

Visit to ABINGDON, WALLINGFORD and the VALE of the WHITE HORSE

Chapel Notes

ABINGDON lies at the intersection of the Thames and the Ock, which flows from the Vale of the White Horse. Abingdon Abbey was founded in Saxon times and in the mediaeval period it was a flourishing centre for the wool and cloth trade; increasing in importance after the building of a bridge in 1416. A charter was granted by Queen Mary in 1556 after which it began to vie with Reading as county town of Berkshire: Reading eventually won out in the mid-19th century and in 1974 Abingdon became part of Oxfordshire and the seat of the Vale of White Horse District Council.

Our first visit is to **Abingdon Baptist Church, Ock Street** [Stell, Berkshire 1].

Baptist churches were in being in both Abingdon and Wantage prior to 1650, when John Pendarves resigned the living of St Helen's, Abingdon to lead the Baptists in the town. Two years later Pendarves and Benjamin Cox founded the 'Abingdon Association' to coordinate the Baptists congregations in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, and Hampshire. Pendarves died in 1656 and shortly afterwards, the congregation, which came from a wide area around, split: part migrated to form a church at Longworth, Berks, which was the precursor of the Cote, Oxon, Baptist congregation.

A meeting house was built on the present site in Ock Street in c.1700 and was rebuilt in 1841 and refitted in 1882. The 1841 building, designed by John Davies of London, stands well back from the street and is of brick with a stucco front and slated roof. The south front facing the road has three bays with Doric columns supporting an entablature and pediment and flanking wings with two pilasters each, currently painted an interesting shade of blue. The interior has a large gallery around three sides on fluted cast-iron columns, no longer used except for special occasions. No pulpit remains on the low platform at the front, under which lies the baptistery.



To the south west of the church, fronting Ock Street, is the former manse, a 17th-century structure with a late-18th-century frontage. This has been converted into office space with a ground-floor coffee shop.

Turning right out of the car park and proceeding west along Ock Street for about 100m, one comes, on the corner of Conduit Street, to Tompkin's Almshouses. These were built in 1733, under the will of Benjamin Tomkins (d 1732), maltster and benefactor of the church, for the 'benefit of poor dissenters of Abingdon and for Baptist ministers'. Four dwellings for men face the four dwellings for women across a narrow courtyard with a central house for the warden at the far end.



Proceeding eastward along Ock Street for about 100m brings one to The Square (corner of Bath Street and Ock Street) where stands the former **Congregational Church** [Stell, Berkshire 3]. A meeting house for Presbyterians was built in Abingdon in 1700 and became Congregational in the late 18th century. A new chapel was built in 1862 by J.S. Dodd and the old chapel behind it converted to Sunday School use. It has an ashlar south front of

four bays with Corinthian pilasters and a pediment. Internally there is a gallery around three sides with an open cast-iron front. It was closed in 1968 and after a period in the 1990s when it was converted into offices it is now a branch of the restaurant chain Ask.

We now proceed westward into the Vale, passing Wantage, to Uffington, a small village about 3km north of the more famous White Horse to which it gives its name.

Our second visit is to **Uffington Strict Baptist Chapel** [Stell, Berkshire 62]. Little is known of the early years of this congregation. The chapel is thought to have been built by William Warren about the year 1831. It is a modest building with a frontage constructed of brick with two single shuttered windows (the earlier wooden sashes have been replaced by UPVC) and a hipped tiled roof. There is a datestone marked 1831 between the windows. The porch at the front and the vestry to the rear are later additions of around the 1960s, the latter being enabled by a purchase of ground from the garden of the then adjoining pub.

Examination of the four external walls shows them to be constructed differently – one of local chalk like the neighbouring cottage and one of stone – this may suggest that the building is an adaptation of an earlier structure.

Inside there are seats for around 100 worshippers. An enclosed stair at the rear leads to the balcony attached to the rear wall and supported by solid iron columns – here all but the front row of pews are enclosed by a removable partition about 20 years old. At the front of the chapel is a small wooden pulpit with fittings for two brass candlesticks. The baptistery, which was constructed by the congregation over one week in 1859, stands beneath.

The chapel declined and in 1879 was on the point of being closed by the then deacon when John Pepler and his family arrived in the chapel for Sunday worship, having taken up the tenancy of a nearby farm. Our guide and the current deacon, Mr D.J. Pepler is of the third generation of this family to have served the chapel.

If there is time, you can go to the junction of Chapel Lane and High Street, turn right and walk about 150m to view the outside of the former **Friends Meeting House** [Stell, Berkshire 63; Butler p17]. This small square meeting house of stone with brick dressings and a hipped and slated roof was built in 1730, became redundant c.1762 and was sold 1821 and converted to a cottage. Despite its apparent size, this too had a balcony which is famous for having collapsed under the weight of the attenders when it was being used for a rare meeting in 1803 addressed by the temperance campaigner Thomas Shillitoe: no one was hurt! The meeting house lies off the High Street opposite Garrard's Farm, with its plaque to Sir John Betjeman, who lived there 1934-45, and beside the Fox and Hounds pub.

The Strict Baptists of Uffington were fictionalised by Betjeman in his 1977 children's book *Archie and the Strict Baptists*, although the illustrator had clearly never seen the chapel and the 'aneucapnic lamps' of Betjeman's story are also a fiction. I gather that the real Strict Baptists did not welcome this publicity and it is best not to mention Betjeman when visiting the chapel.

We now travel through Faringdon and across the Thames to the equally small village of Aston and Cote, on the outskirts of Bampton. Our visit to Cote Baptist Chapel, which is under the care of the Historic Chapels Trust, will include time to partake of our packed lunches – hot drinks will be provided.

Cote Baptist Chapel [Stell, Oxfordshire 6]. The Baptist church which built this chapel was formed by division from that at Abingdon as early as c.1656 and met originally on the other side of the river at Longworth in Berkshire. Aston and Cote are outlying townships of Bampton and there was no parish church in Aston until 1838, so, in this isolation it is perhaps not surprising that dissenters gathered there. Joseph Collett (d. 1741), who reputedly made a baptistery in the garden of his father's house at Cote and as a teenager c.1700 attracted large congregations there, became first minister of Cote and Longworth in 1703. A chapel

was built in Cote in 1703/4 on land given by John Williams, apparently on the site of the current building, and was registered for meetings in 1704.

The present chapel constitutes an enlargement or rebuilding of 1739/40: the galleries were added internally in 1756. Further internal alterations were carried out in 1859 when the pulpit was removed from the south to the west wall, the galleries altered to fit and the seating renewed. The seating arrangement on the ground floor is of box pews with a table pew over the baptistery.

The walls are of stone with a double roof covered with stone slates: the valley between is concealed by the truncated gables at the east and west ends. The two entrance doors have flat canopies: all the windows are round-arched. There is a large vestry against the north wall.

The chapel is surrounded by an extensive graveyard which is still being used for burials.

We now turn to the east and retrace our steps towards Didcot, proceeding a little further to the linked and indeed interdigitated villages of Aston Tirrold and Aston Upthorpe, which lie along the springline on the northern edge of the Berkshire Downs.

The Astons have been in separate legal and ecclesiastical divisions since before the Norman conquest. There were two different manors here in Anglo-Saxon times and each village has a church which dates back to at least the 11th century, although the church in 'Thorpe' has long been attached to the parish of Blewbury. Entering the villages from the north it is strange to see two different village signs on the two sides of the road – Aston Upthorpe on the west and Aston Tirrold on the east.

Aston Tirrold United Reformed Church [Stell, Berkshire 5]. This former Presbyterian chapel was erected in 1728 for the church gathered originally by the preaching of Richard Comyns and Thomas Cheesman, ministers ejected in 1662 from Cholsey and East Garston respectively. A Society of Dissenters had been founded sometime before 1670 and was meeting in barns. After a period in the 18th century in which it was served by ministers from the Countess of Huntingdon's connexion, the church joined the Presbyterian Church in England in 1873.

The original chapel is of brick with a hipped tiled roof with a central valley running north-south. There are pairs of original round-arched windows on three sides. The two porches on the west front and the vestry on the east are later additions. The interior has a gallery on two sides and a pulpit on the east side, flanked by oil lamps and with a 19th century stained-glass round window above it: a modern single-manual organ in an elegant carved wooden case lies to the north of the sanctuary. Between the two western windows is an elegant 'Parliament' clock with chinoiserie decoration signed 'James Chater, Lond.' The round window is the most obvious evidence of the internal rearrangements to the chapel that took place in 1864-5, which included moving the pulpit from the west wall, replacing the central pillars in cast iron and renewing the pews. Until 1864 there may have been a gallery on the east wall as well.



The chapel is surrounded by a graveyard, now only used for the burial of ashes. To the rear is the original manse, now in private hands, and a modern church hall which houses 'The Centre for Reflection', a most successful outreach effort by the church.

From about 1827 the church ran a first-day school according to the principles of the British and Foreign School Society: from 1857 the 'British' School had its own permanent schoolroom and it continued until 1907 when it was merged with the 'National' School, sponsored by

the established church, which had itself been running since 1847. The foundation stone for the British School, now much worn, is incorporated into the west wall of the Centre for Reflection.

A short journey brings us to our final destination – Wallingford.

WALLINGFORD was the largest of the Saxon burhs founded by Alfred, larger even than the capital Winchester, and guarded the important Thames crossing. In the 9th century it gained its defensive earthen walls and in the 10th century its own mint. In 1066 the first English submissions to Duke William took place here and the Norman castle was started the year after. Domesday notes that there were 491 houses in Wallingford and a population of about 3000. Its decline began in the 15th century with the building of the bridge at Abingdon, although it remained an important market town into the 19th century.

We begin our visit at the **Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, St Leonard's Square** [not in Stell]. Wesley preached a number of times in Wallingford after 1769 and there was a society here from at least 1777. Records for the congregation date back to a Baptismal register begun in 1833. The current chapel was erected in 1872/3 on a site which had previously been a workshop and yard. The adjoining site was built on in 1871 to provide a Free Library and



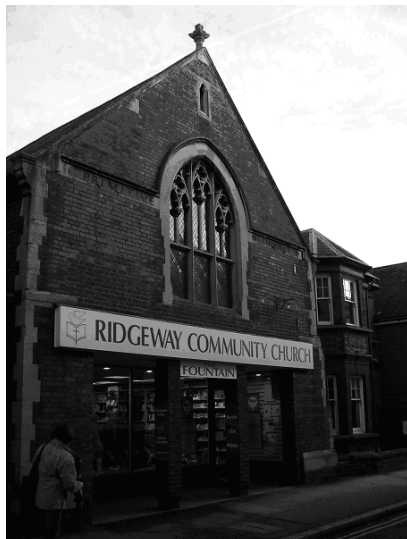
Literary Institute for the town – the two buildings have a considerable resemblance, being constructed of red brick with stone facings.

The Methodist cause in Wallingford has had chequered fortunes through the last 100 years, reaching a nadir in the 1960s, when the decision was made to close the church and sell the premises. However that decision was never implemented and

subsequently the church has grown so that now the congregation totals over 130 including adherents.

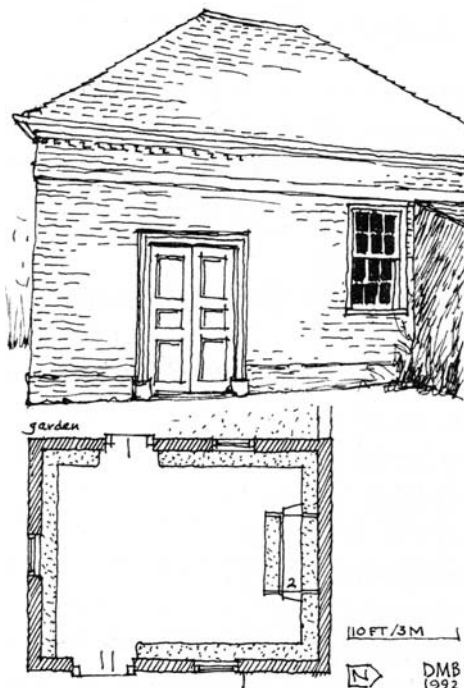
The interior of the chapel is relatively modest and dominated by the organ case – not built for the church but purchased from another church some time in the 20th century. At the rear is a gallery installed in 1992 to accommodate the growing congregation. Its needs eventually led to the purchase of the adjacent Free Library, used as a store-room by Pettit's department store, from the Council and its restoration as a hall with kitchen and toilet facilities for the use both of the church and the community. The irregular space between the two buildings was converted into a foyer and social space, with glazed front and roof. Rebuilding and refurbishment were finished in the last two years.

Other chapels and meeting houses which are open include:



Ridgeway Community Church, St Mary's Street [not in Stell]. This breakaway from the Baptist Church in 1977 took over the Primitive Methodist Church and manse, which had been closed since 1934, following Methodist union. The buildings in St Mary's St were originally built in 1888 and since 1934 had had a variety of uses, including as a British restaurant during the war, a youth centre, a library and as a carpet shop for Pettit's store. There is now a mezzanine floor in the old chapel, which has been extended backwards by two bays. Underneath is a Christian bookshop and store, facing on the street. Rooms in the manse have been retained as offices and meeting rooms for the congregation.

St John's Roman Catholic Church (former Congregational Chapel), Market Place [Stell, Berkshire 65]. Although there were independent congregations earlier in the town, a secession from the nearby parish church in 1785 led to a separate congregation initially supported by ministers from the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. The present chapel, opened in 1799 and was closed by 1905: it became a Roman Catholic Church in 1928 and the interior was entirely reconstructed in 1958: a porch has more recently been added at the front. The front wall, of brick with terminal pilasters, a moulded brick cornice and a low gable above, is set well back from the adjacent houses fronting a paved yard which has been used in the past for burials (one memorial remains).



Friends Meeting House, Castle Street [Stell, Berkshire 66; Butler p19]. The centre of Quaker activity in the area was at Warborough, across the river, and Wallingford was never an important meeting. The meeting house was built in 1724 and closed from 1854 to 1926 and stands in the garden of the caretaker's house. It is a brick structure with a hipped tiled roof and sash windows. A double-doored entrance facing the street gives onto a brick-floored room with a wooden boarded dado fronted by wall benches and, at the north end, the original ministers' stand. The plain open-backed benches with arm rests are in a similar style to the other woodwork and some may be original. On the far side another door leads to a small garden, which was probably never used as a burial ground but which contains a number of headstones removed from the burial ground at Warborough [meeting house demolished 1904], where Wallingford Friends were buried.

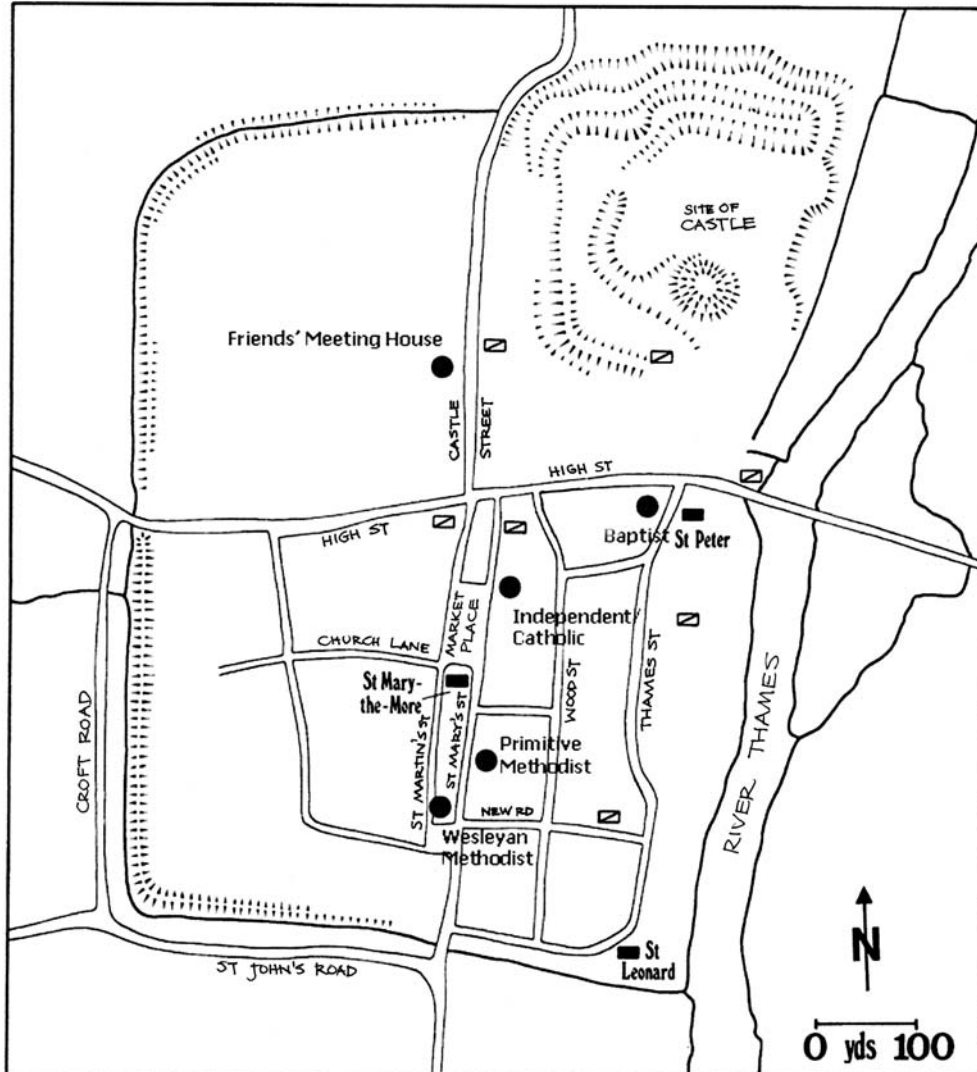
Wallingford Baptist Church, Thames Street

[Stell, Berkshire 64]. Groups of Baptists met in Wallingford in the 17th century including the church of Seventh-day Baptists under Dr Stennett which met in a building in the ruined castle. By the eighteenth century there were no groups surviving until the solicitor, Robert Lovegrove, became convinced of Baptist principles and gathered a church, building a meeting house in the garden of his house, now Calleva House, in the High Street in 1794. This congregation continues to this day on the same site, with its frontage on Thames Street. Several enlargements of the premises were undertaken in the 19th century. The present building, with rendered walls and hipped slate roof, dates principally from the enlargement of c.1819 although the pedimented stucco front belongs to another rebuilding later in the century.



Here our town trail ends and we retire for our Chapel Tea.

Wallingford Chapel Trail



The coach will drop us at the **Wesleyan Methodist Church** in St Leonard's Square in the south of the town centre. After a guided visit here, members will be free to visit the other chapels indicated on the map by the large circles. These are:

- **Primitive Methodist Church** and manse, St Mary's Street (now Ridgeway Community Church) - enter through the shop and viewing of the chapel will be arranged);
- **St John's Roman Catholic Church** (formerly Independent Chapel), Market Place - this will be open prior to Mass at 17.00 - no guided tour;
- **Friends' Meeting House**, 13 Castle Street - enter through the alleyway;
- **Baptist Church**, Thames Street - we are expected here for a guided tour and our Chapel Tea from about 17.00.

Since all the chapels are relatively small it would be best if the group broke up into smaller groups visiting the chapels in a different order.

Other buildings worthy of note in the town are the Town Hall of 1670 and the Corn Exchange of 1856 (now a theatre and cinema), both in the Market Place. There are three remaining parish churches (out of the 11 present in mediaeval times). St Leonard's is the earliest, from the 11th century but retaining Saxon work in the walls; St Mary's in the centre of town, was rebuilt in 1854 but has a tower dating to 1653; St Peter, now redundant, was destroyed during the civil war siege of the castle and rebuilt between 1763 and 1777 and has a striking pierced spire (described by Pevsner as 'rather cheeky'). Many of the houses and shops in the central part of the town are worthy of attention (over 120 buildings in the town are listed) - there are a number of fine houses remaining particularly in the eastern part of the High Street.