

Spend the day beside the Oxford Isis



How long do I need? One day
Where is it? Oxford

Highlights

The River Thames adopts many different characters on its journey from source to sea. As it flows through Oxford, the City of Dreaming Spires, it even adopts a different name. Between Osney and Iffley, the Oxford river is known as the Isis, thought to come from *Tamesis*, the Latin name for the Thames.

Explore a lovely rural reach of the river on an eight-mile walk from Oxford to Abingdon, on the well-signposted [Thames Path National Trail](#). Allow four hours for the walk, plus extra time for any detours and refreshments. Have lunch in Abingdon, "Britain's oldest town", then return to Oxford by a scheduled passenger boat trip (late May-mid September) or hop on a bus to do the trip in less than half an hour.

Add this day by the river to our itinerary '[Explore the historic heart of Oxford](#)' for a short break that takes you to the historic heart of Oxford and its University treasures.

Start the day with a waterside walk

From the city centre: walk down St Aldate's passing Tom Tower at the main entrance to Christ Church. Call in at Café Loco (just beyond the college) for a late breakfast, served until noon. Go on past the Head of the River pub, with its landing stage for rowing boats and punts, and cross Folly Bridge on the left hand side. Take the steps immediately after the bridge, beyond Salters Steamers booking office, and set off along the towpath with the river on your left.

From Oxford station: turn right out of the station, under the railway bridge. At the river bridge, walk down to the towpath on the far left hand side to join the Thames Path on Osney Island. With the river on your left, walk past the former Waterman's Arms and along the tree-lined street of

terraced cottages to Osney Weir and Lock, with its lock keeper's cottage. Walk on under bridges and along the green fringes of Grand Pont Nature Reserve to Folly Bridge, site of the Oxen Ford from which the city takes its name.

Onwards towards picturesque Iffley Lock

This city stretch of the Isis is very much the University's rowing river. Folly Bridge marks the finish of the annual four day Summer Eights, when college crews race upstream from Iffley Lock, bumping and 'knocking out' the boats in front to be crowned "Head of the River". This is a busy and beautiful stretch of the river, with Christ Church Meadow and a glimpse of distant spires on the far bank. University boathouses cluster at the far end of the Meadow, on the island formed where the Cherwell meets the Isis, and there are more college boat clubs dotted along the towpath. Just follow the Path under Donnington Road Bridge, (daubed with rowing slogans) to picturesque Iffley Lock and Weir – a scenic haunt for locals, walkers and rowers. Look for the rollers, built to allow boats to bypass the lock, and for the handsome bull's head set into the wall. The "Starting Ring" he wears in his nose marks the starting point for Oxford University Boat Club races.

A bite to eat The Isis Farmhouse, beside the lock, is a free house with a large garden serving homemade cakes and cream teas, local beers and limited homemade hot meals at lunchtime and evenings. Canoes can also be hired here, if you fancy a spell on the water. In winter, the pub is only open from Mondays to Thursdays. Please note that the pub is 'cash only' (tel: +44 (0)1865 243854).

At Iffley Lock, make a small detour into the pretty village to admire Iffley's thatched cottages and the rare and beautiful [St Mary's Church](#), which remains almost unaltered since the 12th century. Cross the river at the lock, walk straight ahead then branch right into Mill Lane to reach the church in Church Way. The tall, narrow structure of the church is in the grand style of the late Romanesque period, with massive walls, high arches and rich carving. Look for the little staircase used by lepers attending services and the stained-glass Nativity Window by John Piper and David Wasley, showing animals on a Tree of Life greeting the birth of Christ.

St Mary's Church

Church Way, Iffley, Oxford, OX4 4EG

Opening hours: The church is normally open during the day. If you are organising a group and would like a guide for your visit please [email the Vicar](#).

Costs: Entrance is free of charge

Web: www.iffley.co.uk

From Iffley to the Sandford Lasher

Rejoin the Thames Path to follow the river through the fringes of Iffley Meadows Nature Reserve. In April and early May, this little-known site comes alive with a rich purple and white carpet of rare Snake's Head Fritillary, still thriving in the wetlands of the watermeadows. After a couple of bridges, carrying the Oxford Bypass, the Path starts a series of river and island hopping. Cross Hinksey Stream to enter open meadows, then

hop to one tree-fringed island and on to the next for Sandford Lock. The impressive lock chamber has a fall of 2.68 metres (8ft 10inches) making this the deepest lock on the non-tidal River Thames. This pretty place has a darker past. The river behind the lockkeeper's house is fed by water from the fearsome "lasher" weir at the head of the island, which has some treacherous undercurrents. "The pool under Sandford lasher, just behind the lock, is a very good place to drown yourself in", wrote Jerome K Jerome in *Three Men in a Boat*. An obelisk erected in the early 1900s records the names of several students who perished here including one Michael Llewellyn-Davies, adopted son of J M Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*.

A bite to eat The attractive setting makes Sandford a tempting place to stop. Cross the lower lock gates to the far bank to visit the Kings Arms pub, with its large waterside garden. The pub is open daily, serving lunch and dinner (tel: +44 (0)1865 777095). A short walk up Church Lane will bring you to the [Oxford Thames Four Pillars Hotel](#), (tel: +44 (0)1865 334444) open for meals and refreshment throughout the day. The hotel grounds provide a final mooring for the last of the stylish Oxford college barges, which fell out of fashion when boathouses took their place.

Continue through lush pastures to Abingdon

Cross back to the lock, and over a bridge, to walk on along the Thames Path. A lush and open stretch of countryside follows, with fields on either side where Radley College's boathouse is the only landmark. Beyond the boathouse, look across the river to see Nuneham House, parts of which date from the 18th century. This former home of the Harcourt family is now The Global Retreat Centre. Nuneham Park was a favourite destination with Christ Church maths don Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and Alice Liddell (daughter of the Dean) on their rowing expeditions from Oxford. It served as the setting for several chapters of '*Through the Looking Glass*', one of the timeless tales inspired by these idyllic outings. After wooded Lock Wood Island, and Nuneham Bridge, you will be following the river through woodlands with picnic sites abound. At the second site, look across the river to the weir marking one of the entries to Swift Ditch, the ancient channel which predates the lock channel dug by the monks of Abingdon Abbey. After a final wiggle round a reedy inlet, and over the Abbey Stream, you cross the Thames in two stages at Abingdon Weir and Lock. Turn right then and walk on through the water meadows with visitor moorings to Nags Head Island, spanned by Abingdon Bridge.

Enjoying Abingdon

Turn right on the bridge and walk up Bridge Street to the Market Place, passing Thames Street on your right. The centre piece in the Market Place is the splendid 17th century County Hall, raised on arches over a market space. This magnificent Baroque building was designed to house a court room for the Assizes in the days when Abingdon was Berkshire's County Town. It now houses The County Hall Museum, due to reopen – renewed - in 2012. Facing the Market Place is The Abbey Gateway, flanked by St Nicholas Church and the former St John's Hospital. The Gateway is a survival from what was once the sixth wealthiest monastery in England, which boasted a vast complex of buildings, courtyards, gardens and orchards. Other abbey survivals consist of the Bakehouse,

Checker Hall, Checker and Long Gallery situated by the Millstream in Thames Street. They are usually free to visit on summer afternoons - visit the information centre for details.

A bite to eat

- The Stream Bar and Restaurant of the [Upper Reaches Hotel](#) in Thames Street (tel: +44 (0)1235 522536) occupies the original old mill house, complete with working waterwheel. A terrace overlooks the millpond, beside the river bank.
- The [Kings Head and Bell](#) at 10 East St Helen's Street (tel: +44 (0)1235 525362) is the historic 16th century coaching inn where Charles I held a council of war.
- The Old Anchor at 1 St Helens Wharf (tel: +44 (0)1235 521726) enjoys a peaceful location next to St.Helen's church. There isn't a garden, but the pub has a lovely view across a quiet road out to the river and Abingdon Bridge.

Time for Tea?

- [Throwing Buns](#), at 8 Market Place sells sandwiches, salads, wraps and fresh cakes to eat in or take away. Its name is inspired by the old and quirky Abingdon tradition of throwing buns from the roof of the County Hall to celebrate major royal or national occasions.
- Rosie's Tea Rooms, at 17 West St Helens Street is another welcome recent arrival (tel: +44 (0)1253 533281).

The return to Oxford

By boat: [Salters Steamers](#) scheduled passenger boat service departs from the end of the beer garden in the Nag's Head at 16:45, arriving at Folly Bridge at 18:30. The service runs daily from the end of May to the end of September. Tel: +44 (0)1865 243421.

By bus: [Oxford Bus Company](#) run services X3, X13 and City 35 from Stratton Way, in Abingdon town centre to Oxford city centre. There is a bus every ten minutes, with a journey time of 23–30 minutes, depending on the set down point in Oxford.

More visitor information

Abingdon Visitor & Community Information Centre, The Old Abbey House, Abbey Close (opposite the Abbey Gate.) Open: Monday 9.00 - 17.15; Tuesday-Friday 9.00-17.00; Saturday 10.00-15.00. Tel: +44 (0)1235 522711.