn marked 'Canal Farm Lane' opposite. Look uphill to your right across the road, and you will see the Village Hall, and beyond that St Nicholas, East Challow.

From the church, simply continue uphill (after a short distance you will see across the road the turn up Letcombe Hill that you took on the way out). Walk the mile or so back to Wantage.



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The route

(Note: there is currently an hourly bus, the 67 Wantage to Faringdon, that serves stops along this route; it may be worth checking the timetable to see if it would be convenient.)

By Elizabeth Knowles

About the churches

St Mary the Virgin, Childrey

A fine cruciform church dating from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, and with later additions including the crenellated west tower, set at the north end of the village. The range of dates is apparent as soon as you enter: you go through a sixteenth-century porch to reach the twelfth-century south door. Inside, there are a range of treasures; this is definitely a church to savour and spend time with. Among its treasures are a moulded lead font with twelve figures of abbots (or bishops?); a finely carved Easter sepulchre, an effigy of a medieval knight, and a range of excellent brasses (including a tomb with inlaid memorial figures commemorating two more members of the Fettiplace family so frequently encountered in the region).

Holy Rood, Sparsholt

While the north door of this church is Norman, the building now mainly dates from the first half of the first half of the fourteenth century. From the road the key feature is the (late thirteenth-century) west tower, with its later shingled broach spire. Inside, like Childrey, it is full of treasures especially from the medieval period. The south wall of the south transept has two tomb recesses, one with a row of mourners on the tomb chest. The recesses now house two over-life-size oak effigies of the fourteenth century (a third effigy is placed at right angles to them along the wooden screen dividing the transept from the nave. The effigies, which are not where they would originally have been, apparently represent Sir Richard Achard, Lord of the Manor, and two of his wives. They are placed in the tomb recesses, while Sir Richard's effigy lies at right angles to them. The carving is very finely done showing the folds of material in the wimple of one of the wives. One wife rests her feet on an agreeable lion. There are also some good memorials of a later period. A fine chalk tablet on the south wall of the nave commemorates John Pleydell (d. 1591) and his wife (d. 1623). The detailed carved decoration includes strapwork and finely worked supporting heads.

St Lawrence, West Challow

A small medieval church with an aisleless nave and chancel and a double bellcote. The north porch is fifteenth century, and has what the revised Buildings of England volume for Berkshire calls 'richly carved bargeboards': I had to consult the glossary to learn that these (perhaps etymologically a corruption of 'vergeboards') are boards set below the eaves of a gable to cover and protect the rafters). Inside the church is light and peaceful. It belongs to the network of Small Pilgrim Places, and feels a very good fit with the concept.



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St Nicholas, East Challow

A medieval church with a low square nineteenth-century tower. Inside the nave, chancel and south arcade are all from the thirteenth century, although the roof of the nave was then raised in what BoE calls a 'drastic restoration' in 1858-9. Apparently the tower was never completed, which explains its lack of height. The early twentieth century saw the installation of a number of fittings, including an Arts and Crafts Rood screen.

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.