Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964

Alfred's Town, a walk round Wantage

A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

Wantage, an historic market town, stands on the junction of two early routes, where the Reading to Cirencester road (the Portway) crosses the Hungerford to Oxford road. Centuries later, between 1810 and 1914, it was served by the Wilts and Berks Canal. Wantage was the birthplace (in 849) of Alfred the Great, and Alfred's statue by the naval officer and sculptor Count Gleichen (1833-91), who was Queen Victoria's nephew, stands commandingly at the centre of the Market Place, looking south where you can see the square tower of SS Peter and Paul, the parish church, rising above later buildings.
A walk round Wantage offers much to enjoy. Pevsner enthused over its brick Georgian houses, and in the nineteenth century the influence of the architect G. E. Street (a resident for two years in the 1850s), and the long-serving (1846-81) Anglo-Catholic Vicar of Wantage, W. J. Butler, added some lavish buildings. This is a town walk that can be enjoyed for itself, but which can also be linked up with two of our longer routes, 'Towards the Downs' and 'Below the Ridgeway'.

The route

As described below, the full route is approximately four miles, but as with any town walks, you can always choose to shorten it and return to your starting point. SS Peter and Paul, Wantage Methodist Church, and Wantage Baptist Church are all found within quite a small compass. Including St John Vianney adds another half-mile each way, and Holy Trinity Charlton is a similar distance.

Start in the Market Place by the statue of King Alfred, and follow the direction of his gaze to where the tower of SS Peter and Paul is visible. Walk the short distance through to find yourself at the east end of the church, with The Cloisters to your right and Church Street to your left.

After visiting the church, walk down Church Street (for the first section, use the raised path parallel to the road running through the churchyard). Cross the road to the Vale and Downland Museum on the opposite side, and turn left to continue down Church Street as far as its junction with Newbury Street. Turn right, and walk straight ahead to find Wantage Methodist Church on the right. (Notice on the opposite side of the road, now the home of a dental practice, the elaborate red-brick exterior of what was once the Chapel of the first home of St Mary's Convent.)

Walk on down to the corner, cross the road, and turn left down Ormond Road. Walk down its length until you come to the junction with Wallingford St. Turn right, and walk a short distance into Charlton Road. A little ahead, you will find the Roman Catholic church of St John Vianney set back on the right. On leaving this church, cross the road and walk on down Charlton Road until you come to a roundabout with a left turn signed for Charlton Village Road. Turn down it, walk a short distance, and as you pass Charlton Primary School on your left, look across the road to see *Holy Trinity, Charlton*.

Walk back down Charlton Road, and back into Wallingford Street. Follow its course to return to the Market Place.

Alfred's Town, a walk round Wantage

Finally, cross to where Mill Street runs downhill from the south-west corner. You will see Wantage Baptist Church on the right, a short way down.

Start in the Market Place and walk a short way down Mill Street running from the south-west corner to find Wantage Baptist Church on the right. Retrace your steps, turn right, and walk a short way a roundabout with a left turn signed for Charlton Village Road. Turn down it, walk a short distance, and as you pass Charlton Primary School on your left, look across the road to see Holy Trinity, Charlton.

Rest & Refreshment

As well as various eateries and coffee shops in and near to the Market Place, the Vale and Downland Museum in Church Street has a café and facilities
There are newly (2024) renovated toilets at the entrance to the Portway Car Park off Church Street, and Waitrose in Wallingford Street has customer toilets.

About the churches

SS Peter and Paul, Wantage
A handsome thirteenth-century cruciform church rebuilt and enlarged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and then significantly restored by both Street (1857) and Butterfield (1877).

Its square tower catches the eye from the Market Place, and inside the solidity of the crossing below the tower has an immediate impact.

This is the earliest part of the church, with the building being extended in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in a remodelling that included the addition of chancel chapels. Relics of the medieval period include alabaster effigies of Sir William Fitzwaryn (d. 1361) and his wife, in the chancel under what remains of a sheltering canopy. A later Fitzwaryn, Ivo (d. 1414) is commemorated by a striking brass figure mounted on the wall in the south aisle. There are also later additions to enjoy: G. E. Street's restoration of the 1850s (under the aegis of the Tractarian Vicar, W. J. Butler) included the reredos and a splendid pulpit, and G. F. Bodley's 1895 work on the fifteenth-century south chapel (originally a Guild chapel) is described by BoE as 'impeccable', including the wooden ceiling which he apparently designed.

Wantage Methodist Church
According to the church website, the Wantage Methodist Circuit was set up in 1820. In 1845 a new Wesleyan Methodist Chapel was built by the Methodist Society in Wantage 'having outgrown two meeting houses'. It was designed by F. W. Ordish in a simple Gothic style, the material being grey rubble with facings of Bath stone. There was a renovation in 1881 to install pews, a pulpit, and a gallery, as well as gas lighting, and the front of the chapel was enlarged in 1923 to accommodate

a larger (rebuilt) organ and redesigned pulpit.

St John Vianney, Roman Catholic Church
Brick-built in 1960, the church is set back from the road with a two-storey entrance porch at the west end. On the north side, the narrow bell tower has a pyramidal roof. Inside it is aisleless and spacious, with reeded glass windows. The central windows on the north and south include crosses of antique French glass. There are wooden statues on either side of the altar, one of which, by a local carver, depicts St John Vianney (1786-1859), the French priest known as 'The Curé of Ars'.

Holy Trinity, Charlton
Charlton, now part of Wantage, was originally a separate village. In 1848 William Butterfield built the first iteration of Holy Trinity: a simple chapel of ease that was part of Wantage parish, and apparently cost only £200 to build. The current church dates from 1891, when a north vestry and several-sided apse added. This was extended in 1904 by rebuilding of the nave and the addition of such features as transepts, aisles (divided from the nave by wooden posts), a timber porch, and a bell turret with spire.

Wantage Baptist Church
Built in 1860, Wantage Baptist Church was apparently the first church by the Berkshire-born architect James Brooks (1825-1901), who later became known for a number of London churches in the High Anglican tradition. Its impressive frontage has a three-gabled entry with the height of the main building rising behind it. It is worth noting that the Baptists have a long history in Wantage: the *Victoria County History* for Berkshire tells us that the Baptists met in 1653 in the town hall.

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.

Alfred's Town, a walk round Wantage

About the author

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.