



# Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

*Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964*

## **Around Bicester**

### **A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles**

*For some beyond the borders of Oxfordshire, the name today may be primarily associated with the outlet of 'Bicester Village', but Bicester is very much a town in its own right. Originally it was a settlement east of a Roman road running between Dorchester and Towcester. By the medieval period its parish church housed a shrine to the mysterious Saxon princess St Edburg, and an Augustinian priory was founded here in the late twelfth century. It was granted its own market in 1239, and an annual fair in 1252. It seems to have been commercially successful, and BoE comments on 'general rebuilding' in the seventeenth century. Major expansion came at the end of the twentieth century, and in 2014 designation as a 'Garden Town' indicated further increase, but through it all Bicester has retained its own identity. A walk round its churches and chapels is an excellent way to glimpse some of the key changes of past and present.*

### **The route**

The walk as described here is an easy route of about three miles; the longest stretch is the walk to and from Emmanuel Church, a mile or so from the town centre. Start at the bus stands in Manorsfield Road to the west of Pioneer Square and walk down to the traffic lights at the junction with Market Square and The Causeway. Turn right and to the end of the road and the beginning of Church Street. The Church of the Immaculate Conception is set back immediately to your right, and St Edburg's Church is a little further on across the road to your left.

On leaving St Edburg's, walk on down Church Street and along King's End as far as the T-junction. Turn right into Queen's Avenue and walk up it. Use the pedestrian crossing to go over to the far side of the road, pass the entrance to Bucknell Road, and take the Banbury Road fork off the mini roundabout. Walk down the Banbury Road, passing under the railway bridge. Shortly afterwards, you will find that the pavement becomes a shady walk screened from the open traffic. Continue down it until you reach a left turn into Lucerne Avenue. Walk down here, bearing round to the right, and you will see Emmanuel Church across the road on your right.

Afterwards walk back down the way you have come. Cross to the far side of the road, and at the roundabout use the traffic island to cross Buckingham Road. Pass the entrance to Roman Way and turn left into North Street. Walk down it, and across into Sheep Street. Walk down it to the corner with Bell Lane, look across to your left, and you will see Bicester Methodist Church. Beyond it is a pedestrianised section with a number of eateries, and a short way down on the right a passage takes you through to Pioneer Square by the large Sainsbury's store.



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## About the Churches

### *Church of the Immaculate Conception (RC), The Causeway*

The Roman Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception was built in 1961-3, of brick. The main entrance looks out on The Causeway, the doors reached by a flight of shallow curving steps.

The bronze statue of the Immaculate Conception above the door dates from 1993, and is by the sculptor Mark Delf. At the east end of the building, invisible from this side, there is a tower with pyramidal roof. The church website provides a short parish history with some further details of the building, including an illustration of a new crucifix, painted by the Prior of Farnborough Abbey, installed in 1999.

### *St Edburg's Church (CoE), Church Street*

This is a handsome town church, apparently Norman (or even earlier) in origin. The north and south aisles date from the thirteenth and fourteenth century, and the pinnaced west tower is from the 1400s—apparently a replacement for the earlier central tower of what was a cruciform church.

Inside, it is spacious, with a tall wide chancel arch (once part of the central crossing), and tall piers running down the nave. On the north side, you can see a range of arches indicating the different stages of the building, with the round arch of the earlier crossing to the east, and the later pointed arch on the west. Between them, the triangular head of the lower opening may be the survival of a yet earlier stage: the Anglo-Saxon entrance to a *porticus*, or cell opening out of the main part of a church. The picture also shows the square solidity of the piers; with the south aisle, these were later cut down into a slender clustered form.

As a town church that has been rebuilt and extended, St Edburg's has some furnishings from an earlier period than what we now have. A fragment from a tomb-chest, showing carved figures of knights, is set high on the south wall of the nave. According to the church leaflet, these are thought to have come from Bicester Priory after its dissolution in the 1530s. And the tapering sixteen-sided font (which BoE calls 'extraordinary') may perhaps be from the thirteenth century. It's worth noting too that the Priory originally housed the shrine of the Saxon princess, St Edburg, now in St Michael's Church, Stanton Harcourt. At the Dissolution it was removed (or rescued) from Bicester by Sir Robert Harcourt, then Sheriff of Oxfordshire, and taken to St Michael's.

There are also some eye-catching memorials from a later age. Thomas Grantham (d. 1718), a commander in the Merchant Navy, is represented by a portrait medallion flanked by two cherubs and surmounting a winged skull, while Edward and Cassandra Turner (d. 1766 and 1770 respectively) are also shown with a (double) portrait medallion in three-quarter profile embellishing what BoE describes as a 'pretentious, rather bulbous standing monument. And from a hundred years later, the east window in the south transept has a fine Morris & Co. window, designed by Burne-Jones, depicting Faith, Hope and Charity.



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*Emmanuel Church (CoE), Barberry Place, Bure Park*

This brick-built church in Bure Park, about a mile from the town centre, is one of a small number of twenty-first-century churches to be met with on these walks. The main entrance faces inwards to a small square, but its name 'Emmanuel' with the banner proclaiming 'God with us' catches the eye from the road.

*Bicester Methodist Church, Sheep Street*

Bicester Methodist Church dates from 1927, and was preceded by an earlier Wesleyan Chapel of 1841 (in North Street, now the Masonic Hall), and a United Free Methodist Chapel (now a shop) of 1863 on the other side of Sheep Street. The current church is an impressive brick-built erection with stone facings. The wide frontage has two bow windows (BoE calls them 'domestic looking'), with three tall lancet windows in the upper storey. Inside there are apparently stained-glass windows dating from the turn of the millennium.

## Rest & Refreshment

*Bicester amenities are mainly concentrated in the town centre, where there are a range of eateries. Sainsbury's in Pioneer Square has a coffee shop. The Emmanuel Church website notes that from Wednesday to Friday mornings they run a café serving hot and cold drinks and cakes.*

*There are public toilets (operated by card or cash) in Manorsfield Road just up from the bus stops, and Sainsbury's has customer toilets.*

## 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.*