



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964

Some Forest Churches: Holy Trinity, Witney, Hailey, Ramsden, Wilcote and North Leigh

A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

The medieval Wychwood Forest once covered a broad swathe of West Oxfordshire, including the villages of Hailey, Ramsden, Wilcote and North Leigh. This walk of approximately 10 miles begins in Witney and runs via Hailey out on a curving route to North Leigh. From that point it is quite possible to walk back to Witney; alternatively, you can pick up the half-hourly S7 bus service (Witney to Oxford via Woodstock). The OS Explorer 180 map covers the area needed, and the footpaths are well marked. It is a versatile route that could be added to; from Hailey, for example, you could extend your walk to take in Minster Lovell before working your way back to Witney. From Ramsden, you could reach Finstock (perhaps to fit in with the timetable of the Witney to Chipping Norton X9 bus, which runs hourly Monday to Saturday, and two-hourly on Sundays).

I tested out this route in October, with an eye to winter walking: after a lot of rain, some of the paths that work well in summer may be flooded/seriously muddy in winter. I've therefore describe a route below that can be done walking along lanes/minor roads, but have indicated where the option of a path or bridleway is worth considering.

The route

Holy Trinity, Witney was built to minister to the northerly part of the town, beside the road to Woodstock (just up from the mini roundabout, there is an old milestone inscribed 'Burford 7 miles, Woodstock [with long 's'] 8'). The church is set at the top of the rise, at the south end of Wood Green. Leaving Holy Trinity, turn right and walk to the corner, cross, turn left, and then almost immediately right to follow the footpath sign through Farmer's Close. Exiting, walk down to the Hailey Road and turn right to walk up to Hailey. As you exit Witney (just past a garage on the right) the footway runs only on the left, so if necessary use the pedestrian crossing before you reach the chicane.

A little further on the road curves round to the right, and Foxburrow Lane (from Crawley and Minster Lovell) comes in from the left. Looking across the road, you can see a footpath to the right leading past Down Hill Farm; as the map shows, this would allow a field route to Witney (coming out at the end of New Yatt Road running up from New Green, but in wet weather parts of it can be very damp). Continue up the footway, and when you get to Witney Rugby Club use the footbridge to cross into their car parking area. Continue parallel to the hedge until the far end, where a path leads back out to the footway. Continue for a short distance and then cross; turn left, and walk up to the road for Poffley End and Ramsden coming in from the right. Cross and continue down through the village until you see St John the Evangelist, Hailey on the left hand side.

Leaving the church, cross back to the right-hand side and turn left. Walk out of the village and down to a crossroads in the dip; take the right turn to Delly End.



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At this point, you will be walking along the road, but the traffic is only intermittent. Walk up the road to the village green, keeping the green on your right, and noticing the c.1920 'Peace Memorial' (BoE), a small domed temple resting on columns. Walk down Wood Lane as far as the corner, and turn right into Turley Lane (ignore the footpath straight ahead which is the continuation of Wood Lane).

Walk down Turley Lane until you reach an effective crossroads, with a lane leading down past Gigley Farm on the right, and a Restricted Byway ('St John's Path') coming in from the left. I rather like this woodland path, but in places (especially towards the far end) it can be very muddy, and the remains of a made surface can make for uneven walking. I'd also be wary of it after prolonged rainfall, although when I did it in mid-October it was passable with care. However, if you prefer not to undertake it, simply keep straight on along Turley Lane until you come to a junction with the road from Poffley End/Hailey, turn left, and walk up into Ramsden village.

If you do choose St John's Path, follow it through woodland until you exit on to open ground and see a tarmacked lane to your right. This is the lane to Ramsden; it is also part of the course of the Wychwood Way and the (much older!) Roman road of Akeman Street. It runs uphill and then levels out for a long straight stretch before 20 mph signs indicate that you are reaching the outskirts of Ramsden. Walk past a 'Children's Playground' on the left and follow the lane downhill into the village. St James, Ramsden is on your right.

Leaving the church, walk down to the war memorial at the centre of the village, opposite the Royal Oak, and turn right. It would be possible to reach Wilcote largely walking off-road by taking the path opposite up to the Wychwood Way and following it on the map through to the lane running up to Wilcote, but in view of the condition of St John's Path, the alternative road route may be preferred. For this, follow the road out of the village towards Poffley End, and after a short distance take a left turn signed for 'Wilcote $\frac{3}{4}$ ' as well as the more distant Stonesfield. After about half a mile, you will see the Wychwood Way coming in on the left-hand side and leading away (through 'Holly Grove') to the right. Keep straight on up the hill, and after passing various houses you will come to St Peter's Wilcote on the right.

On leaving the church, you have the choice of returning down the hill, picking up the Wychwood Way, and following it through to North Leigh (it actually runs through the churchyard). I have done it in the past and enjoyed it, although it can be wet in places. However, to finish this route by road, turn right on exiting the churchyard and walk down to the point at which you come out through stone gates to what is a crossroads. Take the right-hand turn, signed 'North Leigh 2' and walk down the lane, passing in due course Bridewell Organic Gardens on the right. When you come to a junction just beyond Bridewell Farms, continue down the right-hand fork. At this point, the road is slightly bigger, but the traffic is still only intermittent.



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After a mile or so, you will pass Fishill Farm; shortly after that, bear right into Church Road and walk uphill to where St Mary the Virgin, North Leigh is set back on the right.

To reach the centre of the village, turn right and walk up the hill to the main road, bearing to the left. The bus stop for the S7 (see above) is just past the Mason's Arms on the left (towards Woodstock and Oxford) and across the road on the right (towards Witney). An energetic walker could also walk back to Witney quite easily by walking down Common Road and then following the footway along the A4095 Woodstock to Witney road.

About the churches

Holy Trinity, Witney

A Victorian church built 1848-9 by Benjamin Ferrey to serve the people in the north-west part of Witney. The nave is aisleless, and there is a short chancel beyond the high chancel arch. Lancet windows make this a light church. There is a bellcote at the west end of the church, and inside there is a west gallery.

St John the Evangelist, Hailey

This little church was built 1868-9 to the design of Clapton Crabb Rolfe, the Vicar's son, replacing an earlier demolished 1761 church, to the east of the present building. Buildings of England calls it 'a remarkable first major work for a young architect'. Although the original design was not without its critics; G. E. Street called it 'needlessly eccentric'.

He may perhaps have had the bell turret in mind: this is highly distinctive, with a round turret with a conical roof, crowning red stone shafts. Inside the church uses a blend of colourful masonry, with red Mansfield stone for the rounded pillars of the north arcade, with banded grey-white local Milton stone above. The pulpit is similarly of red and grey stone, with carved symbols of the Evangelists.

St James, Ramsden

The first church here was built in 1842, when Ramsden became a separate parish from Shipton-under-Wychwood. This was demolished, and the current building was designed and erected by A. W. Blomfield in 1872, following his restoration of St Peter's Wilcote four years earlier. According to the church leaflet, the 'moving spirit' of the enterprise was the Vicar, the Reverend Robert Lowbridge Baker, who 'gave liberally' of both money and time to the church, and who was in post for forty-four years. The north-west porch, with a surmounting tower and broach-spire, which *BoE* calls the church's 'best feature', was given by him in memory of his first wife, Mary Noel, who died shortly before the building was consecrated.



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The interior has not been greatly altered (other than by the installation of a glazed screen separating the south aisle from the main body of the church). Stained-glass windows of the period include in the north wall a 'Guardian Angel' window commemorating Charles Sartoris, formerly of Wilcote House, who died in 1884.

One set of four memorial tablets, on the north wall, gives us a brief glimpse of one local family, the Wynters, between 1914 and 1917. Philip Wynter, who died in 1914 before the outbreak of the First World War, was according to his memorial tablet 'late Captain, Bengal Army', and 'Queen's Foreign Service Messenger for 35 years'. His two sons were both killed in action in 1915, one in Flanders and one in Mesopotamia, and their mother Constance died two years later.

St Peter's, Wilcote

A small twelfth-century church with some later medieval alterations, comprehensively restored by Blomfield four years before his work at Ramsden. His additions included the north porch, bellcote, and enlarged east window, but if you walk round to the south side of the church you can still see the outline of a blocked Norman door, with billet moulding, testifying to the church's twelfth-century past.

St Mary the Virgin, North Leigh

A fine square-towered medieval church with many striking details and treasures. There is a fifteenth-century Doom painting over the chancel arch, and some good wall monuments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, showing respective couples at prayer with their children also praying in the lower register. However, the jewel in North Leigh is the Wilcote Chapel, which lies at the east end of the north aisle. It was begun at the end of the 1430s by Elizabeth Blacket as a chantry chapel in memory of her first husband, Sir William Wilcote, and their two sons. It is a narrow, elegant construction, with two bays of finely-worked fan vaulting. Alabaster effigies of William and Elizabeth (who died in 1445) lie on a stone tomb-chest on the south side of the Chapel.

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.



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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.