

## Ride, Stride, Churches and Chats

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> September, and Jo A and Jo B set out to for Jo A to ride and Jo B to run to churches in our locality. We met at St Andrews (13<sup>th</sup> Century, with earlier origins, possibly founded by St Birinus?) and were waved off at 11am by Jemima, who was 'manning' the church for other Ride and Stride visitors.

Jo A headed off to North Stoke, Jo B slogged across the fields and upwards to 'the church on the hill at' Ipsden. St Mary the Virgin is a small and beautifully tranquil place which also boasts links to early

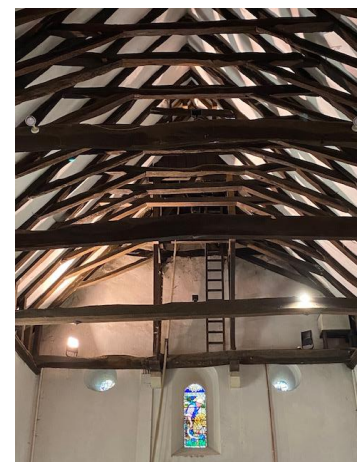


Christianity in Oxfordshire, being reputed

to have been founded by St Birinus himself. A prayer for swift feet and not too many aches the following day, a signature in the visitors' book under a visitor from Melbourne (Australia, not Derbyshire!) and Jo B set off again along the Icknield Way. Meanwhile, Jo A was mending a flat tyre, at home, her bike being unco-operative about field-side fixing.



Next for 'the B team' was St Mary Magdalene at Crowmarsh Gifford. I have seen this church from the road so many times, but never visited and what a treat. A lofty church, it was constructed in the twelfth century by Wallingford Priory and it is believed to have originally been used as the chapel for a leper colony. King Stephen fortified it in 1140 in his war with his cousin Mathilda, who he besieged at Wallingford Castle. It's not hard to imagine the church being on the banks of the flooded river, and the Queen and the King firing volleys back and forth. In fact there are cannon ball holes in the Vestry door – courtesy of Royalists who fired upon Cromwell's supporters sheltering there during the Civil War. So much for sanctuary! This Church must surely win the prize for the most fearless bell ringers in South Oxon – a single ladder rises from a platform above the nave and the bell rope hangs a little to the side of the ladder! A chat with



other Striders led to a recommendation to visit Newnham Church ("The Little Church") that I had missed and I made a note to pop in on the return leg. Whilst Jo A battled her bike, Jo B carried on to St Helen's at Benson. The West Saxon King Cynegils had his stronghold at Bensington and it is believed his son was baptised a Christian in the Thames nearby. There was certainly a party atmosphere

in the Churchyard and meeting rooms last weekend. Heritage Day was being celebrated with a display of historic bicycles including 2 penny farthings and a bike owned by William Morris. Inside the church was a history of Bensington and a wonderfully curated display of field maps and growth of the village. I lingered there a long time and, it being lunch time by now, indulged in what I think was 'probably' the best lemon drizzle in the county. The final three miles to Dorchester Abbey was cake-fuelled and mercifully flat. Disappointing that St Birinus church was closed, but Dorchester (as ever) did not disappoint. It was surprising that the ride and stride sheet at the Abbey was not into double figures when I got there, but the town was busy and I expect people arrived as the afternoon wore on. I spent a happy hour listening to rehearsals and sipping a very good cup of tea from the museum shop. But, time was passing and Wallingford beckoned Jo B.



Jo A was back in the saddle and heading for Ipsden. It's a long climb out of Goring; the downhill comes quick, but so does the next, steeper incline. When Jo A got to Ipsden, she added her name to the visitors' book, under Jo B's, then set off for North Stoke.



Wallingford is downstream from Dorchester and it feels oddly downhill too. Jo B's first stop off there was St Mary Le More. Small in scale and in the heart of the town, it sometimes feel as it you don't ever see it all when you enter from the market square. I'd have liked to have been able to climb the tower, but it wasn't open, so on to St John the Baptist, preparing to celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday – how wonderful! The Quaker Meeting House was an unexpected delight. It could have been a dovecote, so small was it in scale. A place to

contemplate, talk and be heard. I enjoyed time there very much. Another place of quiet contemplation was the Methodist Hall in Wallingford. To a driver it seems stranded on a roundabout, to a Strider, it was an easy stop and an inbetween space of calm reflection. St Leonards was the final Wallingford church I visited and its oldest. A church has stood on this site since the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when Christianity had barely made any



inroads into Mercia and Wessex. The ancient tower faces the town and has seen off sieges of Wallingford in the days of Stephen and Mathilda and again in 1646 when it was used as a barracks. Wallingford once had 14 Medieval churches, that any survive is a testament to faith and hope and to continue to thrive they need continued support. Ride and Stride helps fund that.



Jo A visited St Mary The Virgin in North Stoke and, after a quick 'sprint' around the ruins of St John the Baptist at Mongewell, the

visitors book showed Jo B was the next to visit North Stoke's beautiful church. St Mary The Virgin dates from the 1200's. Construction began under patronage of William III's brother, and was funded by Normandy nobles. Interrupted by crusades in 1242, completion of the Nave was later and between bankrupt builders and part of the tower collapsing because of bell vibrations, it has a rich and interesting history. The Medieval wall paintings are beautiful and depict various biblical scenes. Both Jo's agreed it was an unexpected gem on our doorstep that is deserving of a return visit. Both Jo's popped back in at South Stoke, before pressing on to St Thomas of Canterbury and St Mary's Streatley, Jo A ahead of Jo B who found the last two churches on her 40km circuit closing, but what a way to spend a day. A thousand years of worship and uninterrupted line of faith up and down the river and all of it on our doorstep if we just stride (or ride) out. *Jo B.*

