



# Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

*Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964*

## **RIDE, STRIDE, CHURCHES AND CHATS: CHURCHES CIRCULAR in South Oxfordshire**

### **A cycle ride described by Jo Almond and Jo Brook - "JoJo"!**

*One of the delights of this South Oxfordshire circuit is the way it threads together riverside villages, quiet hills, and bustling market towns, each with churches rich in history and character. Begin in South Stoke, where St Andrew's 13th-century tower watches over the Thames, then head to Ipsden's St Mary the Virgin, a tranquil hilltop church with links to St Birinus himself. From there, the route flows on to Dorchester Abbey's soaring spaces and Wallingford's varied treasures – from the intimate Quaker Meeting House to the ancient tower of St Leonard's, witness to centuries of change. Whether you ride the full loop or stroll a section, this is a journey through a thousand years of faith and community, with each stop offering its own story to discover.*

#### Thomas of Canterbury Goring.

Saturday 14th September, and Jo A and Jo B set out to A: ride and B: run to churches in our locality. We met at St Andrew's South Stoke, (13th Century, with earlier origins, possibly founded by St Birinus?) and were waved off at 11am by Jemima, who was 'manning' the church for other Ride and Stride visitors. Jo A headed off to St Mary the Virgin North Stoke, Jo B slogged across the fields and upwards to 'the church on the hill', St Mary the Virgin Ipsden. This is a small and beautifully tranquil place which also boasts links to early Christianity in Oxfordshire, being reputed to have been founded by St Birinus himself as a place of quiet outside of Dorchester. A prayer for swift feet and not too many aches the following day, a signature in the visitors book under a visitor from Melbourne (Australia, not Derbyshire!) and Jo B set off again along the ancient Icknield Way, recalling the many feet who walked it before her as she set her sights on the far tower of Dorchester Abbey. Meanwhile, Jo A was mending a flat tyre, at home, her bike being unco-operative about field-side fixing. Many hands helped her and she girded herself to get back out there.

Next for 'the B team' was St Mary Magdalene Crowmarsh Gifford. I have seen this church from the road so many times, but never visited and what a treat! A lofty church, it was constructed in the twelfth century by Wallingford Priory and it is believed to have originally been used as the chapel for a leper colony. King Stephen fortified it in 1140 in his war with his cousin Mathilda, who he besieged at Wallingford Castle. It's not hard to imagine the church being on the banks of the flooded river, and the Queen and the King firing volleys back and forth. In fact there are cannon ball holes in the Vestry door – courtesy of Royalists who fired upon Cromwell's supporters sheltering there during the Civil War. So much for sanctuary! This Church must surely win the prize for the most fearless bell ringers in South Oxon – a single ladder rises at the back of the church, from a platform above the nave and the bell rope hangs a little to the side of the ladder! A chat with other Striders led to a recommendation to visit Newnham Murran Church ("The Little Church") that I had missed and I made a note to pop in on the return leg.



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Whilst Jo A battled her unco-operative bike, Jo B carried on to St Helen's Benson. The West Saxon King Cyneigils had his stronghold at Bensington and it is believed his son was baptised a Christian in the Thames nearby, but now this church that we glimpse from the fast road to Oxford, seems marooned from the river, but the happy lot at Benson weren't going to let a bypass be a barrier and there was certainly a party atmosphere in the Churchyard and meeting rooms here. Heritage Day was being celebrated with a display of historic bicycles including 2 penny farthings and a bike owned by William Morris! Inside the church was a history of 'Bensington' and a wonderfully curated display of ancient agricultural field maps and growth of the village. I lingered there perhaps a little too long but it being lunch time by now, I indulged in what I think was 'probably' the best lemon drizzle in the county!

The final three miles to Dorchester Abbey was cake-fuelled and mercifully flat. Disappointing that St Birinus church was closed, but Dorchester Abbey (as ever) did not disappoint. The village was busy and I spent a happy half hour listening to rehearsals and sipping a very good cup of tea from the museum shop. But, time was passing and Wallingford beckoned Jo B.

Jo A was back in the saddle meanwhile and heading for Ipsden. It's a long climb out of Goring and quite the view when you get there; the downhill comes quick, but so does the next, steeper incline. When Jo A got to Ipsden, she added her name to the visitors book, under Jo B's, then set off for North Stoke, in site and definitely and blissfully, downhill.

Wallingford is downstream from Dorchester and it feels oddly downhill too. Jo B's first stop off there was St Mary Le More. Small in scale and in the heart of the town, it sometimes feel as if you don't ever see it all when you enter from the market square. I'd have liked to have been able to climb the tower, but it wasn't open, so on to St John the Evangelist, preparing to celebrate its 100th birthday – Jo B was starting to feel a little old too, but happy to celebrate this Church's birthday with a Ribena offered to visitors! The Quaker Meeting House was an unexpected delight. It could have been a dovecote, so small was it in scale. A place to contemplate, talk and be heard. I enjoyed time there very much. Another place of quiet contemplation was the Methodist Church in Wallingford. To a driver it seems stranded on a roundabout, to a Strider, it was an easy stop and an inbetween space of calm reflection. St Leonards was the final Wallingford church I visited and its oldest. A church has stood on this site since the 6th century, when Christianity had barely made any inroads into Mercia and Wessex. The ancient tower faces the town, it was destroyed by the Danes in 1066 and has seen off sieges of Wallingford in the days of Stephen and Mathilda and again in 1646 when it was used as a barracks. Wallingford once had 14 Medieval churches, that any survive is a testament to faith and hope and to continue to thrive they need continued support. Ride and Stride helps fund that.

Jo A visited St Mary The Virgin in North Stoke and, after a quick 'sprint' around the eery and enigmatic ruins of St John the Baptist at Mongewell, the visitors book showed Jo B was the next to visit North Stoke's beautiful church. St Mary The Virgin dates from the 1200's.



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Construction began under patronage of William III's brother, and was funded by Normandy nobles. Interrupted by crusades in 1242, completion of the Nave was later and between bankrupt builders and part of the tower collapsing because of bell vibrations, it has a rich and interesting history. The Medieval wall paintings are beautiful and depict various biblical scenes. Both Jo's agreed it was an unexpected gem on our doorstep that is deserving of a return visit. Both Jo's popped back in at South Stoke, before pressing on to St Thomas of Canterbury Goring, Jo A ahead of Jo B who found the last church on her 40km circuit closing, but what a way to spend a day.

A thousand years of worship and uninterrupted line of faith up and down the river and all of it on our doorstep if we just stride (or ride) to it!