



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

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All Around the Town: Witney **A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles**

Witney is both rural and urban: an historic market town, enriched by the medieval wool trade, which later expanded with the development of the mills that made 'Witney blankets' a world-famous product. A walk around its streets, visiting its churches and chapels, is both rewarding and enlightening.

The route

This walk begins at the fine town church of St Mary the Virgin. Leave by the north door, and walk down Church Green, passing Henry Box School on your left and at the foot the War Memorial on your right. At the corner, turn left into Corn Street. Cross the road, and walk down to the roundabout at the end of the road, where Welch Way comes in from your right. Cross it with care to reach the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady and St Hugh, at the corner of Welch Way and Tower Hill. Leaving the church, walk up Welch Way to the town centre. Just before the junction with the High Street, you will find the Congregational Church on your left. Across the road, almost straight ahead, you will see the imposing shape of High Street Methodist.

After visiting this church, you have several choices. If you wanted only a short walk, turn left, and walk up the High Street up to the Market Square. From there (where there are several coffee shops), you could decide to explore Church Green in more detail by walking up the east side, and perhaps taking the opportunity to visit the site of the 'Bishop's Palace' (a house owned by medieval Bishops of Winchester) in the grounds of Mount House at the top of the Green. Or to connect with a more extensive walk, think about crossing the river to visit St Mary's Church, Cogges (see our route for Three Churches by the Windrush).

If you would like to walk further and see more Witney churches, there are also choices to make. To include Davenport Road Methodist Church, cross back to the west side of the High Street and walk away from the town centre and along Mill Street until you come to the corner with the Burford Road. Turn left, and walk uphill, crossing at the Woodford Way lights. Across the road, you will notice the tall chimney that was once a key component of one of the local mills. Shortly before the junction with Tower Hill you will come to a left turn into Davenport Road. Walk down it to find the Methodist Church on the corner.

After visiting it, retrace your steps to the traffic lights. At this point, you can either go back to the town centre by walking down Woodford Way to access Welch Way via Marriotts Close, or decide to walk up to Wood Green to see Holy Trinity Church. In this case, cross to the left-hand side of the road and walk back down to the corner with Bridge Street, named for the bridge that takes you across the Windrush. The present bridge is the most recent construction of a bridge first instituted in the thirteenth century by the Bishop of Winchester. It offered an alternative to the ford crossing at Cogges, and thus could be considered Witney's first bypass.

Walk down Bridge Street, noticing across the road the Witney Blanket Hall (in itself worth a visit).



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At the mini roundabout, turn left into West End, and almost immediately cross the road to take a narrow road leading uphill. At the top you will emerge into Wood Green, with Holy Trinity Church at the south end.

On leaving the church, you can walk back into town. Alternatively, cross the Bladon Road on the east side of the green, walk down the hill to the mini roundabout, and turn left into Newland. Walk up the road past the Townsend almshouses, the modern estate of Pensclose, and a recreation ground ('King George's Field') to reach the Cogges War Memorial. Look across the road and you will see *Newland Methodist Chapel*.

To return to the town you can either walk back down Newland and turn left into Bridge Street, or walk past the opening of Compton Way on your left to turn into a pedestrian footway that will lead you across Newland Mill road and on to a fieldpath across the water meadows leading to Cogges. Exiting into Church Lane you will see Cogges Priory (now divided between a private house and the Vicarage) on your right. To your left you can find St Mary's Cogges, and beyond it the Cogges Manor Farm Museum and Café.

To get back to the town centre, simply walk back down Church Lane to the first footbridge, cross, and walk on. If after the second footbridge you follow the footpath round to the right you will arrive at the pedestrian crossing for Witan Way. Cross into Waitrose car park, and walk past the store on your left to enter Woolgate. At the other end you will be back in the Market Square

About the churches

St Mary the Virgin

A fine spacious town church with a central tower and spire, which was remodelled in the thirteenth century. A twelfth-century the Bishop of Winchester laid out a palace just to the east of the church, and a century or so later one of his successors extended the town by laying out Church Green, the Market Square, and the High Street. At the same time the church was enlarged by the addition of a north aisle and south porch. Today the interior is lofty, with tall arcades separating off the aisles, and several side chapels.

Witney grew wealthy from the wool trade, and its church reflects that prosperity. As with any town church, a number of its features recall people and events of significance in the community. A brass on the Wenman Tomb commemorates Richard Wenman, a local sixteenth-century wool trader, shown here in a fur-lined gown with a purse hanging from his belt. The Batt family came to Witney in the 1730s and practised medicine here for several generations. Edward Augustine Batt (d. 1853), whose family later provided land and buildings to found the Batt Church of England Primary School, has a marble memorial illustrating the parable of the Good Samaritan.



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St Mary's did not escape the Second World War unscathed. On 2 September 1942, an RAF plane crashed into the spire, and the roof of the chancel was damaged. A new chancel ceiling now commemorates this by depicting the lights of that plane, and of a Hurricane and a Spitfire (many of those were repaired in Witney).

A new (2023) nave altar with a design that links closely to Witney's past of the wool trade and especially the weaving industry. It is made of cedar, from a cedar of Lebanon tree in the churchyard that had had to be felled. The new altar, fashioned from this, has a central support in the shape of a bobbin. Along the front edge, carved images evoke a shuttle, and the warp and weft of a loom.

Our Lady and St Hugh

Early bishops of Winchester were as landholders important to Witney's development, but in that period the town lay within the great medieval diocese of Lincoln, which stretched down to the Thames. (Oxford diocese was not carved out of it until the sixteenth century. The double dedication of Witney's Roman Catholic church recalls this earlier period through the name of St Hugh of Lincoln.

The church was built in 1975, and is of pale brick with pantiled roofs. The interior is light and serene, and there are some striking interior stained-glass panels at the west end, showing St Peter and St Paul on one side, and St Anne and St Mary Magdalene on the other.

Congregational Church

This building, of 1993, replaced an earlier home (of 1828) around the corner in the High Street. The stone frontage which looks out on Welch Way appears relatively modest, but the brick-built church and meeting rooms behind are spacious.

High Street Methodist

This Wesleyan Methodist chapel, built in 1849-50, was built in stone and in the Gothic style, with a four-light window and flamboyant tracery. It is impressive now, but according to BoE originally also had elaborate pinnacles and a bellcote. The interior was constructed with galleries, but in the 1990s it was reordered to face north, and new entrances were added. Today, as well as offering regular worship, it is a popular and accessible venue for concerts and musical events.

Davenport Road Methodist Church

A mid-twentieth-century building, of pale brick, and hall and chapel set at right angles.

Holy Trinity

Holy Trinity Church was erected in 1848-9 in an Early English style that BoE calls 'convincing'. The moving spirit for its construction was apparently the Rector of Witney, Charles Jerram, who felt that St Mary's Church at the south end of the town was just too far for the residents of Wood Green.



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Inside, Holy Trinity is simple and light, with an aisleless nave running up to the sanctuary through a screen and below a high chancel arch.

Newland Methodist Chapel

A modest building inserted between neighbouring houses; the single-room chapel has been built out into what was part of the garden of the next-door house.

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.