

Detours and Diversions in Abingdon (at least half an hour)

Arriving at the Market Place, once known as The Bury, you will find remarkable and important buildings to right and left. The oldest building over on your right as you enter the market place from Bridge Street is St Nicolas' church, with its square medieval tower. This was once the monastery's outward facing "little church by the gate" in which local lay people connected with the monastery could receive communion. The archway indicates where the abbey's front line stood and this term was sometimes apt as the gates were on occasion locked against the rioting townsfolk.

The dramatic centrepiece of the Market Place is the County Hall; this glorious building has a look of Christopher Wren about it. The stonemason associated with the building was one Christopher Kempster; there is evidence that he worked with Wren so there is an undoubted connection and influence. For a market house and assize court, this building outdoes any other in the country, and is a statement of the ambitions and confidence of the town leaders in the eighteenth century, when Abingdon was a leading trade centre and County Town of Berkshire. Horse fairs, hiring fairs and others kept the town busy and the tradition of the Michaelmas Fair continues every October, the longest street fair in Europe. The following week is the Runaway Fair, perhaps a typical

Abingdon tradition in that it asserted the rights of the small man. Farm workers who had found their new contract to be unpleasant; perhaps a master who was cruel, or pay that was less than promised; could try again at the Runaway Fair to find a better place before the winter set in.

Abingdon is still full of independent spirit; it is emphatically not a clone town. The compact town centre has fewer chain stores and more independents than the national averages, and plenty of good restaurants and cafes in the back streets. You are also likely to find a market in front of the County Hall as they take place weekly, monthly and quarterly throughout the year.

Leaving Abingdon

After starting down the alley way that commences the Ock Valley Walk, continue forwards when the route crosses the end of a residential street and over a small footbridge. The walk then winds along a wooded valley, sometimes between two streams, both seemingly the River Ock. The occasional glimpse of townhouses on your right is the development created from the old Morlands Brewery site. The streams are crystal clear, an improvement on their former state a century ago when they took away effluent from the brewery, and sewage from the Ock Street slum areas beyond.



2. You may detour through the archway to visit the site of the monastery in Abbey Gardens (the abbey that stood here was dismantled by Henry VIII's administrators in 1538 and the lead, glass and stones sent down the river, probably to be incorporated into Notsoch Palace that was begun in the same year. The site is marked out in the lawn of the Abbey Gardens.

3. Detour to visit the town centre and look around the County Hall which now houses a museum of local life and a national craft collection.

4. After exploring, to regain your route you should walk round to the back of the County Hall and walk down East St Helen Street. The Kings Head & Bell is reputed to be where Charles I held one of the first councils of war in 1642. This street is lined with even older medieval buildings, the homes of those merchants of the Guild of the Holy Cross who built the bridge.

6. After visiting the church, it is time to pick up the Ock Valley Walk, the secret path out of Abingdon. The beginning of this walk is found a few yards back up West St Helen's Street. Turn into the alley way where the signpost indicates.

St Nicolas' Church and old abbey gateway

County Hall which now houses a museum of local life and a national craft collection.

East St Helen Street

Medieval Abingdon

St Helen's Church

1. Arrive in Abingdon from the bridge

5. The grand finale of the street is the arrival at St Helen's Church itself. This small area around the church is worth a little exploration, taking in the wharf and the abbot's tower as well as the interior of the church with its panorama of stained glass windows and its medieval painted ceilings.

Abingdon to Drayton (one hour)

At the end of the Ock Valley Walk, the path joins a track and winds over a bridge to reach the B4017. Use the crossing point as this is a busy road and then turn left to walk a few yards up the road before turning into the public park.

Take the path that skirts along the side of a public sportsfield, continuing into a second field which you should cross over diagonally to pass in front of a children's play area and reach a wide bridge. The path curves around to run alongside a stream and through trees and brambles. Walking over a footbridge a small weir is visible. Turn immediately left after the bridge to walk along by the high fencing and under willows into the Ock Meadow Nature Reserve.

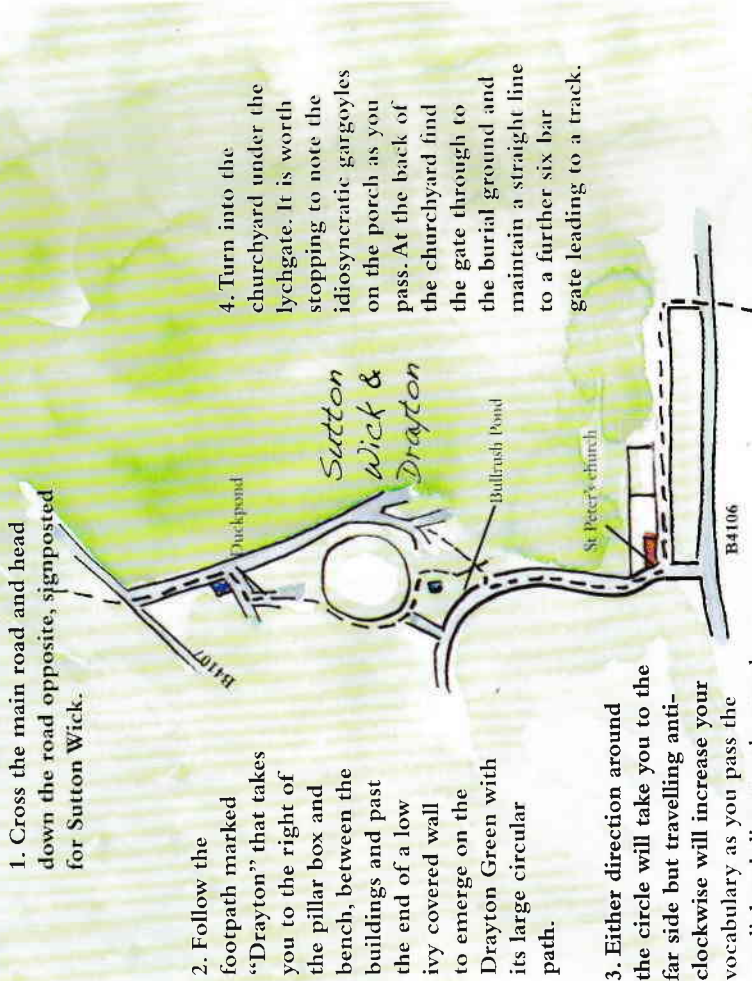


The Ock is here almost a stream, with lush growth, supposed to admire as it Himalayan Balsam. Local that voles are seen here if no guilt in enjoying a indigenous creatures. You unexpectedly tall footbridge, rather than steps, apparently on wheels... but a ramp of the downward slope cannot indeed terrifying.

Follow the path over the out onto a lane, turning right little way. After passing the Mill, the track turns 90 degrees left, then right, then presents you with a choice of two pathways either side of an open field gate. Take the left-hand and widest path and then enjoy the sensation of rising up gently onto downland as you walk, with views across the fields opening out with each step. As you look back from the crest of the slope you can see that Abingdon is now truly left behind. The path runs between hedgerows and eventually emerges onto a road.



In March 1957 an RAF plane crashed in Sutton Wick killing eighteen RAF personnel on board, and two people in the buildings where it landed. RAF dogs were also killed although one was pulled from the wreckage. On modern flying enthusiasts' blog sites I found interesting references to sightings of a ghost thought to be the pilot of this plane; in case the hairs on the back of your neck are rising, be assured that all the sightings were at Abingdon airfield where the pilot was based rather than the crash site.



1. Cross the main road and head down the road opposite, signposted for Sutton Wick.

2. Follow the footpath marked "Drayton" that takes you to the right of the pillar box and bench, between the buildings and past the end of a low ivy covered wall to emerge on the Drayton Green with its large circular path.

3. Either direction around the circle will take you to the far side but travelling anti-clockwise will increase your vocabulary as you pass the sundial and discover the word "gnomon" for the first time. Leave the circle where the path branches off to pass a bullrush pond, and at the footpath "crossroad" turn right to follow a narrow alleyway and at its end turn left onto Church Lane.

4. Turn into the churchyard under the lychgate. It is worth stopping to note the idiosyncratic gargoyles on the porch as you pass. At the back of the churchyard find the gate through to the burial ground and maintain a straight line to a further six bar gate leading to a track.

5. When the track meets an open field, turn right and head down to the road, cross straight over and take the footpath on the opposite side marked "Rook's Nest".

Dragon to Sutton Courtenay (one hour)

Your path now heads away from the road, over a small footbridge and across a field margin to a battered metal kissing gate. Turn left onto the track and follow it as it crosses the road and continues relentlessly on ahead. This part of the walk can be muddy where farmers' vehicles pass regularly; this is genuine working countryside after all.

Eventually, as the outskirts of Sutton Courtenay are reached, the path becomes a tarmac lane and on the next bend, just as the Ginge Brook is encountered, you must take note of the footpath sign and turn sharp left into the hedge and over the footbridge and stile. Follow the bank of the pretty Ginge Brook, over another stile and to the corner of the field. With a full pack on, your passage through the rather tight kissing gate may entertain anyone looking out of the cottage windows. Before you walk ahead down the drive, turn aside to the tiny footbridge to see how the cottages span the brook. At the end of the drive, cross the road as there is no footpath on this side, and turn right to walk down Brook Street.

3. Crossing back over the road will become necessary once the village green is reached as you may wish to visit the church and may need to visit one of the two pubs which stand on either side of it.

2. The interesting looking doors in the opposite wall are into the grounds of the Abbey, one of Sutton Courtenay's many interesting examples of vernacular architecture.

1. Continue down Brook Street keeping the grass triangle at the road junction on your right, and stay on the same course using the wide grassy verge of the road as your path.



5. Cross back over the road to take the footpath to the weirs which starts where the road turns sharp right. Asquith's country residence, Wharf House and the adjoining Walton House are on the corner as you find the footpath.

4. Find the grave of Eric Arthur Blair (George Orwell) towards the back of the churchyard

Sutton Courtenay & back to Culham (half an hour)

From the sharp right hand corner, the footpath quickly plunges into a very different area, surrounded by different bodies of water that cascade into each other through three weirs. It is all Thames water but here the river braids, with an island in the middle and Sutton Pools at the side. If you have become puzzled as to how river craft are supposed to find their way through this confusing waterworld your question will be answered after you cross the open water-meadows and find yourself on a small bridge passing over Culham Cut, the navigable by-pass of this stretch of the river. You will recognise this as the bridge you stood on top of to attain your first view of the power station, a few hours ago.

From here you are retracing your steps from the very earliest part of the walk, so you will not need to be told to turn right and walk along the Thames Path back to Culham Lock and your starting point.



Sutton Courtenay churchyard was the burial site of a flurry of the nation's movers and shakers of the early twentieth century: Prime Minister Asquith, publisher David Astor and author George Orwell, the latter buried in an unassuming grave planted with two rose bushes under his real name of Eric Arthur Blair. Sutton Courtenay was not his home. His publisher David Astor arranged for him to be buried there after he died in a London hospital in January 1950. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had not even been in print for a year: the effort of completing it, spending months in the harsh climate of Jura, and smoking roll-ups as he banged at the typewriter, contributed to the rapid development of the deadly tuberculosis that finally beat him.