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Banbury Crosses: A Town Walk

A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

Banbury is an excellent centre from which to begin to explore the splendid Ironstone churches of North Oxfordshire, but it is well worth visiting in its own right. Beginning in the fine town church of St Mary's Banbury, a walk round a comparatively short compass will bring you to a range of extant and former churches and chapels testifying to the contribution the different denominations have made to their historic community.

The route

Start at Banbury Cross, and walk north up to the top of Horse Fair to find St Mary the Virgin, Banbury on the right-hand side, entering by the north door. On leaving, cross at the pedestrian crossing at the top of Horse Fair, walk past the former Church House on your right, and find the Quaker Meeting House in the right-hand corner, at the top end of The Leys, tucked away behind a wrought-iron gate beneath a stone arch. Slightly to the south, you will then see an opening and a sign across it reading The People's Church. Walk under the arch, and you will see the modern church building ahead and to your right.

Walk south down Horse Fair to Banbury Cross, and used the pedestrian crossings to reach the east side of South Bar Street. Looking to your left, you will see set back what was once the Congregational Church. Walk uphill as to where Dashwood Road comes in from the left, and see on the corner across the road St John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church, with its tall pinnacled west tower.

When you leave St John's, glance right a short way down Dashwood Road to see the former Ebenezer Chapel. Cross, and notice on the corner to your right the brick-built 'Austin House'; this was once a Baptist Chapel. Walk back down South Bar Street until you come to a right turn into Calthorpe Street. Follow this down to the High Street, turn right, and then almost immediately right again into Marlborough Street. About half way down, on the right, you will find the Methodist Church. From here, you can go back to the High Street, turn left, and walk back up to Banbury Cross, or explore the town more widely. The façade of a former Particular Baptist Chapel in Bridge Street has according to BoE been incorporated into a supermarket, and there is a house in Church Lane which was originally (1811-12) a Wesleyan Methodist Chapel. And on a more mundane level, you can of course find a range of eateries.

About the churches

St Mary's Church, Banbury

There was once a large medieval church here, but by the late eighteenth century it was apparently 'ruinous', and was replaced by the current structure, consecrated (before completion) in 1797. The architect was Samuel Pepys Cockerell (1753-1827), a great-nephew of the diarist.

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He was surveyor to the East India Company, and designed the notable Indian-style manor of Sezincote for his brother Charles, as well as Daylesford for Warren Hastings. The church was completed in 1818-22 by Cockerell's son, who apparently slightly modified his father's original plan when he added a semi-circular portico, and cylindrical west tower topped by a copper half-dome which, rising above now well-grown trees, are the visitor's first sight of St Mary's.

Cockerell's design seems not to have been received with great warmth. Buildings of England quotes the Gentleman's Magazine of 1800 characterizing it as 'more like a gaol than a Christian temple', and in 1840 John Henry Parker, writer on architecture and publisher, called it 'despicable'. Parker was a supporter of the Oxford Movement, and would presumably have been encouraged by the significant interior remodelling of the 1860s, through what Nicola Coldstream in Oxfordshire Churches calls 'the forceful intervention' of the then Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, the vicar Henry Back, and the architect Arthur Blomfield. As a result, the original 'auditory' Georgian interior was significantly modified bring the altar and sanctuary into central focus. The 1860s scheme laid great emphasis on the visual, including sequences of fine stained glass installed by the firm Heaton, Butler & Bayne. (According to Coldstream, a number of the designs were the work of a talented designer, Alfred Hassam, who died in 1869 at the age of twenty-six: on the evidence of St Mary's, he was a considerable loss to his art.

Today when you walk up the portico steps and into St Mary's, the impression is one of light, space, and colour. Samuel Pepys Cockerell's original square space, punctuated by columns rising to a vault and with capitals picked out in red and gold, now terminates naturally at the east end in a flight of steps leading up to Blomfield's raised sanctuary and apse, with paintings imitative of mosaics seen in early Christian churches.

The stained glass in the south and north aisles offer a range of striking illustrations of parables, some with an unusual focus. The Prodigal Son, rather than focusing on the son gloomily sitting among swine and husks, has his welcoming father as its central figure. Another window shows the parable of Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44-46).

Before the 1860s work, there was a gallery which ran round all four sides of the central square, and the south, west, and north sides still survive. Today, rather than offering maximum accommodation for a congregation to hear a preacher, what strikes you about the gallery is the perspective it offers on the interior, and the ability to look at close quarters at the red and gold capitals at the top of the pillar.

The stained glass in the upper register also repays study, with scenes from the life of Christ set in central medallions flanked by illustrations of flora and fauna. One instance, in the north gallery, is particularly notable. Known as the 'Arctic Window', it commemorates Admiral Sir George Back (1796-1878), naval officer and explorer, who mapped a good deal of the Arctic.

His nephew was Vicar of St Mary's. The central medallions are in this case flanked by representations of sketches in Back's journals: his ship Terror stuck in the ice, dogs pulling a sled, a group of walrus.

St Mary's deserves a good deal of time and attention. Its remodelling to reflect contemporary ideas about liturgy, worship, and community use also make it particularly interesting in terms of church history. (Blomfield's choir, which projected into the nave, was according to BoE removed in 2004 'to create a community theatre space.) It is a fine example of a sacred space that has adapted itself to contemporary needs while maintaining a core, and very pleasing, identity.
Quaker Meeting House

An oblong two-storey Ironstone building, dated to 1851, with a later (c. 1861) Tuscan porch in the south-west corner. This is a building with echoes of different periods in its life; the linked schoolroom (1906) has parts of the north and west walls of what was once (1681) the 'women's meeting room', which in turn had been an extension of the original 1665 meeting house (now demolished).

The People's Church (Baptist)

A late-twentieth-century brick-built church by G. Forsyth-Lawson, 1971-2. It is set endwise-on to the approach from Horse Fair, and the gable-ends follow a Gothic design. It stands on the site of a mid-nineteenth-century Unitarian chapel, and was the successor to the original Particular Baptist Chapel in Bridge Street.

St John the Evangelist, Roman Catholic Church

Built 1835-8 by Hickman and Derick, St John's was designed in the Gothic Revival style, with a tall pinnacled west tower. (The pinnacles seen today are apparently renewals of the originals.) Inside it has a broad nave, and an chancel with a three-sided apse added by Pugin in 1840-1. Its painted interior decoration is much later, dating from the 1930s, as does the altar of Bath stone. BoE notes that the much earlier (fourteenth or fifteenth century) inset stone relief of the Crucifixion may have come from the old parish church.

(Wesleyan) Methodist Chapel

A substantial mid-nineteenth-century building, of rock-faced Brackley stone with Bath dressings, with traceried windows in the style of the late thirteenth century, and at the west end a porch surmounted by a tower and spire. The interior originally had galleries, but these were removed in a reordering of 1975 when a new glazed porch was also added. There are also two stained-glass windows of the 1920s which BoE attributes to Percy C. Bacon.

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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.