

Epwell to Swalcliffe and back

Just under 2.5 hours, around 5 miles for main route

Starts in The Square.

From the Village Hall head towards the church and take the path up through the churchyard. Go through the gate at the top (known as the Timothy Wimbush gate, in memory of a Rector who was keen on cricket), turn left and take the track across the field to the back of the Chandlers Arms. Turn left round the car park, down the Sibford Rd and almost immediately right alongside the grassy triangle. Keep right, go through the wooden farm gate and follow path keeping to the left of the pond/woodland.

Though next gate and go straight on, keeping the hedge close on your left. Good views towards Epwell Mill and beyond in that direction. At the end of the field go through the gate which veers to the left and keep to the left as the path descends through a field of saplings. Another gate then down the narrow track with hedges either side. Eventually you end up at a stream with a plank crossing. Go carefully over the stream (bridge can be slippery), though the metal gate and head to the right, keeping close to the trees etc on your right. (The OS map official path takes you to the centre of this field and then turns right. Temporary fencing, a pond and often some inquisitive horses keep you to the right.) Keep going. It might well be boggy but is the best way at present.

The path becomes drier, opens out to a track and heads gently upwards. Keep to the left of a large tree, ignoring a turn to the right which leads round a pond to the farm. So, onwards and upwards. The path becomes shaded by bushes and small trees. You are on the line of what is known as the Roman Road but I bet it's an earlier track. Likely to have been a Salt Way, running from Droitwich across country, passing Compton Wynyates and Broughton Castle, towards a river crossing at Twyford, just south of Banbury. Remains of Roman buildings have been found near Swalcliffe Lea and Broughton, ahead of you.

The path is dry and straight and the terrain agreeably undulating. You come to a road and cross straight over. Take care! Keep going and enjoy the open view. You see the tower of Swalcliffe church to the right in front of you.

On the left there is Madmarston Hill, an Iron Age fort. Pre second world war aerial photos show ramparts. See the photos in the Ashmolean Museum.

On the Roman Road you meet a gate just before coming alongside Madmarston Hill. An unmissable gate across the track. Almost immediately after the gate turn right and head south towards Swalcliffe. You cross a stream and in about 100m there is straight on – up to Swalcliffe - and at 90 degrees on your right a track alongside a hedge. The main route of this walk is to turn right and follow this track, towards Brakelands Farm.

(You could extend the walk by going straight up the hill into Swalcliffe rather than turning right. Past the village hall, turn right the road, go past church and tithe barn, and, on the hill out of the village, pick up a path to the right in woodland)

Back to the main route. Follow the track alongside the hedge to a finger post sign. Straight on is to Brakelands Farm and is Private. To the right (ish) the finger post points along our route, a bridleway towards Epwell. Follow this (narrow) path which can be a bit slippery on a wet day. Keep going over a bridge, farm and horses are on your left, and carry on up the hill. There is usually a clear path even when the crops are high. This is splendid open country. There's a hedge on the near horizon. The

path should lead you to a gate in this hedge onto the road. Almost opposite is the rather grand driveway of Blenheim Farm. Take this driveway towards the farm.

Follow the road round to the left and skirt the farm. Note the lovely pond with the duck house on it. On a bit and there are some handsome farm cottages on the right. Note the coat of arms on the building. New College, Oxford.

Keep going steadily upwards and ignore the track on your left to Redland Barn, a barn conversion out on its own. Head up the slope, probably between two cultivated areas but is not always very clear, and at the top meet the hedge and turn right. Keep close to the hedge. A gate appears on your left. Often muddy. Go through it and up the slope, past the pond to the top gate. After the top gate pass between the old farm house on the left and the new barn conversions on your right. A very fine wrought iron gate on your right is worth a stop.

Follow the track onwards, and just after it veers to the left there's a gate on your right. Go through the gate and follow the path, which turns left quite sharply. This should be familiar territory; you came this way. Straight on, with horses on the left.

Onwards and through the next gate. You are now back in Epwell Parish. Walk between the hedge on your right and the pond on your left, to the wooden gate. Meet the road and cross it, and head up the tchure (pathway) just to the left of Rugby House. At the top of the path turn right and go round the edge of the field (called The Leys). You are on a track described as a Cartway in the 1773 Enclosure Act document

At the gate into the churchyard turn right and notice the fine bench on your left, put there in memory of Caroline Long. Caroline lived at Epwell Mill for many years until their move to Sibford, and was the organist at the church. She was a keen musician and loved to be involved in local music making.

The church is medieval and worth a look, now or at a later date. It is dedicated to St Anne, the mother of the blessed Virgin Mary. There are only about 100 churches with this dedication in the Church of England.

Until 1905 the church was a chapelry in the large parish of Swalcliffe. It then became part of the Sibford and Epwell benefice, and in 1975 was made a separate ecclesiastical parish within the group of parishes which make up the present day Wykeham Benefice. The building was first mentioned in 1360, and there was at that time a chaplain at Epwell appointed by the Rector of Swalcliffe.

The original structure, probably 13th century, had no tower and the entrance was on the north side of the nave. You can see where it was filled in. The tower was added later. The church has been repaired and altered over the centuries, with a complete restoration in 1857 when a new roof was needed, new pews fitted and the singers' gallery at the west end removed. Pity! The church registers run from 1577 for baptisms, 1580 for marriages and 1584 for burials. There is a file in the church listing the graves with legible engravings.

Leave the churchyard by the bottom gate and you are back where you started.