

Churches of the Lambourn Valley

This must be one of the best parts of Berkshire. Not for nothing is it part of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Our walk, following the Lambourn Valley Way, took us across fields, by the river and along the old Lambourn Valley railway line, through historic villages, and with the Downs sweeping up on either side - and took us, too, past seven wonderful churches, each distinctive, each different from the last, and all amply repaying our visit.

We started at **Boxford**, with a visit to St Andrew's Church (RG20 8DS). This dates from Saxon times - a small Saxon window was discovered during a recent restoration and can still be seen in the outside of the north chancel wall. It has, however, seen many changes since. The tower collapsed in 1657 and was rebuilt in the later seventeenth century (note the large flint panels in brick framing); the north aisle was added in 1841; and the whole interior was remodelled in 1908-9. North of the church, on the banks of the River Lambourn, is a tranquil Peace Garden, well worth a moment (or more) of your time.



From Boxford the path climbed over fields and past copses to **Welford**. St Gregory's Church (RG20 8HA), standing right next door to Welford Park (the grounds here famous for snowdrops in the spring) has one of only two round towers in Berkshire (we shall come to the other one later in the walk). The church was rebuilt by Thomas Talbot Bury in the 1850s, at the expense of the then rector, William Nicholson. He rebuilt the tower and spire as an exact replica of the original, but the remainder of the church is entirely Victorian, and is striking for its lavish decoration and carving. In a recess in the wall of the



north aisle is a lovely brass to Nicholson, showing him with a church on each arm, Welford on one and Wickham on the other, for he paid for both restorations.

Our path left the valley floor again for a while, as we climbed up the road south from Welford, as far as a footpath over the hill, past the grounds of Welford Park Cricket Club, and down again to the hamlet of Weston. Here we crossed the road, walked through a garden, found a foot bridge over the river, and turned left to follow the river upstream, in a mile or so reaching **East Shefford**. St Thomas's Church (RG17 7EF) is tiny, just a small nave and smaller chancel, and it seems little changed since the fifteenth century. It has fragments of wall paintings, and an impressive tomb chest on which lie the effigies of Sir Thomas Fettiplace and his wife Beatrice. No longer used regularly for worship, the church is in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust.

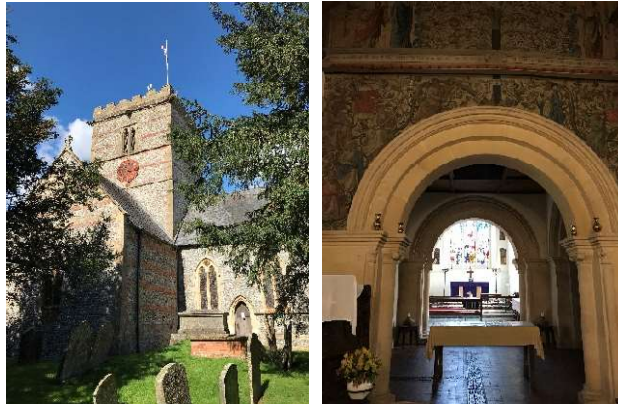


Returning to the path, now following the track of the railway, we soon reached the A338 and the village of **Great Shefford**. For a moment we were reminded of the busy world, as traffic rushed past, but we soon turned off (where the road turned left on its way to Hungerford, we turned right) and in a hundred yards or so reached St Mary's Church (RG17 7DZ). This has a glorious approach, through a brick arch and along an avenue of mature trees, and it is distinctive as the other Berkshire church with a round tower. Inside, texts



run round the top of the walls, a feature of the restoration carried out in 1870-71. It also has a fine reredos.

Leaving the church, we also left the village, and struck out across the churchyard to a well-defined footpath, eventually rejoining the Lambourn Valley Way at Maidencourt Farm, and from there walking on to **East Garston**. All Saints' Church (RG17 7HH) is right at the end of the village, surrounded by trees. It is Norman in origin but has seen many changes over the centuries. It was restored in the 1870s and 1880s. In the latter restoration some remarkable wall paintings were created by Nathaniel Westlake - a judgement over the chancel arch and a nativity in the north chancel chapel - and some fine stained glass was installed, all well worth lingering over.



A little further up the valley we reached **Eastbury**. The Church of St James the Greater (RG17 7JL) is entirely Victorian, built to serve the people of this part of Lambourn distant from the parish church. It was designed by G E Street, then Oxford Diocesan Architect, and has the most magnificent roof, sweeping down over nave and north aisle, inspired, some say, by the magnificent barns of north and west Berkshire. Inside, opposite the entrance, is a wonderful surprise - the most beautiful engraved window, designed by Laurence Whistler, engraved by Leslie Legg, and installed in 1971 in memory of the poet Edward Thomas (killed in the first World War) and his wife Helen.



From Eastbury we made the last stage of our journey to **Lambourn**. The village was once an important market centre and was sometimes known as Chipping Lambourn. It is still the largest village in the valley, and the imposing cruciform church of St Michael and All Angels (RG17 8PA) certainly the grandest of all those we saw on our walk. The oldest parts of the present building, the nave arcade and the impressive tower arches, date from the

1180s. Chapels were added to the chancel in the fourteenth century, and a fine second chapel added to the south by John Eastbury in 1501 - note the grotesques on the outside wall!



It was a fitting conclusion to a lovely walk. Many of the churches we saw had been supported by the Berkshire Historic Churches Trust, and it was lovely to think that we were raising money so that the work of the Trust could be continued into the future. It was also very moving to see flags flying at half mast and books of condolence open in every church following the death of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

You can find out more about the Lambourn Valley Way on the West Berkshire Council website (www.westberks.gov.uk - search for *Lambourn Valley Way - a walk from Whitehorse Hill to Newbury* for a downloadable pdf file with directions and a map). From time to time we left the way itself to follow other footpaths so that we could visit all the churches along the route, and for this we found the Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 158 (1:25,000) extremely useful. Our walk was about ten miles, but it could be shortened by starting at Welford, or even Shefford (though that would mean missing some rather special churches). We took two cars, leaving one at the end and driving the other to the start, but it is possible to do the route with one car: there is (in 2022) a good bus service from Newbury to Lambourn operated by Reading Buses - see https://images.reading-buses.co.uk/downloads/route%204%20times_2.pdf for the Newbury and District timetable.