

Pilgrim Paths

Bicester Town Circular Walk

Distance: 3.2 miles

Pause, Reflect & Pray

There is very little record of Catholic worship in the town between the closure of the priory in 1537 and the 19th century. A Catholic chapel and school opened in Piggy Lane in 1883 and in the early 20th century Priory House in Priory Lane became the Catholic Church, having been founded by Benedictine nuns who had been exiled from France. In 1963 the current Catholic Church was opened. When the car park was expanded a few years later Anglo-Saxon graves and evidence of an early church were discovered, raising the possibility that this was the site of Bicester's first church building.

Thank you God, for the long history and demonstration of Christian worship and witness in Bicester, which began near this place.

We pray that you, O Lord, will continue to inspire and guide us.

May we proclaim to all in the town the message of salvation offered through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Continue down the Causeway until you return to St Edburg's.

Pause, Reflect & Pray

We have come to the end of our walk, taking the experience with us ...

May the raindrops fall lightly on your brow.

May the soft winds freshen your spirit.

May the sunshine brighten your heart.

May the burdens of the day rest lightly upon you.

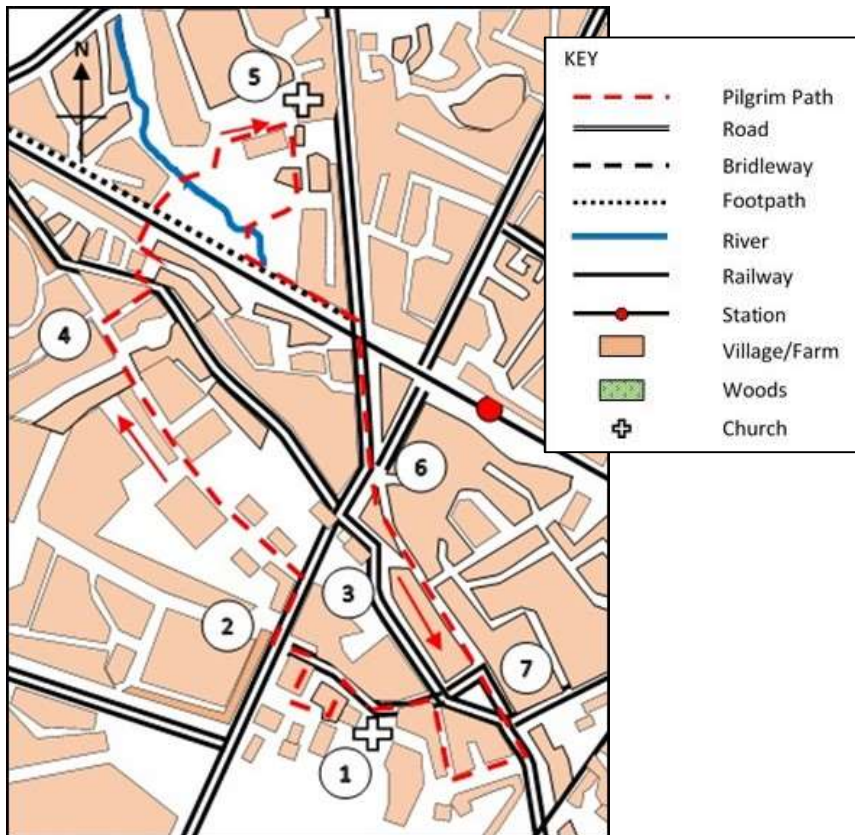
And may God enfold you in the mantle of his love.

Old Gaelic Blessing

END

A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to a sacred place. This leaflet offers Bible passages and reflections to accompany your journey, with suggestions of places to pause. Please allow much more time than you would usually spend on a walk to be able to contemplate the journey.

The circular walk may include road walking through villages, footpaths through woods and fields and negotiating some stiles. You may also encounter sheep, cattle or horses grazing in the fields.



SCALE

1km

1 mile

FOR ADDITIONAL WALKS PLEASE FIND US ON
www.bicesterandislipdeanery.co.uk and on

FACEBOOK at

Bicester and Islip Deanery Pilgrim Paths



Facing with your back to the Congregational Chapel, you are now looking towards the site of the former Bicester Priory. This Augustinian Priory was founded by Gilbert Bassett around 1183 for a Prior and eleven canons, the number of Christ's disciples. The land given by Bassett for the priory lay just south of the parish church. The priory itself was endowed with land and buildings including 180 acres, two mills and the quarry at Kirtlington, 300 acres at Wretchwick and 135 acres at Stratton Audley, Graven Hill and Arncott. It also held the mill at Clifton and had farms let to tenants at Deddington, Grimsbury, Waddesdon and Fringford. However, it appears to have been poorly managed as it was never very rich and was amongst the first to be closed in the Reformation in 1537.



Image and details
 courtesy of
 Bicester Local History Society

From the former Congregational Church, continue down Chapel Street, turning left at the end, into the Causeway. Continue along the Causeway until you come to the Church of the Immaculate Conception on the right.



LOCATION: The Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church, Bicester



Photo: Barbara Walton

After passing the roundabout continue in the same direction, down the London Road. After 100m you will come to Priory Road (7) on the right. The building on the corner of Priory Rd is St Edburg's Hall.



St Edburg's Hall was built in 1882 as a church hall. The original interior consisted of a large entrance hall, reading room, lecture room and a large first floor room with gallery and stage capable of seating 400 people. A huge number of events were held here including concerts, magic lantern shows and exhibitions. In the winter of 1896, it acted as a soup kitchen. In the early 1900s the lecture rooms were being used for woodwork, drawing, cookery and shorthand instruction. It was sold in 1953 and is now used as offices.



From St Edburg's Hall turn down Priory Road, turning right at the end, into Chapel Street. Continue down Chapel Street until you come to the former Congregational Church on the right, now a Thai restaurant.



The former Congregational Church is a stunning building and is now a Thai restaurant, 'Cabbages & Condoms'. This restaurant invests its profits in an NGO in Thailand that helps sex workers and their children.



START

This walk reflects the growth of Bicester over the last millennium and particularly in recent decades. It starts in the centre of the oldest part of Bicester and the oldest place of worship in the town, and then continues through areas of more recent development. The route eventually comes to the newest place of worship, standing on what was still farmland in the 1990s, before tailing back to the Church of St Edburg via some older and no longer active, and newer and still active places of worship. **NOTE:** The churches along this route may not be open for viewing as they are not open every day.



LOCATION: Church of St Edburg, Bicester



Pause, Reflect & Pray

Be with us, Lord God, as we set out today. Open our eyes to see the beauty of your creation and open our hearts to receive your love.
Amen.



St Edburg's Church is named after the Anglo-Saxon saint Eadburh who is thought to have been the daughter of King Penda of Mercia, although this is not known with any certainty. It is likely that a simple Saxon church stood here in around 850AD. A triangular arched entrance (shown here) set in the north wall of the current nave is possibly the original entrance of the Saxon church. The land south east of the church was dominated by the much larger buildings of Bicester Priory, which also contained the shrine of St Eadburh. The priory was a victim of the Reformation, with the buildings being destroyed and St Eadburh's shrine being relocated to Stanton Harcourt, where it can be seen to this day. Standing at the main door of St Edburg's Church



Photo: Barbara Walton



Photo: Barbara Walton

you will see opposite you the Old Police House and the old Magistrates' Court. The former police station retains the archway that led to the stables, where the inspector's pony and trap was kept.

In 1916 when the blackout was first introduced as a defence against German Zeppelin raids

the Bicester police were out in force to ensure that it was being observed correctly. The first person they caught for having improper blackout precautions was the vicar of St Edburg's. He had been holding a choir practice in the church and had put brown paper around the lights but unfortunately they were still visible from outside. The Vicar was duly fined £2.

From the church door of St Edburg's go down the path to the left in the direction of Church Street.



When you reach the end of the pedestrianised area continue straight ahead, staying on the pavement on the left. On reaching the pedestrian crossing by the King's Arms Hotel, cross to the other side and continue in the same direction until you reach a mini-roundabout. Hometree House (originally called Bicester Hall) is on your left.

Bicester Hall was built in the early 19th century for Thomas Davies, an apothecary. The



Photo: Barbara Walton

popularity of fox hunting in the area meant that the building became a hunting box for wealthy

people travelling up from London. One of the owners was Baron Schroder, who founded the bank of that name. During WWI, a Red Cross Hospital was established in Bicester Hall, staffed mainly by members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) and other local volunteers. The hospital opened in November 1914 and initially had enough beds for 20 wounded, but this was later increased to 56 by the construction of huts to the rear of the building. The wounded, in their distinctive blue hospital uniforms, would have been a conspicuous and common sight in the town. The hospital became a focus of the town's charitable efforts during the war, with regular fundraising events, such as concerts, being organised to raise money. Much effort also went into providing entertainment for the wounded, with concert parties and singers visiting the hospital each week. Many local people also gave support to the hospital in the form of gifts. After the war the building became a school, which in due course became Bicester Grammar School. The school moved to new premises in 1963, and after a period as government offices, the building was sold in 1980 and became a retirement home.

i The Methodist Church was built in 1927, although much of the land was purchased in 1919. It was first called The Grainger Hargreaves Memorial Church after The Reverend Grainger Hargreaves, who spent his early life in China as a missionary. He died in 1924, soon after becoming a 'Supernumerary' (retired Methodist minister) and moving to Bicester. He was much admired as a missionary, in his churches and across the district. In the 1950s and 60s there was a very active Sunday School here, with as many as two hundred children attending.

Pause, Reflect & Pray

John and Charles Wesley, with George Whitefield, started a revival movement within the Church of England which developed into a group of independent churches. Methodism in Bicester is now concentrated in this one church and continues the traditions first established by the Wesley brothers, focusing on worship and the social gospel in the form of helping others.

Thank you, Lord, for the strong and continuing traditions of Methodism. Help us as Christians hear what work Jesus is calling us to undertake in his Kingdom. May we see the needs of those around us and help as Jesus did. Amen.

Continue along Sheep Street.

i As you walk down Sheep St you will pass the Penny Black public house on the left. The Penny Black used to be Bicester's main Post Office and sorting office. Work to start building the Post Office was begun in the week the First World War broke out. If you look carefully at the top of the guttering downpipes you will see that they carry the monogram of King George V and are dated 1914.



i As you leave the church grounds (1) you find yourself in a small triangular space, now partially used for parking. This triangular space was thought to be the site of one of Bicester's two market places in medieval times. This market was associated with the nearby priory.

Continue down Church St, taking the first left down Cemetery Rd. At the end of Cemetery Rd turn right and continue until you come to the hospital on your left.

i Much of the land on which Bicester is built was owned for several centuries by the Coker family. Major Aubrey Coker, one of the last member of the Coker family to live in Bicester, donated the land on which the hospital was built as a permanent memorial to the men from Bicester who died in the First World War. Across the road from where you are standing is Montgomery House surgery. This was the site of the first Catholic School (St Mary's) and chapel, opening in March 1883 with 12 children in attendance. In 1958 teaching commenced at the current St. Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School.



Turn right and go down the road opposite the hospital. Continue to the end of this road, the corner of Coker Close and Kings End.

i The building opposite you when you come to end of the road is Bicester House. It was built on the site of a medieval Manor house of the Nuns of Markyate, whose mother house was in Bedfordshire. Now it is a retirement home but it was once the home of the Coker family.



Pause, Reflect & Pray

Look to the right down the road on the same side as Bicester House and you will see a large tree called the 'Hallelujah Tree' because the Salvation Army Band used to play here on Sunday afternoons.

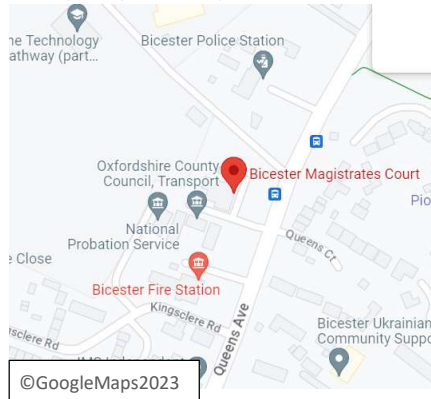
Lord God, thank you for all the different forms of worship in Bicester. We pray that all the churches in Bicester continue to work together to further your mission and care for the people of the town. Amen.

At the end turn left and continue to the end. Turn right down Queen's Avenue, taking the opportunity to cross to the opposite side of the road at the pedestrian crossing.



The site now occupied by the fire station (2) was still farmland in the early 20th century. For three months during the Great War this was the site of a tented encampment occupied by three hundred soldiers undergoing training.

Further to your right you will also see the Magistrates' Court (photo next page), followed by the "old" police station. In the 1930s, the centre of the town's justice moved to Queen's Avenue from Church Lane, at the same time as it was declared an 'Urban District Council'. In 1974 Bicester became part of Cherwell District Council and thereafter had a local council with a mayor instead of its own centre of governance. Subsequently, the Magistrates' Court closed in 2016, followed by the police station in April 2021. Both of these sites are being looked at for redevelopment.



Continue down North St. After 100m Wesley Hall will be on the right.



Wesley Hall was built in 1863 by the United Free Methodists as a Chapel close to the site of the original farmhouse. In 1891 it was renamed Wesley Hall. It was used as the Methodist Church Hall until 1954 when it was sold to Woolworths. In 1925, when the Wesleyan Chapel (Weyland Hall) was sold to the Freemasons, it was used for a short period as the main place of worship for the Methodists until the new building was completed in 1927. Wesley Hall is now a furniture shop.



Continue down North St straight to the pedestrianised Sheep Street. The first building on your left is the current Methodist Church.



LOCATION: Bicester Methodist Church



Follow this path to the end. Turn left and continue along the path, with a metal fence on your right. At the end of the track you will come to the Banbury Road. Cross the road and turn right, going under the railway bridge. After 350m you will come to a mini-roundabout (6). Ignore the road that forks to the right (Field Street) but cross the road with care and follow the cycle path right into North Street. Continue

straight down North St, passing Crumps Butts on your left. Sixty metres after passing Crumps Butts you will come to Weyland Hall on your left.

The former Wesleyan Chapel is



now a Masonic Lodge, but was originally one of two Methodist chapels in Bicester. Methodism came to Bicester in 1748 after a local resident, Mrs. Bowerman, went to one of John Wesley's meetings in Brackley. A room in a farmhouse near the site where Wesley Hall would later be built (now Home Comforts) was opened by Mr. Bowerman for these services. Methodism developed in two branches in Bicester, with one branch building the Wesleyan Chapel in 1840. In the late 1800s the two strands of Methodism came back together, continuing to use this site until 1925, when it was sold to the Freemasons, with the money being used to pay for the new church that is used today.



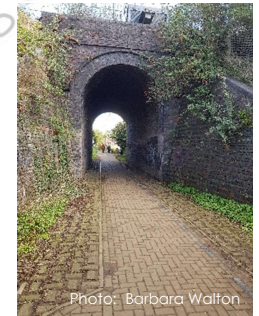
Continue down Queen's Avenue.

After passing the Magistrates' Court turn left (3), signposted 'The Bicester School'. Continue on this road, staying on the right hand side, passing Bicester School on the left and the Leisure Centre on the right. This footpath continues onto George St and crossing Leach Rd after 200m.



As you pass Market End Way on the left, you are passing the site of the former Bicester workhouse which was situated slightly further down this road. It was built in 1836 and had beds for 350 inmates. It served Bicester and 36 surrounding parishes. The 1881 census shows 77 inmates, ranging from 8 months to 95 years old. It ceased to operate in 1939 and was later converted into flats and then briefly used for fire brigade training before being demolished in 1966.

After Market End Way continue for 75m to a footpath on the right. Turn right down the footpath and cross the small patch of open ground to another road and turn left. After 20m you will see a gap in the wall on the right, with some concrete steps going down. Go down these steps and continue to the end, turning left once there. After 50m turn down the footpath on the right, signposted 'Bure Park Nature Reserve'. Go under the railway bridge.



The railway bridge was built in 1910 in order to allow farm traffic from Slade Farm to pass back and forth under the new railway that was built between Birmingham and London.

Continue along the tarmac path through the nature reserve following the frogs and butterflies printed on the pavement and crossing a footbridge.

Pause, Reflect & Pray

The park is a welcome point of our journey, away from the busy roadway paths with all the passing traffic and the hurdles of crossing the side roads. This is a beautiful place of refreshment and uplift.

Reflect on those times where being wearied perhaps by a particular situation in our lives, we have found God giving us refreshing strength to carry on.

Thank you, Lord, for your ever-present help in times of trouble.
Amen.

Approximately 150m after crossing the bridge, the path continues, with a school on the right and a field on the left, both substantially obscured by hedgerows. On reaching a road, turn right and you will see Emmanuel Church (5) on your left.



As you walk down the path along the side of the school you will see an old gate post, with the hinges still in place. This gatepost is a reminder that this was once farmland. The farm (Slade Farm) stood behind you and the gatepost is the solitary surviving relic of this building. The track that you have walked on from the railway bridge to this spot follows the same path as the old farm track.

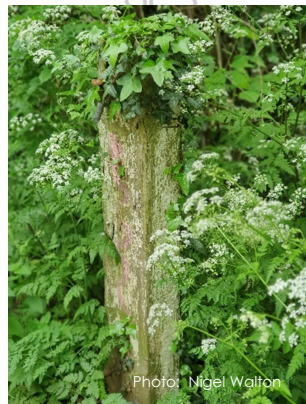


Photo: Nigel Walton

Slade Farm mainly farmed horses as well as hay for the horses. The last resident of Slade Farm was Oliver Gilbey who died in 1971. The land was subsequently sold to developers.

When the Bure Farm Pub originally opened, it was named The Oliver Gilbey in honour of this last resident of Slade Farm, but sadly this name has not remained.



LOCATION: Church of Emmanuel, Bicester



Photo: Barbara Walton



Emmanuel Church, the newest church in Bicester, was built in 2011 in the heart of the recently built Bure Park estate to cater for the greatly expanded population of Bicester. Its Café is open Wednesday to Friday mornings and is well visited by the community.

Pause, Reflect & Pray

Father God, we thank you for the strength and faith of those who first formed a congregation a decade before this church was built.

Thank you for the persistence and faith of those who founded and grew this church. May it continue to grow and spread the tent of its mission. Amen.

After visiting Emmanuel Church, turn right and return to the road, then turn left. Where the road bends to the left do not follow the road but continue straight ahead down Betony Way. At the end of Betony Way cross the road and go straight ahead down the tarmac path that leads into the Bure Park Nature Reserve. Follow the tarmac path as it curves onto a gravel track that goes over a footbridge, turning left at the T-junction on the other side of the bridge.