

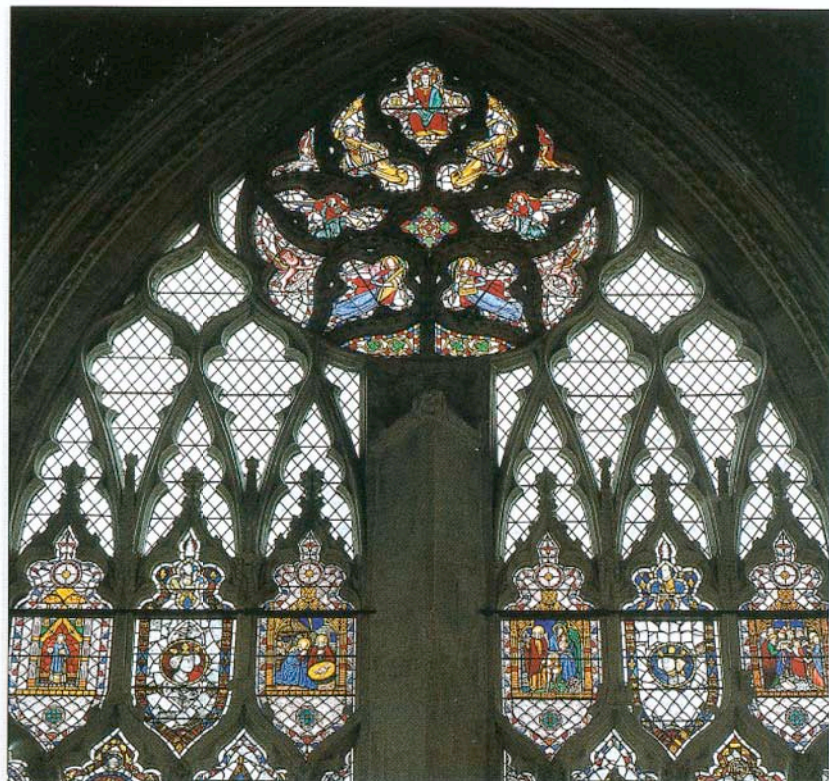
Be inspired



CLIVE FEWINS, editor of *The Church Explorer's Handbook*, takes us on a church-crawling tour of South Oxfordshire



Dorchester-on-Thames, with its historic houses and inns (below), has an abbey church (above) with fine examples of stained glass (top right)



PHOTOS: DEREK FORSS/ANDREW BASKOTT

There's nothing like exploring the inside of a parish church if you want to get to know a place. It was former Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman who said, "Our churches are our history shown, In wood and glass and iron and stone."

I discovered this myself 40 years ago, and, in that time, have managed to visit about half the 10,000 or so medieval parish churches that exist in England alone. And I'm still working on it. I live in Oxfordshire, a county that possesses some of the finest examples, so I can explore the local gems fairly easily.

Some of my favourites are in the south of the county: an area that contains a glorious mix of lush riverside meadows

and pretty brick and timber villages, plus some expansive rolling country that forms the lower slopes of the Chiltern hills. Many visitors have discovered the delights of wandering up and down the River Thames – either on the water or the byroads, by car, by bike or on foot. Why not make the churches the focus of your travels instead?

Dorchester-on-Thames is a good place to start, not least because it predates Oxford and was one of the earliest centres of Christianity in the country. Although it is now just a large village and its famous Abbey of St Peter and St Paul is simply the parish church, Dorchester has an amazing history.

It was on this spot that the Romans forded the river and established a settlement. Later, in 635, the missionary St Birinus baptised the King of Wessex. The King, in turn, established a bishopric that, after York, remained the second largest in England by the time of the Norman Conquest. So Dorchester's Saxon church was the cathedral of the Kingdom of Wessex! After the Norman Conquest, the Bishop's See (seat) was transferred to Lincoln but the Augustinian canons, who took over the building at this stage, were an active bunch, and started building the great Abbey church that stands to this day.

The interior of Dorchester Abbey is of the top rank. There is masses of interest: ▶





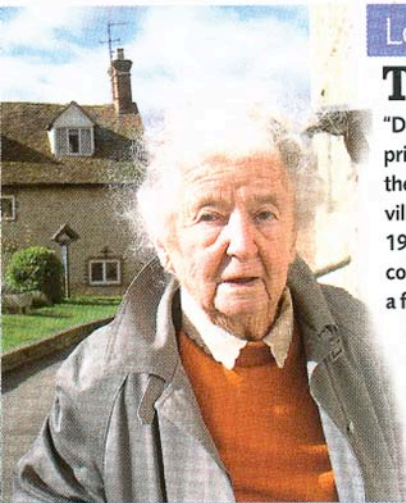
St Mary's Ewelme has links with writers Geoffrey Chaucer and Jerome K Jerome

the shrine of St Birinus, some of the finest 14th-century glass in England, the new cloister gallery that follows the line of the former south cloister, a magnificent lead font, and some recently rediscovered wall-paintings. When in Dorchester Abbey, I always make a beeline for the Tree of Jesse window, on the north side of the sanctuary. It combines tracery, sculpture and stained glass in a single theme, and is widely regarded as one of the great triumphs of 14th-century English decorated Gothic church architecture.

The village museum, formerly the grammar school, is packed with village by-gones. I also heartily recommend a visit to the extraordinarily friendly Dorchester Abbey tearoom, where you can sit round one large central table and enjoy a never-ending choice of cakes, all made by village volunteers. On my visits here over the years, I have bumped into all sorts of fascinating people, from Oxford dons to visiting grannies from the Antipodes.

A few miles to the south, and two miles east of the Thames, is another great

gem of a church in South Oxfordshire: St Mary's Ewelme, famous for its connections with the family of Geoffrey Chaucer, the poet and author of *The Canterbury Tales*. The village and church are perched in a glorious position on a south-facing hillside on the edge of the Chilterns. At the bottom of the slope, a spring-fed stream weaves its way past the houses. The near-perfect setting is much enriched by the ancient brick almshouses



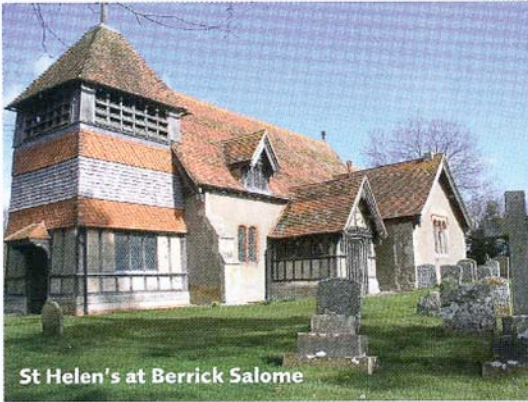
Local hero

Teaching to the converted

"Dorchester-on-Thames has an extraordinary history," says retired primary school headteacher Mary Tame. "My life is full because there is so much going on here." A sprightly 93, she is one of the village's best-known characters and has lived in the village since 1936. She's written a clutch of books on Dorchester and contributes an article on the area every month to *Dorchester News*, a free local newsletter. Mary still plays a full part in the life of the abbey church: look out for her in the small museum, open every afternoon in summer months. Although she has done many things in her long life, including being a founder member of the village historical society, she is proudest of the fact that she is acknowledged as one of the first to teach environmental education in a primary school.



Victorian architect Sir George Gilbert Scott added a spire and turret to Clifton Hampden's riverside parish church



St Helen's at Berrick Salome

And don't miss

Berrick Salome: St Helen's is a fascinating church because its exterior is almost entirely Victorian, while it largely retains its medieval interior. It has a wonderful early Norman stone font.

Chalgrove: St Mary's is a large, handsome church with a splendid chancel in the decorated style that houses a fine collection of wallpaintings

Easington: St Peter's church is a humble 14th-century building with chancel and nave in one and a simple barn-style roof. Its great attraction is that the village it served, on the edge of the Chilterns above Chalgrove, has completely disappeared. It is now all alone and approached through the adjoining farmyard.

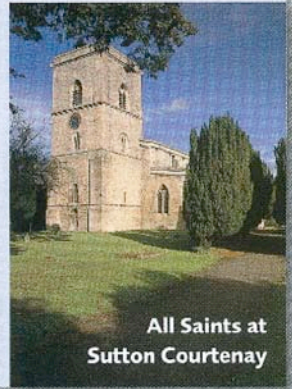
Rycote Chapel: consecrated in 1449 as the place of worship for the Quatremaine family at Rycote Park, it has a sumptuous and justly famed

interior, dominated by two domed and canopied 17th-century pews. There are some fine monuments and a magnificent 15th-century curved roof. The chapel was well-known to Queen Elizabeth I: in her youth, she was detained in the area by her sister Mary, who reigned from 1553-1558.

Sutton Courtenay: in this Thames-side village near Abingdon, All Saints church is a mixture of all the medieval styles. George Orwell (Eric Blair) and the Liberal Prime Minister H H Asquith are buried in the churchyard.

Swyncombe: St Botolph's: This well-preserved early Norman church lies amid beech trees on a beautiful sloping site in the Chilterns, three miles from Ewelme.

Wheatfield: this is another church on the slopes of the Chilterns that has 'lost' its parish. St Andrew's lies alone in a vast field with only sheep for company. Once a great mansion stood beside it, but this was destroyed by fire in 1814. It has an unspoilt Georgian interior.



All Saints at Sutton Courtenay

and school – the oldest Church of England school still to be using its original building. Church, almshouses and school were built by the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk in the mid-15th century and, to the delight of visitors, it is possible to walk freely round much of this complete medieval complex. I find it one of those places where I can almost sense the atmosphere of late medieval England, and am overawed when I walk up the steep steps from the almshouses and enter the perfectly-proportioned brick and flint church.

Inside, the star attraction is the magnificent alabaster effigy of Alice de la Pole (1404-1475), who became Duchess of Suffolk. Alice was Geoffrey

Chaucer's granddaughter. Her father, Chaucer's son Thomas, who died in 1434, lies in a nearby tomb.

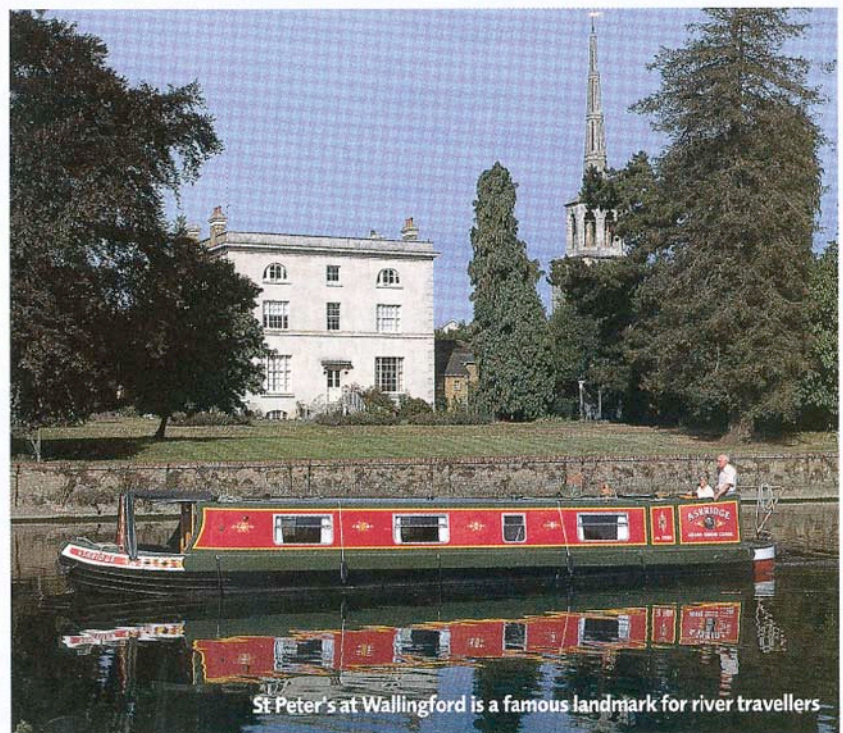
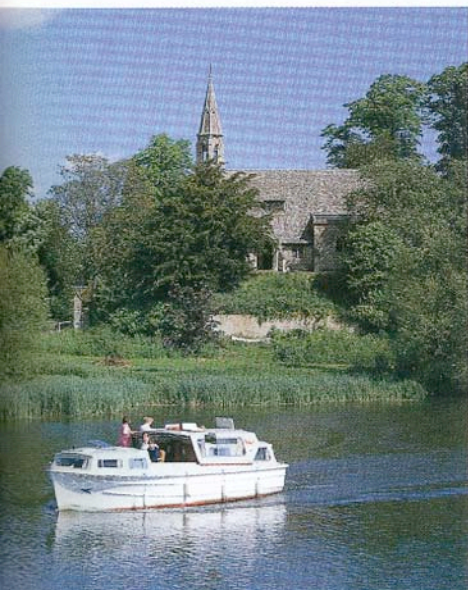
Beneath the Duchess's tomb is a rare corpse effigy. If you lie on your back on the chancel floor – an ungainly position but one to which dedicated 'church crawlers' are quite accustomed – you will be able, with the aid of a torch, to see the glorious frescoes on the ceiling of this lowest compartment of the tomb.

In the churchyard, you can see the gravestone of that famous Edwardian chronicler of the River Thames, Jerome

K Jerome (1859-1927), author of *Three Men in a Boat*, who lived nearby and worshipped at St Mary's.

On your way back to the river, visit the attractive village of Warborough, where the church of St Laurence has a fine tower built in 1666. We know this because the figures are emblazoned in its excellent flintwork. If you feel like refreshment, the Cricketers Arms is one of several lovely traditional pubs in the area where you can get a good lunch or tea.

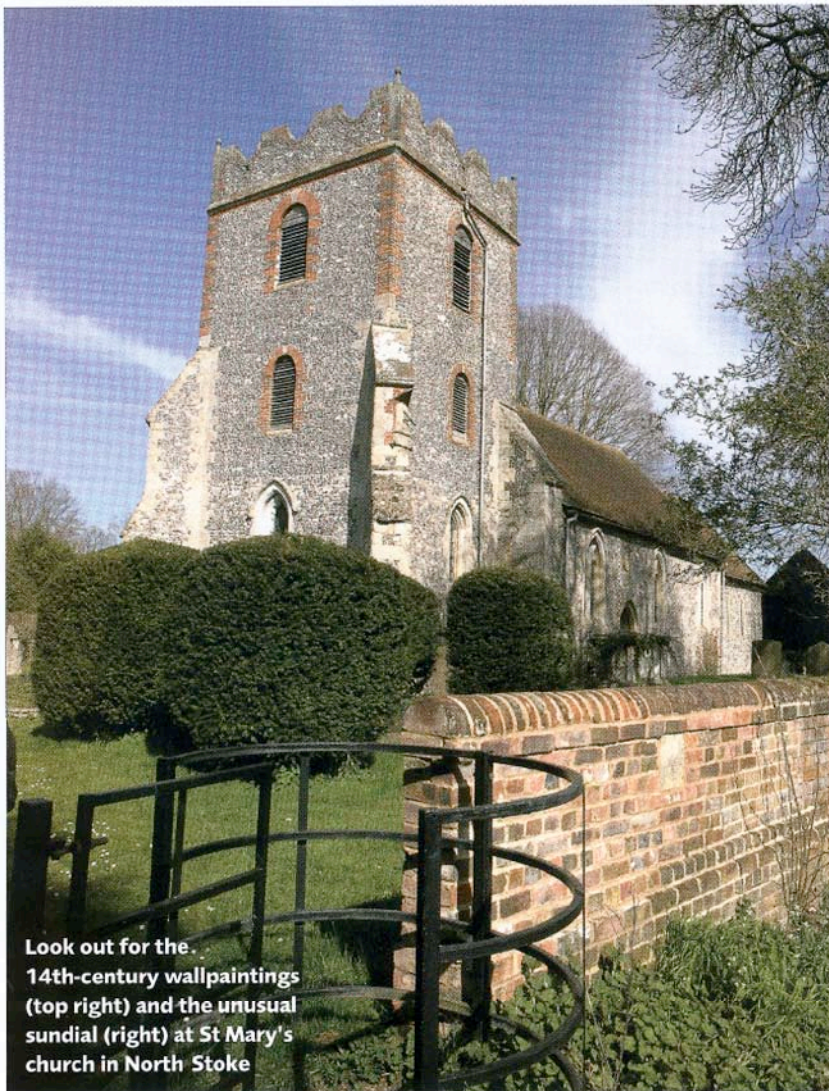
Inside St Laurence's there is an extremely fine lead font, dating from ▶



St Peter's at Wallingford is a famous landmark for river travellers

PHOTOS: ANDREW BASKOTT/CLIVE FEMINS/CAROLINE JONES

PHOTOS: PAUL FELIX/CLIVE FEWINS



Look out for the 14th-century wallpaintings (top right) and the unusual sundial (right) at St Mary's church in North Stoke



For your final port of call, cross over Wallingford's ancient bridge, pass through Crowmarsh and take the main road towards Henley. Then follow the south bank of the river towards Goring and turn right into the village of North Stoke. St Mary's has some ancient wallpaintings inside and also a 13th-century font, Tudor bench ends and a Jacobean pulpit. Outside, above the blocked south doorway, there is an unusual circular sundial carved with the

about 1200. Lead fonts are rare – there are only about 40 in English churches – but there are three in this area. The third (after those at Dorchester Abbey and St Laurence) is at the church of St Mary in Long Wittenham, a village just four miles up the river towards Oxford.

Lie on your back on the chancel floor to see the glorious frescoes under the tomb

To reach the village, you cross over a famous stretch of Thames using one of the most lovely bridges on this section of the river. The beautiful six-arched structure at Clifton Hampden was built in 1864 by the famous architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, who was also responsible for the restoration of the little parish church, perched high on a riverside bluff. Scott transformed the church and added a turret and spire. Jerome K Jerome was greatly inspired by this stretch of river and there is a famous description of the village in *Three Men in a Boat*.

Carry on to Wallingford. All three of the town's churches are worth a visit.

St Mary-le-More in the market place is a large brick and flint church, while St Leonard's is a Norman church that was badly damaged in the Civil War. My favourite is the redundant (it is used a

lot for concerts) church of St Peter. It occupies a magnificent riverside position and, with its light and elegant spire, is another notable landmark for those travelling on the Thames.

head of a priest. The actor Michael Caine lived nearby in the Rectory Farm House.

From here you can head back to your base, perhaps in the charming riverside town of Henley-on-Thames, to enjoy an evening meal while looking back over a fine day exploring English churches. ■

further information

For information on visiting South Oxfordshire, go to: www.visitsouthoxfordshire.co.uk. Or contact the **Tourist Information Centres**: Town Hall, Market Place, Wallingford OX10 0EG; tel: (01491) 826972; King's Arm Barn, Kings Road, Henley-on-Thames RG9 2DG; tel: (01491) 578034.

The Churches Conservation Trust has a website with information on churches around Britain to visit: www.visitchurches.org.uk.

FURTHER READING

The Church Explorer's Handbook by Clive Fewins, is published by the Canterbury Press, £14.99; www.scm-canterburypress.co.uk. A reference guide to over 1,000 churches, aimed at helping you spot their most interesting features.

