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On the Thames, Henley

A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

Henley lies along the west bank of the Thames, and for centuries marked an important stage on the route between London and Oxford. From the late fifteenth century it had become a port for dispatching timber, corn, and malt by river to London, and by the late seventeenth century it had become a coaching halt between London and Oxford. It was a prosperous place, and that together with its proximity to the river meant that it increasingly developed as a resort centred on rowing. Walking round the town today, you can still enjoy the well-preserved buildings that remind you of its long history.

The route

This route offers reasonably easy walking, with only the short stretch up St Andrew's Road to Vicarage Road being uphill rather than on the flat. The circuit as described from the Market Place, out to Christ Church and Sacred Heart, and back to the Market Place, is around 3½ miles, and the extension up to the Friends Meeting House and back is less than a mile overall. Henley has good public transport links, with buses to Wallingford and Abingdon, Reading, and Marlow. The branch line to Twyford is a link to Reading and London Paddington.

Start in the Market Place, and walk east down Hart Street to find the Church of St Mary the Virgin at its foot. After visiting the church, leave as you entered by the west door and walk back up Hart Street. Continue up the south side of Market Place to find Henley Baptist Church on the left, at the foot of Gravel Hill.

Walk back a short way and turn right into Duke Street. Walk down it for a short distance and cross into Reading Road. The United Reformed Church is a little further down on the right. Just before it, you will see a blue plaque that is worth reading. It commemorates Humphrey Gainsborough (1718-76), described as 'Innovative Engineer and for 27 years Minister at the Independent Chapel on this site'. Gainsborough, an elder brother of the painter, had his ministerial training at the Congregational Fund academy in Moorfields, London, which ODNB says was noted for its excellent science teaching. An information board nearby records the ways in which Humphrey Gainsborough's natural talents must have profited by this.

On leaving, walk on down Reading Road to find a right turn into St Andrew's Road. Turn up here, and walk uphill a short way to the junction with Vicarage Road. Turn left, and walk down a short distance to find the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart.

Walk back down Vicarage Road and when you come to the junction with St Andrew's Road keep straight on and into Church Street. Follow this down past Trinity CoE Primary School on your left, and on to the pedestrianised section. You will find the lychgate of Holy Trinity Church on your left, at the foot of Grey's Hill.

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.

Continue on down Church Street and turn right into Grey's Road. This will bring you to a left turn back into Duke Street and so on into the Market Place.

For the final visit, cross the foot of Market Place and walk down Bell Street. Cross to the left-hand side of the road and continue up it to the end of the street. Walk on bearing slightly left into Northfield End, and you will find the Friends' Meeting House a short way along it. Afterwards walk back the way you have come. (Or, to vary the route a little, walk back down Bell Street until you come to the left turn into New Street. Walk down it and then bear right along Thameside, and right again round the east end of St Mary's to reach Hart Street.

Rest & Refreshment

Henley offers plenty of eateries in and around the town for rest and refreshment (and if you are there on a weekday, the Baptist Church has a nice Community Café open between 9 am and 2 pm).
There are public toilets in the Greys Road car park, and the Kings Road car park next to Waitrose.

About the churches

St Mary the Virgin
Approaching Henley from the far side of the Thames, you have an excellent view of the pinnacled top section of the tower of the church of St Mary the Virgin. The tower is also the dominant feature looking down towards the west end from Market Place. To one side of the tower, an elaborate fountain (1885) commemorates a former Rector, Greville Phillimore, with the text 'O ye fountains, bless ye the Lord/Praise and exalt him above all for ever.' The original church is likely to have been thirteenth-century, but the exterior we have today is largely Late Gothic (although the west doorway, from an 1850s restoration, apparently copies an Early English predecessor.

Inside, the church is spacious, with rounded columns dividing the nave from the side aisle. The north-east chapel, now the Lady Chapel, was added in the early fourteenth century, and is divided from the chancel by an arcade. A smaller chapel (the Chapel of St Leonard) opens out of it from the

north side, and was added by John Elmes (d. 1460), a merchant of the Henley. The Jesus Chapel (originally the Chapel of St Catherine) to the south of the chancel dates from the early fifteenth century. Town churches typically feature memorials to significant local figures, and the monument to Dame Elizabeth Periam (d. 1621) is an example. A sister of the philosopher, essayist, and courtier Francis Bacon, on her death she left bequest to found a school for poor boys in the Chantry House next to the church. This ultimately became the Grammar School, now Henley College, which still regards her as its foundress. She is shown lying propped on one elbow, book in hand.

St Mary's is a fine medieval church, but many of its rich furnishings come from a later period. The early tracery of the east window of the Lady Chapel features the brilliant glass of the 'Queen of Heaven' window by Hardman (1868). An 1890s renovation saw a wall painting of the Adoration of the Lamb by Ernest Geldart added to the chancel arch, while the chancel walls were stencilled with shields in a pattern designed by Comper. The richly-carved rood screen dates from 1920, and was designed as a warm memorial (the names of the dead are inscribed on panels on each side).

Baptist Church, Market Place
Henley's Baptist Church, in red and silver brick, was built in 1878-9 in a Gothic style with a three-light upper window looking out on to the street. It presumably replaces an earlier site of worship, since there is a memorial tablet commemorating 'Henley Tabernacle' set into the façade.

Christ Church (United Reformed Church), Reading Road
Christ Church (URC) was originally Henley's Congregational Church, and was built in 1907 to replace an earlier 'Independent Chapel' (see further under 'Route' below). It is built of brick with Bath stone facings with Gothic-style tracery, and to the south-east a clock tower with lantern and small spire. This was apparently given by Sir Frank Crisp (1843-1919), lawyer and microspopist, at that time the owner of Friar Park. Inside, the windows are Art Nouveau.

Sacred Heart (RC), Vicarage Road
Sacred Heart, Henley's Roman Catholic church, was built in 1935-6, and is described by BoE as 'Arts and Crafts Gothic in red brick'. Inside, the east end holds important work from an earlier date: an east window, reredos, and high altar from the chapel of Danesfield House, Medmenham, which was demolished c. 1901. The chapel had been commissioned in 1851 from A. W. N. Pugin, and the work was completed by Pugin's son after his father's death. The window (featuring Women of the Old Testament and the Immaculate Conception) is by Hardman, and the reredos shows the Virgin and Child between scenes from the life of St Charles Borromeo. Figures in niches on either side show St Charles and St Elizabeth of Hungary.

Holy Trinity, Grey's Hill
Holy Trinity was built in 1847-8 in a style described by BoE as 'Puginian Dec'. The architect was Benjamin Ferrey (1810-80), who had been a pupil of Pugin's, and published his Recollections of Pugin

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in 1861. Ferrey lived near Henley between 1846 and 1853. The church is built of flint and stone, with a triple bellcote at the west end. It was extended in 1890-1 by the addition of aisles, a south-east vestry, and a north-west baptistery. The interior was reordered in 1987 to provide an open liturgical space.

Friends Meeting House, Northfield End
The history of the Quakers in Henley goes back to the seventeenth century. The present *Friends Meeting House*, in red brick with terracotta dressings, was designed by Smith & Son of Reading, and was built in 1894 as a replacement for an earlier Meeting 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.