

The Abingdon Waterways walk

A delightful circular walk that shows a variety of Oxfordshire habitats and also takes in the medieval heart of Abingdon. It may be unique among walks for including a town centre whilst avoiding any weary suburban road walking.

The walk is approximately 8.5 miles (13.5 kilometres) long.

Walk devised and written by Heather Brown
Illustrated by Stuart Roper

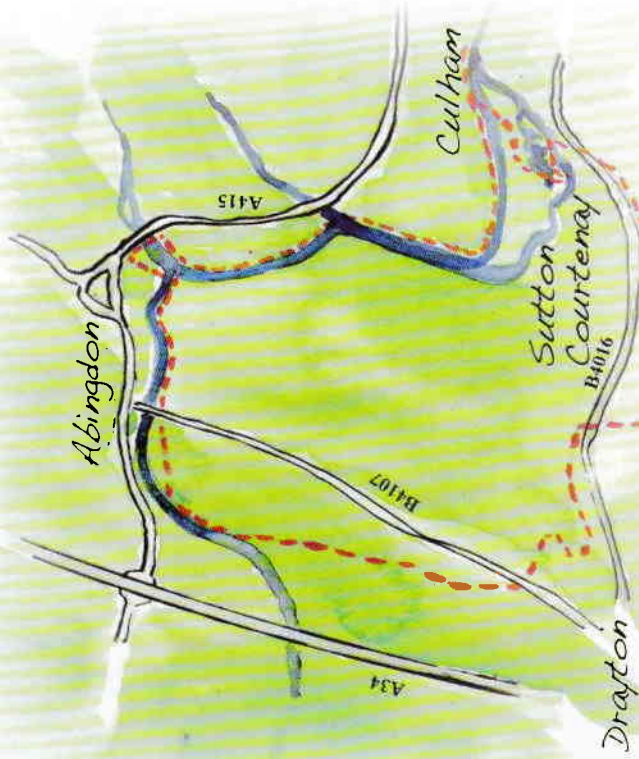


£2RRP

Also in this series: *The Abingdon Two Locks Walk*

This walk is circular and can be walked in either direction. It could be started and finished from the town centre or several other points along the way. The walk as described here, starting at Culham Lock, has the advantage of free parking, the best views are ahead of you rather than behind you and, if started around mid-morning, the availability of pubs, restaurants and cafes coincides approximately with lunch and tea time.

This walk is ideal for a group that divides into an A team of the rompingly fit and a B team of those who would prefer a little walk, a little lunch and a little shopping, followed by a relaxing boat trip back to the start point. Both parties can share their first hour or two together, then go their own way and wind up back together at roughly the same time in the afternoon.



We hope you enjoy the walk



With thanks to
Peg Lowenigan
The Ramblers
for technical assistance



Abingdon Town Council
Vale of the White Horse District Council
Oxfordshire County Council
Abingdon on Thames Chamber of Commerce
Abingdon Business Alliance

For further information visit:

Abingdon Visitor & Community Information Centre,
Old Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 3JD
Tel 01235 522711
www.chooseabingdon.co.uk

Starting from Culham

To find the free car park at Culham Lock, turn off the A415 Abingdon to Dorchester road at the pub, taking the road signposted to Sutton Courtenay. The car park is close to OX14 4NE if you are using internet map services or grid reference SU508949 if you prefer your OS map.

Culham Lock to Abingdon Bridge (one hour)

From the car park turn right along the road to the footpath gate marked Thames Path and enter the working area of Culham Lock, which was opened by the Thames Commissioners in 1809 as part of the new Culham Cut designed to bypass the main river and improve the route for barges through to Abingdon. Jerome K Jerome called it the "coldest and deepest lock on the river". Take a look backwards at Sutton Bridge, opened in 1811, before passing the lock and out through the gate ahead of you into open countryside. The rooftops of the village of Culham appear over the broad field on your right.



After a small slope and a gate, a footbridge appears on your left which goes over the water towards Sutton Courtenay. Although our route is not over the bridge it is worth taking the few steps up to the apex and observing the surreal effect of Didcot Power Station rising into view ahead of you. Local people have an ambivalent relationship with this cluster of buildings; it is on the cusp of moving from monstrosity to local landmark and is of sufficient age to begin to qualify as industrial history. There is a local beer named after it. It is a haunting presence that seems to pop up unexpectedly. Puzzled consultation with your map will prove that this illusion is produced by your brain not registering that you have followed some huge bends in the river, but logic is still challenged by the feeling that the power station is in fact trundling surreptitiously from place to place on the horizon whilst your back is turned.

Turning round on the bridge you can also see the sturdy tower of Culham village church, St Pauls, and Culham Manor House. The whole site was once the property of Abingdon Abbey, being a bequest from the two sisters of King Kenulf of Mercia who had lived out pious unmarried lives there at their own request. Return back from the bridge and resume your former direction past the lush bullrush patch and through a rustling copse of willows and silver birches.

Once out in the open again and following still the water's edge, look out for the newly carved entrance to the Wilts & Berks Canal on the opposite bank.

The story of this canal is an interesting antidote to the easily-made assumption that 19th century technology and private enterprise formed a relentlessly successful partnership. The Wilts & Berks Canal sounds like a refreshingly modern chapter of disasters. As a project it was late, over budget and never produced a good return for its investors. By the time it was built it was becoming obsolete as the coal it was meant to transport was becoming worked out. Different attempts to refinance it failed, and finally parts of the canal were filled in during the Great War. Today, the Wilts & Berks Canal Trust are working doggedly towards restoration and perhaps one day we will see the canal enter a period of success as a leisure waterway.

Continue along the Thames Path to the wooden footbridge over the outflow of the old navigation channel called the Swift Ditch. A more ancient stone bridge is visible a few yards away. This is Culham Bridge, route of the main road from Dorchester to Abingdon for many centuries and site of a vicious Cavalier vs Roundhead skirmish in the Civil War.

In the early hours of 11th January 1645, a Royalist troop was sent out from their stronghold in Oxford to try to take back the bridge. Ever since the Royalists had surrendered Abingdon the year before their supply wagons heading for Oxford past Dorchester had been subject to attacks emerging out of Abingdon which was now in the command of Major General Richard Browne. They needed to put a stop to this and knew that control of the bridge could deny the Parliamentary rudding parties their easy access.

Emerging from the early morning mist, the Royalists, led by Sir Henry Gage, gained the element of surprise and were able to kill a sentry and take control. However, another sentry had escaped and was soon back in Abingdon raising the alarm. A troop of Parliamentary fighters was dispatched to ambush them by coming round through the fields and bushes at the side of the road. The fight went on for some hours until the Royalists withdrew, carrying the mortally wounded Henry Gage with them. The Parliamentary side wrote up the event to include some colourful claims of thuggery on the Royalist side, claiming that they had tried to destroy the bridge, which might well have made sense strategically, but also claiming that they were guilty of "plundering Culham most miserably, stripping from... women of rank all their clothes". Historians are inclined to take this part with a pinch of salt, particularly as Gage was a Roman Catholic which always incited the most vitriolic attacks of the Parliamentary propagandists.



Continue on the riverside path and from here on the two banks present very different riverside environments. Much of the wealth of medieval Abingdon was built on the barge trade that linked the small rural town with London. On the opposite bank you will now see traces of the wharves and landing places that used to underpin the economy of the town. The steadily unfolding view encompasses the spire of St Helens Church, and on rounding a final bend in the river you come upon the view of St Helens Wharf. Here you are looking at the historical heart of Abingdon.



Long Alley

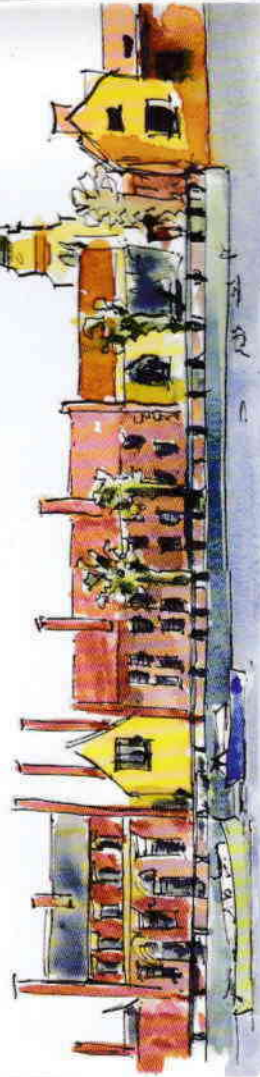
- the first of the three almshouses that were built around the church to house poor elderly townfolk, all still in the same use today. The others, Mr Twitry's and Brick Alley are also charming but Long Alley has the sixteenth century wall paintings which can be seen from the outside.

St Helen's Wharf

- imagine the bank opposite you now teeming with life, three storey warehouses built right up against the water and barges drawn up to load and unload. This is how this area would have looked for many centuries.

St Helen's Church

- the people's church as opposed to the monastery church on the other side of town. Successive generations of the town's wealthier merchants built additional naves until the church became as wide as it is long. From here they also ran the Guild of the Holy Cross, an organisation that looked after the town's infrastructure and the poor and elderly.



Continuing along the river the triumphant achievement of the townsfolk of 14th century Abingdon comes into view. What is known as Abingdon Bridge is in fact two bridges, the other being called Burford Bridge.

It was not the might and wealth of the international Benedictine religious order, whose Abbey of St Mary's stood close by, which built the economically important crossing over the Thames but the well-organised local merchants of the Guild of the Holy Cross. Their successful structure has had some refurbishment in order for it to stand until today but nevertheless you are still looking at what is essentially a medieval technological achievement, built through active local organisation in a way that should inspire us in our own time.



Pass under the bridge, and then up the stone stairs immediately on your right to save crossing the road above. Cross the river, pausing at the centre for excellent views. At the centre of the bridge there is a path down to the embarkation point for steamers which can take you back down to Culham Lock (summer only).

From the bridge continue straight up Bridge Street, passing the Old Gaol on your left. On a bright day, with a breeze fluttering the flags, and the white rails of the County Hall roof shining, the first few bars of Rule Britannia may come to mind. It's because the roof is designed remarkably like a galleon fore-deck, and deserves a gentleman in frock coat and tricorne hat to be leaning over the rails with a brass telescope. In fact, minus the telescope, this happens more often than one might expect as the town of Abingdon boasts not just one Town Crier but a whole Guild of them. If you hear a handbell ringing as you round the corner into the Market Place you will just catch one of them giving out some local news, ending with the cry "God Save Abingdon and God Save the Queen".

Completed around 1811, the design of the Old Gaol was enlightened for its time as the design of three wings around a central hub allowed all prisoners to have windows for light and fresh air! In charge of the project was Daniel Harris, Governor of the County Gaol at Oxford Castle. Locals say that Napoleonic prisoners of war built the gaol but there is a clue in Harris' career which combined gaol management with major building and waterways projects, a synergy strange to us today. It is more likely that he used his ordinary convicts, a free workforce that must have made his building projects particularly profitable. Daniel Harris features in the Abingdon Watertumpike Murder, a piece of historical fiction, featured in our Abingdon Two Locks Walk and found in books-hops locally.