



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964

Some Oxford City churches, from St Barnabas to St Mary the Virgin A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

A walk of around 4 miles that can be comfortably completed in a morning, and that offers the opportunity to encounter some of the history of church building within the city, as well as seeing something of the development as a public space of the former Radcliffe Infirmary site, now the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter. The churches seen cover both medieval foundations and (as with the Anglo-Catholic glories of St Barnabas) examples of nineteenth-century ecclesiastical expansion, and each one opens windows on to both past and present.

The route

Start at the bus stop for the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter on the east side of the Woodstock Road. (This stop is served by buses coming in from the Park and Ride at Peartree as well as Carterton, Eynsham and Witney.) Cross using the pedestrian crossing, turn right, and walk a short way north up the road to Gate 7. Take the marked footway through the ROQ with the Radcliffe Observatory on your right. Exit past the Blavatnik building on your left into Walton Street, cross, and turn right. A short way along, turn left into Jericho Street. At the junction with Albert Street, turn left, and almost immediately right into Victor Street. At its foot, turn left into Canal Street, and walk down past the east end of St Barnabas' Church. At the corner, turn right and walk down Cardigan Street to enter by the south door.

On leaving, turn left and walk back up the south side of the building, noticing the plaque to Thomas and Martha Coombs on the exterior of the south wall. Turn right into Canal Street, and then left into Great Clarendon Street. Cross Hart Street (named for Horace Hart, Printer to the University), and walk back towards Walton Street with the Oxford University Press building on your right. When walking through Oxford on a tour of church buildings, it is worth keeping your eyes open for former churches now put to different use. The first of these is directly ahead on the other side of Walton Street. Freud's Café (currently closed for renovation) was once St Paul's Church, and the pillars and steps of its Greek Revival style catch the eye.

Cross the road, and walk back up into the ROQ via Gate 6. When level with the Radcliffe Observatory, cross to the right to walk through the Andrew Wiles Building (note, the café downstairs is open to the public if you want refreshment). Pass the Simon Cheriton sculpture 'The Alchemical Tree' on the right your way in. Exit into Penrose Quad (note the surface, showing the non-repeating pattern discovered by Sir Roger Penrose) and you will see *St Luke's Chapel* ahead and slightly to the left.

Leave the ROQ by the main gate and turn right down the last section of the Woodstock Road towards the City Centre. Walk past Somerville, and notice the Roman Catholic Church of St Aloysius Gonzaga, built in 1875-6 by the Jesuit order, and since 1990 an Oratorian church. A little further down on the left, at the junction of the Woodstock Road and the Banbury Road, you will see the square tower of *St Giles' Church*.



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Leaving the church, cross back over to the west side of walk from the end of the Woodstock Road into the broad stretch of St Giles. Walk down to the traffic lights and the junction with Beaumont Street. (On the way, you will pass both Pusey House Chapel and Blackfriars.) The Ashmolean museum is on the corner, and its downstairs café offers a convenient way to take a break and some refreshment. Then cross Beaumont Street into Magdalen St, and use the crossing to go over to the nineteenth-century Martyrs' Memorial, with St Mary Magdalen Church immediately below it.

On leaving the church, cross back to the far side, and walk down to the lights at the top of George Street. Cross, and walk a short distance to see the Saxon tower of St Michael at the Northgate on your left, at the top of Ship Street. Enter the church by the south door. You will see from its notice board that St Michael's is now the 'City Church'; the next part of the walk will introduce you to the buildings that formerly held that title.

Turn left out of the church, walk down to the end of Ship Street, and turn right into Turl Street. Follow it down to its exit into the High Street, and notice on the corner the imposing bulk of Lincoln College Library, formerly the City Church of All Saints', an eighteenth-century building designed by the then Dean of Christ Church to replace an earlier medieval church whose spire had collapsed. All Saints' became the City Church in 1896 when St Martin's Church at Carfax was demolished; if you look back up the High you can still see what is now known as 'Carfax Tower', originally the tower of that church. Turn left from Turl Street, and walk a short distance down the High until you come to the Church of St Mary the Virgin, the University Church.

From here, you will have a range of choices as to how you want to complete your walk. One possibility would be to walk back up the High, turn down St Aldates, and visit the Cathedral. You are well placed too to get back to a stop at which you can pick up a return bus to your starting point (George Street and Magdalen Street both have a range of stops). Or you might decide to explore further, and find the Norman exterior door of St Ebbes, or visit the more distant but interesting church of St Thomas the Martyr near the railway station. The choice is yours.

About the churches

St Barnabas, and St Luke

Built in 1868-9 at the behest of Thomas Combe, Printer to the University and Anglo-Catholic, for the benefit especially of the workforce in the printing house at Oxford University Press. Built in 1868-9, with a campanile added a few years later, it was designed by Arthur Blomfield as an Italian Romanesque basilica with round arches, an apse, and a campanile. Coombes apparently stipulated that construction methods should be simple, and the walls are cement-rendered rubble with exterior decoration achieved with brick bands.



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The campanile in particular is a striking Jericho landmark: it can be seen clearly from the towpath on the west bank of the canal running up to Wolvercote (in Combe's day, site of the Oxford Paper Mill).

Inside, St Barnabas offers a rich profusion of colour and gilding. The decoration of the south wall, in particular, catches the eye, with lettering and figures from the Te Deum, and the furnishings are comparably rich.

The whole church is a remarkable testament to the initiative and dedication of Thomas Combe, and the contribution made by him and his wife is acknowledged in a blue plaque on the exterior south wall of the church.

As will be seen when walking back through the ROQ, Combe was interested in spiritual support for his workforce both in sickness and in health. In 1863-5 he presented the Radcliffe Infirmary with a chapel dedicated to St Luke, also designed by Arthur Blomfield, this time as a simple aisleless building with a steep gable, a rose window at the west end, and a tympanum over the south door showing Christ as the Good Shepherd.

St Giles

A medieval church (first mentioned in the 1120s), with a square tower (on an earlier base) finished in the early thirteenth century. The nave arcades with rounded piers are of the same date. *Buildings of England* calls attention to the 'exceptional form' of the north aisle, and notes that tree-ring dating has assigned a date of 1288 to the chancel roof. The church is set sideways on at the top of the wide thoroughfare named for it, and the path through the churchyard forms a link between the Banbury and Woodstock Roads.

St Mary Magdalen

Another medieval church of which the north aisle was rebuilt in 1841-2; according to BoE, it is known as 'Martyrs' Aisle' because it was paid for from monies left over when the Martyrs' Memorial just to the north of the church was put up. The south aisle, on the other hand, is still largely the work of the 1320s. The square west tower is early sixteenth century, as is the porch. Inside the furnishings include an 1894 reredos with painted figures of various saints, and from a much earlier period, and fourteenth-century font.

Modern memorial tablets include one to the antiquary and biographer John Aubrey (1626-97), who is buried in the churchyard. There is also a beautifully-lettered circular memorial to John Francis Phelps (d. 1974), 'Chorister and Churchwarden for 51 years'.



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St Michael at the Northgate

The west tower of St Michael's Church is late Anglo-Saxon, and BoE suggests that it may originally have been built as a lookout; the church, at the junction of Cornmarket and Ship Street, is located just within what would have been the old city wall. The chancel is later, from the early thirteenth century, and the south and north aisles and the transept followed in the later medieval period. The church was restored by G. E. Street, who is responsible for the chancel arch, but BoE points out that following a fire in 1953, there was an 'anti-Victorian' restoration which resulted in pointed-arch ceilings. In short, St Michael at the Northgate is one of many churches in which you can hear conversation and debate on what a church requires going on across the centuries. It is always worth, too, looking out for survivals: the clear-glass east window of the chancel has four fine late-thirteenth-century glass panels showing respectively the figures of St Nicholas, St Edmund of Abingdon, the Virgin and Child, and St Michael.

Wall tablets include an elaborate seventeenth-century one to William Guise (d. 1783), and a modern plaque commemorating in Welsh and English the naturalist and philologist Edward Llwyd (1660-1709), Keeper of the Ashmolean between 1691 and 1709, said to be 'buried here in the Welsh Aisle'. This usage apparently derives from the fact that when Jesus College was founded in 1571, it did not have its own chapel. Scholars were given permission to worship here in the south aisle, and from that it became known as the Welsh Aisle.

There is also in the south-west corner of the church a twentieth-century window, installed to commemorate the Burma Star Association, and carrying the Kohima Epitaph, 'When you go home, tell them of us and say, For your tomorrow, we gave our today.'

St Mary the Virgin

The church stands on the south side of Radcliffe Square, facing out into the High Street. Its late-thirteenth-century square west tower is topped by a fourteenth-century spire, which BoE calls 'one of the most impressive in England'.

The fourteenth century also saw the construction, to the north-east of the building, of the old Congregation House, that is, a two-storey building to provide the University with its original meeting room for Congregation (the University's governing body) and a chapel (downstairs), and above space for a library. St Mary's is still known as the 'University Church'.

From the High Street you enter by the south porch, given in 1637 by a former chaplain to Archbishop Laud. It is worth pausing to look at before you enter the church. The twisted columns at each side are a traditional visual reference to the temple of Solomon, and the shell-topped niche has a statue of the Virgin and Child.



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The interior is spacious and high with tall slender piers, and there is a good deal to see; give yourself time to explore. Much of what is most striking, of course, comes from the medieval period, but there is a notable later addition: a wall tablet commemorating the Reformation Martyrs, both Catholic and Protestant.

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.