



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964

Abingdon and Beyond

A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles

One of the pleasures of a town walk is that it can be as long or as short as you wish, while reliably offering interesting buildings within a small compass. Abingdon is a good example: a comparatively short walk links the mid-nineteenth-century elegance of the Baptist Church with the fourteenth-century painted ceiling of the Lady Chapel in St Helen's, but you can then easily range more widely to take in the Abbey Gardens housing what is left of the great medieval Abbey of Abingdon, or walk north up Oxford Road to find the Roman Catholic church of Our Lady and St Edmund. Explore further to visit other town churches (the route below has an extension to Christ Church and All Saints, Methodist). And if you would like to add the rural to the urban, follow the Ock River Valley Walk down to Drayton, or think of crossing Abingdon Bridge, and walking downstream along the Thames Path to reach Culham, or Sutton Courtenay.

The route

Abingdon is very accessible. Frequent buses link it with Oxford, and there are convenient car parks. I caught an X15 over from Witney, and got off in Stratton Way. From here, walk back a short way to the junction with Ock Street and turn right. A short distance along the road you will find Abingdon Baptist Church, set back from the road. Walk on as far as Conduit Road on your right, and turn down it to find Trinity Methodist Church.

Retrace your steps, and at the lights cross over Stratton Way and then walk to the far side of Ock Street. Turn left, and walk to the second turning to the right, West St Helen's Street. Walk down this road to find the tower and spire of St Helen's Church at one end.

Leaving the church by the north door, cross the road, and walk up East St Helen's Street to the Market Square. Look across to the far side to see St Nicholas' Church, with to the right of it the gatehouse and a route through to the Abbey grounds.

Leaving St Nicholas, walk up Stert Street to Vineyard. Continue up this road to where the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady and St Edmund stands at the junction of Oxford Road and Radley Road. At this point you have a choice. If you would like the exercise, walk up Oxford Road for about three quarters of a mile until you come to a set of traffic lights. Cross over and walk down Northcourt Road to find Christ Church. Returning, cross back and walk a very short way down Appleford Road to find All Saints Methodist on the corner with Dorchester Crescent.

Walking back down Oxford Road and then Vineyard, you can cross into Stratton Way and walk down to the bus stop where this walk started. But Abingdon's a pleasant town, why not try one of its eateries, or explore the Abbey Gardens bordering the river. Or, as suggested above, consider extending your walk beyond the town to visit Culham, Sutton Courtenay, or Drayton. If doing so, use OS Explorer 171 'Vale of the White Horse' to follow the marked footpath. It perhaps hardly needs saying, but only do that in dry weather, and not when the river is running high.



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Abingdon and Beyond Rest & Refreshment

*There are eateries in central Abingdon, and Waitrose has a café and customer toilets.
There are public toilets in The Charter carpark, and in Abbey Meadows.*

About the Churches

Baptist Church

Built in 1841, and set back from what is a continuously busy road, Abingdon Baptist Church presents as a building of classical design, with a portico of four rounded columns, and squared-off pilasters at each side.

Trinity Methodist Church, Conduit Road

Today Trinity Methodist Church serves a combined congregation of the Methodist and United Reformed Churches, but it was originally built in 1875 as a Wesleyan Methodist chapel. Built of Corallian sandstone, it has a tall steeple and geometric tracery, with stained glass (1906) that BoE suggests is based on Reynolds' Virtues in New College Chapel. Trinity Methodist celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, and there will be a special exhibition for Heritage Open Day and Ride and Stride.

St Helen's Church

The spire and (thirteenth-century) tower of St Helen's, in the north-east corner of the building, are the most immediately visible parts of the church. The north door, the main entrance to the church, is set just to one side of the tower, and if you cross Abingdon Bridge and view the town from across the river, you see spire and tower rising above the buildings along the waterfront.

In the medieval period, the Abbey of Abingdon (one of the richest abbeys in England) would have been a dominant force in the locality, and there are records of struggles between town and abbey. St Helen's is definitely a town church, and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the religious fraternities in the town enlarged it by adding aisles to the original build. The north aisle was the original nave, but expansion to the south greatly expanded the building.

Today stepping into the church you are conscious of its width, since donors added to it by building aisles. Standing just in the north aisle, you look across the church through a forest of pillars. The addition, originating in the mid thirteenth century, was the Lady Chapel built by the Guild of Our Lady. Today it houses one of the great treasures of St Helen's, a painted ceiling of the late fourteenth century. Its 52 panels are a representation of the Tree of Jesse, depicting figures from the genealogy of Jesus

The painted ceiling is a glory (and perhaps unique), but as with so many of our churches you will find echoes from every century.



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Thus the pulpit is seventeenth-century, but the chancel was fitted out in Woodyer's remodelling of 1873. And a twenty-first-century reordering has added a nave altar of white oak.

As a town church, St Helen's naturally has memorials to key figures in the town, and some of them are striking. Elizabeth Hawkins was memorialized in 1782 by a monument that shows her, book in hand, surrounded by her family in Roman dress. A memorial to Dr John Crossley (d. 1753), by Nollekens, has an urn with a distinctly grumpy cherub. This is a church that repays time spent in it.

St Nicolas, Market Place

According to BoE, the church was first mentioned in 1177, and was built for the lay population of the Abbey of Abingdon. The battlements on the tower were added by Edwin Dolby during his 1880-1 restoration. To the right of the church, you see what is left of the Abbey gatehouse.

The west front also has a memorial tablet (of 1964) to one of Abingdon's most famous sons. St Edmund of Abingdon was Archbishop of Canterbury between 1222 and 1233, and was also according to the tablet 'First known Doctor of Divinity in the University of Oxford'. Born about 1175, he died in 1240. His mother, Mabel, had apparently been buried in St Nicolas.

Our Lady and St Edmund (RC)

The Roman Catholic church dedicated to the Virgin Mary and St Edmund of Abingdon was completed in 1865. Sir George Bowyer, a local landowner who had converted to Roman Catholicism in 1850, was a significant figure in its foundation, and his name is one of those inscribed on pillars on the north side of the church—others include the St Birinus, 'Apostle of Wessex' and first Bishop of Dorchester, and the martyr Edmund Campion. The inscription commemorating Sir George describes him as 'Founder of St Edmund's church and school Abingdon'. There is a section in the east window which shows him presenting a model of the church.

The church sits in the angle made by the junction of Oxford Road and Radley Road, with the churchyard, sheltered by a wall, dividing it from the presbytery. One of the graves, that of the seventh Lord Abingdon (d. 1928), has an Eric Gill carving on its headstone.

Christ Church, Northcourt Road

A modern church with older roots, Christ Church was converted in 1960-1 from what was once a barn belonging to Northcourt Farm—which in turn, was once owned by the Abbey of Abingdon. The barn is thought to go back to the thirteenth century, although since the church was founded it has been further extended with such additions as a hall and vestibule.

All Saints, Methodist, Appleford Drive

A twentieth-century church built in 1959, sited on the corner of Appleford Drive and Dorchester Crescent.



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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.