



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

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Between the River and the Road: Cumnor, Appleton and Besselsleigh **A short walk as described by Elizabeth Knowles**

A walk of between 4 and 5 miles (if done as a circular route, with an optional side trip to Besselsleigh), connecting three churches between the Thames and the A420 in what was once Berkshire. If as I did you start and finish by bus, beginning with Cumnor has the advantage that at no point do you need to cross the A420 on foot, something that needs to be done with care. Most of the route is easy walking; the only point to consider if taking the fieldpath route from Besselsleigh to Cumnor is that at one point after wet weather the path can be extremely muddy. (Even in a dry spell it is likely to be damp, although quite negotiable.) The walk can be comfortably done in between 3 and 4 hours, and with the Bear and Ragged Staff at Cumnor and the Greyhound at Besselsleigh there are possibilities for refreshment at each end.

The route

The S9 Wantage bus from Oxford (every 20 minutes) goes through Cumnor. Get off at the final stop (Kenilworth Road) and walk back downhill to see St Michael's Church, Cumnor on the left-hand side. Cross over just before the junction with the High Street and take the path up to the main door. After visiting the church, turn left out of the churchyard and continue downhill past the Post Office and the War Memorial to a mini roundabout with a left turn into Appleton Road.

Cross this road and continue along the High Street. Follow the curves of the road round a gentle S-bend and walk up to the left turn into Leys Road. Turn into it, and a short way down find Cumnor United Reformed Church on the other side of the road.

From here, you have a choice. The simplest way (and probably the best one in muddy weather) is to walk back down the High Street and turn right into Appleton Road. Walk down this road passing Cumnor Village Pond on the right, and beyond it the Bear and Ragged Staff.

A little further down on across the road there is a turn in to Cumnor Cricket Club, and you can also see a Public Footpath sign; this marks the Cumnor end of the footpath from Besselsleigh. Continue down Appleton Road, and at a bend with Closes Field on the right, cross the road to keep to the footway. Shortly after you will reach the end of the footway and of the speeding restrictions. However, while proceeding with care, the road itself is quite walkable.

(If however you preferred, on leaving Cumnor URC, you can continue down to the end of Leys Road, to the point at which you reach a fork and a sign marked for 'Bablockhythe' to the right and 'footpath' to the left. Take the left-hand fork and follow the footpath until it reaches Closes Field, home of Cumnor Minors Football Club. Cross the field, and exit on to Appleton Road. At this point you can turn left to walk back to the centre of Cumnor, or turn right to continue to Appleton.)

In just over half a mile, at the junction with Besselsleigh lane, turn right following the sign for Appleton (marked as 1¼ miles on the signpost).



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The route

After a quarter of a mile, turn left (ignoring the lane ahead leading to Eaton Village). As you reach Appleton (and a 30 mph speed limit) the road curves round to the left. Shortly after this you begin to pass houses and there is a footway on the left-hand side. Walk down through the village, passing a private house that was formerly 'The Thatched Tavern'. Shortly after this a left turn is signed for the local Church of England primary school, and St Laurence's Church. Walk down the lane, passing the school on the left, and with the wall of Appleton Manor on your right. The church is dead ahead. At this point, ignore the sign directing you round the west end of the church, and enter through the porch and south door.

When leaving the church, follow the path round to the north side and walk straight ahead to a gate letting you out of the churchyard. Cross a stretch of pasture and go through another gate to a footpath running between fencing and then an open field to the left with woodland (Besselsleigh Wood) ahead. Cross a footbridge over a stream and take the left-hand branch of a path. Follow this through the wood (ignoring a stile on the left) to the edge of the trees and out into open land, fenced on the left. Follow the (roughish at this point) track past farm buildings and a final tarmacked stretch. When you reach a T-junction with the lane, turn right towards Besselsleigh village. When you pass Home Farm on your left, you will see a Public Footpath sign marked for Cumnor (1½ miles).

At this point you have a choice. You can walk back to Cumnor over the fields (see route below*), or walk on down the lane past the Greyhound to the A420. The bus stop (serving both the S9 from Wantage and S6 from Faringdon buses) is on the left a short way down. If you want to see Besselsleigh Church (unlikely to be open, but still of interest) turn right and walk just under a mile up the footway along the A420 until you come to St Lawrence, Besselsleigh on the right. After seeing it, walk on past the gates of what is now Parklands (once Besselsleigh School) for a short distance to a bus stop and wait there for the S9 (back to Cumnor and Oxford) or the S6 (directly to Oxford).

*Footpath route from Besselsleigh to Cumnor

Turning down by the side of Home Farm, walk down a tarmacked stretch, cross a grassy stretch, and go through a metal grate on the right into a large open field, following the evident track running along the line of the left-hand hedge.

Walk down to the end of the field, and you will reach two gates. Go through the right-hand one and across a footbridge leading to a shady wooded path. After a few minutes you come to a distinctly boggy patch, where someone had fortunately laid down some branches to make it negotiable. I imagine that in very wet weather this might be trickier.

Exit into stubble field. Keep straight on following left hand boundary; the course of the track is evident



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The route

evident. (I would think that this stretch is likely to flood in bad weather; I could still see water in the lowest furrows.)

This is a long field. Walk down to the end and leave via a short track to come out in Appleton Road just below the Bear and Ragged Staff.

About the churches

St Michael's, Cumnor

An impressive medieval church with the remains of a Norman corbel table on the south wall of the nave, and a square crenellated tower dating from the early thirteenth century. Inside, as well as the architecture, there are a whole range of individual treasures. One that catches the eye is an almost-life-sized statue of (as the Preface to the Authorized Version has it), 'that bright Occidental star, Queen Elizabeth of most happy memory', otherwise Elizabeth I. The statue is thought originally to have been commissioned by her favourite the Earl of Leicester when he owned Cumnor Place. The actual steward of Cumnor Place at the time, Anthony Forster, who as the fictional 'Foster' was represented in Scott's *Kenilworth* to have played an active and malignant role in the mysterious death of Amy Robsart, is more fairly commemorated by a fine Purbeck monument with inlaid brasses to himself and his wife.

St Michael's has evidently had a number of wealthy patrons, but other individual memorials have a more personal local touch. One of these is a brass wall tablet of the early seventeenth century commemorating James Welsh (d. 1612) and his wife Margery, who survived him. The tablet, in somewhat laboured verse, acclaims the virtues of James who *'for the poore did Christianly provide, /Accordinge to the talent God had lent, /Five poundes he gave, of zeale and good intent.'* The lines on James are well spaced; a second section below, lined a little more tightly, tells us that Margery enlarged his gift *'With five pounds added to his five, unto her Christian fame'.* The monies had been deposited with the local clergy, and she set out clearly what was to happen, that *'...yearly to the poore of Comner be a marke of silver payd/Which is the full apoynted rent, of the whole bequeathed some/And so for ever shall remayne, until the day of dome;/In Comner for the poores releife, Margery Welsh doth will,/The charge of this when she is deade, may be performed stille.'*

Judgement Day has not yet arrived, but it seems improbable that James and Margery's ten pound donation can still be yielding fruit—however, one must give her full marks for determination.

I was also very taken by a second memorial, this time to a Cumnor-born 'shipwright and marriner', Norris Hodson, who died aboard the Gloucester 'in the squadron commanded by Commander Anson' on 14 June 1741. According to his epitaph here, he 'was buried in the great South Sea



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in the hope of a joyfull Resurrection when the sea shall give up her dead'. The memorial tablet was (according to the inscription) 'erected at the sole expense of Mr. John Quainton' in 1743, although there is nothing further to explain the link between the two.

Cumnor United Reformed Church

A late-nineteenth-century church of red brick, with lancet windows, set endwise on to the road. A dedication tablet in the wall records the date of 3rd June 1895, but the church website notes an earlier origination date of 1845 as a Congregational Chapel, a mission church founded from a neighbouring village.

St Laurence, Appleton

Another medieval church, with a tower that has undergone some changes. It was apparently heightened in the fifteenth century, and then gained a lantern in the mid nineteenth century when the number of bells was increased from eight to ten.

Inside the church is aisled, with late-twelfth-century round pillars marking out a north aisle. It was apparently extended east around 1612 by Sir Richard Fettiplace, and a century later a graceful wooden arcade was installed to separate this space from the chancel. There are also two more recent additions that are worth noting: a stained-glass window commemorating Sir Basil Blackwell and his wife, and a distinctly unusual iron grave-marker for Alfred White (d. 1876) in the churchyard.

This has an iron ring with ten bells in the surround. Alfred (born at Appleton in 1804) was a bellhanger, son of a blacksmith, and founder of the firm Whites of Appleton, according to their website the oldest continuously-trading bellhanging company in the country. And Alfred had another important local connection: he was the proprietor of the Greyhound at Besselsleigh.

St Lawrence, Besselsleigh

Besselsleigh Park was once the site of a manor owned by Mr Speaker Lenthall of the Long Parliament. (Before that, as recent archaeological excavations have shown, there was a much earlier medieval settlement on the wider site.) The church itself sits within the park the churchyard protected from grazing sheep by a drystone wall. There is still a side gate into the manor grounds, and beyond it you can see a single surviving pier of what was the gatehouse in William Lenthall's day.

The church is medieval (you can see a Norman doorway on the north side), but it was refurbished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the Lenthall family. It is generally locked, although if you ever do see inside you will a painted tympanum across the nave with the arms of the Lenthall family. However, even the exterior is worth seeing to get a feel of its relation to the park and manor.



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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.