

# WW GUIDE TO THE UPPER THAMES

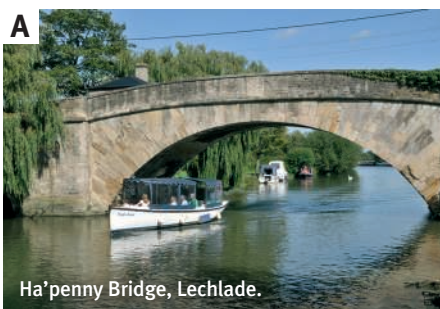
Leave the gin palaces of the Royal River far behind, and enjoy the blissful peace of the Thames through rural Oxfordshire.

**Keith Goss** is your guide...



Idyllic scene at Kelmscott.  
ROBIN SMITHETT

Waterways World January 2010 73



Ha'penny Bridge, Lechlade.



Pretty lock cut at Buscot.



Moorings for the New Inn at Lechlade.



Radcot Bridge.



The roundhouse at Inglesham.

## LECHLADE TO SHIFFORD

Think of the Thames, and the grandeur of the Lower Thames springs to mind, with its extravagant houses, well manicured lawns and sophisticated towns.

The river between Lechlade and Abingdon is an entirely different experience. For mile after languid mile, it charts a tortuous course through remote watermeadows, attended by just a handful of convivial pubs and sleepy hamlets.

Yet just as with the more famous lower reaches, the locks are worked for you, the bridges are elegant and the channel deep – the best of both worlds. This is a true get-away-from-it-all experience, right at the heart of central southern England.

Although small unpowered craft such as kayaks and canoes can reach as far as Cricklade, the practical head of navigation on the Thames is just downstream of tiny Inglesham. Here, in the presence of one of

its distinctive roundhouses, the Thames & Severn Canal joins the river. Restoration of the canal is, of course, underway as part of the Cotswold Canals project which will ultimately link Britain's two greatest rivers.

**Lechlade** reaches out to embrace its river with open arms. Wonderful free moorings are available below Ha'penny Bridge, built in 1793 and so-named in reference to the toll paid by pedestrians until 1839. The town has numerous fine Cotswold stone buildings, a Londis supermarket and a plethora of good places to eat and drink. The New Inn offers reasonably priced meals, good moorings for patrons and accommodation, whilst Monica's Plaice serves up some of the best fish and chips to be found anywhere along the 125 miles of the river.

For something more elaborate try Colleys or Pino's splendid Italian restaurant. But it is the quirky shops that really set Lechlade apart: a handful of antique outlets, a

delightful children's store selling doll's-house miniatures, and an odd year-round Christmas Shop (bah, humbug).

Immaculately maintained, St John's Lock is the highest on the river. A statue of Old Father Thames, once sited at Thames Head, is to be found outside the lock house. Most Thames lock-keepers live on site, and the ever-changing architecture of these outposts of the old Thames Conservancy is one of the river's many pleasures. There is a small information centre outside this one, providing literature on local places of interest.

Before departing the lock, be sure to turn and admire the view back to Lechlade, dominated by the spire of St John's church; it's one of the finest sights on the waterway network. The Trout Inn, adjacent, is a very friendly, down-to-earth establishment frequented by local Cotswold Canals Trust members, with real ale, vast portions of home-cooked food, and a nice line in fish.





The graceful spire of St John's church, Lechlade.

ROBIN SMITHETT



Hotel boats approaching Lechlade.



Ascending St John's Lock.

ROBIN SMITHETT

A series of sharp bends leads to **Buscot Lock**. From here it's just a five-minute walk to the village, which boasts a splendid shop/tearoom with outside seating for warm sunny days. If you wish to visit Buscot House, however, you will have to walk a mile or so along the busy A417 to get there. An 18th century house set in extensive parkland, it is open April to September, normally Wednesday to Sunday ([www.buscot-park.com](http://www.buscot-park.com)).

**Kelmscott** (one 't' according to Ordnance Survey, but two on local signs) lies much closer to the river and is a village of exquisite charm and peace. The focal point is Kelmscott Manor, the country home of William Morris – poet, craftsman and socialist – from 1871 until his death in 1896. Lesser mortals can enjoy the house and garden today, but only on Wednesdays and selected Saturdays from April to September ([www.kelmscottmanor.org.uk](http://www.kelmscottmanor.org.uk)). Refreshments are available at the manor's licensed restaurant when the house is open, as well as at the Plough just along the lane, which also has accommodation should you wish to prolong your stay in this delightful village.

**Radcot Bridge** is widely thought of as the oldest on the Thames, dating back to the early 13th century. Constructed with pointed arches flanking a central rounded one, it was superseded by a single-arched structure in 1790, surprisingly built by canal engineer William Jessop. Narrow and located on a tight bend, it calls for careful navigation.

Alongside is the Swan Hotel, one of too many Greene King pubs in this part of the world, but offering a fine riverside garden, food, accommodation, and even day-boat hire.

Like Ryan Giggs on a mazy dribble through the opposition defence (*our features editor assures me this is a familiar phrase to football fans – ed*), the stripling Thames twists and turns through the increasingly remote landscape, occasionally making life difficult for steerers of narrowboats. And if you want civilisation, then you have to get your walking boots on and seek it out!

From Old Man's Bridge, a wooden footbridge, you can proceed along bridleways and quiet lanes to **Bampton**, a small town noted as a centre for Morris dancing. It makes few concessions to tourism, but does have a small art gallery, coffee shop and a handful of pubs (we like the Morris Clown). Overhead, a succession of low-flying aircraft trundle across the sky carrying personnel and equipment from Brize Norton airfield. You can also reach Bampton along the road from Tadpole Bridge, where there is another Trout Inn offering free moorings with expensive meals.

Shifford Lock was the last on the Thames to be built, being opened in 1898 as part of the new cut which bypassed the loop through Duxford. Small boats can navigate up the old arm as far as the ancient ford, where you can still paddle across the channel in the summer months. The Thames Path follows this route too, having left the main river at Tenfoot Bridge.

## THE HIGHER THAMES

Long before the onset of the canal era, boats would make their way past Lechlade up to Cricklade.

There were once four flash locks along here, allowing boats to carry up to ten tons of cargo. However, passage was frequently difficult during periods of dry weather. The opening of the Thames & Severn Canal in 1789, followed by the North Wilts Canal in 1819 (a branch of the Wilts & Berks), offered a more reliable route and the river soon went out of use.

In spring 1984, the local branch of the IWA organised the carriage of a 'token ton' of cargo from Coventry to Cricklade, aboard a pontoon-type butty which was towed by various craft. The venture, which sought to highlight the statutory right of navigation between Lechlade and Cricklade, achieved its objective when the 'token ton' arrived at Cricklade Bridge on 16th June, to be met by civic dignitaries from Swindon, Gloucester and North Wiltshire, as well as large crowds who gathered to greet the first vessel to arrive at the town for over 140 years.

Today there are no active plans to bring about restoration of this section of the Thames, although it remains relatively popular with canoeists and kayakers, as well as with walkers on the Thames Path.



## NEWBRIDGE TO GODSTOW

What's in a name? Not too much hereabouts, for **Newbridge** is, in fact, the second oldest on the river, built in the mid-13th century. For aesthetic appeal it has few equals, especially when viewed from upstream.

Sadly, it is finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the incessant traffic thundering across on the A415, and a replacement structure is planned; good news, perhaps, but only for motorists tired of being delayed by the bridge's single-way working.

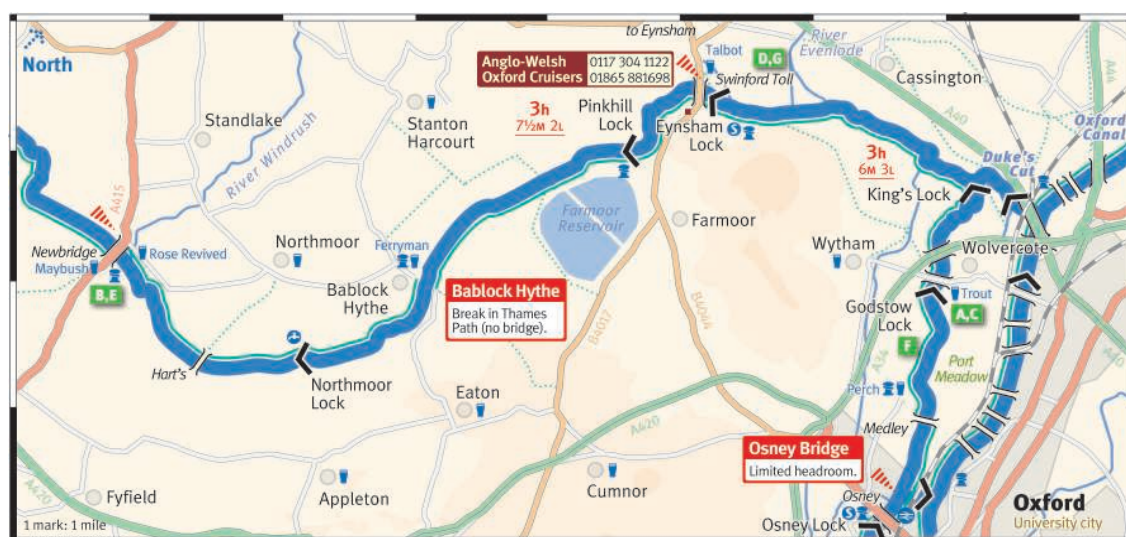
You can ponder all this, and the fact that the bridge was fought over by Cromwellians and Royalists in 1644, as you enjoy a drink at one of the two pubs that vie for your custom (both, inevitably, Greene King). The Maybush, on the south bank, is perhaps cosier, but the Rose Revived has the nicer garden. The Thames Path passes right through the middle of it and few walkers, one suspects, manage to get past without stopping for a pint or two.

The long reach to Pinkhill Lock is – with one exception – one of the quietest stretches of the river: remote, lonely and timeless.

Nowhere is quieter than Northmoor Lock, and from here you can walk across the fields to Appleton. A well stocked community shop and the Plough Inn will reward you for the effort. Slightly further away, on the opposite side, is Northmoor village, which is shopless but with an excellent 'local', the Red Lion, providing sustenance for the walk back to the river.

This rural idyll is abruptly shattered at **Bablock Hythe** by a large and unsightly caravan site, entirely out of keeping with all that has gone before on this lovely stretch of river. The Ferryman Inn here has a long past,

- A** Entering Godstow Lock.
- B** The Maybush at Newbridge.
- C** The Trout Inn at Godstow.
- D** Swinford Toll Bridge.
- E** Newbridge has few equals in terms of aesthetic appeal.
- F** Remains of Godstow nunnery.
- G** Time to cough up – toll charges at Swinford.





but is no oil painting itself. The ferry service to the opposite bank no longer operates, and Oxfordshire County Council has reneged on plans to build a foot and cycle bridge – leaving this as the one break in the 184-mile Thames Path. Still, you can moor up on the north bank and cycle to Stanton Harcourt a couple of miles away, to savour its delightful grey stone buildings and the remains of a 15th century manor house.

Now heading almost due north, you pass Farmoor Reservoir, which is fed by the Thames and supplies the taps of households throughout Oxfordshire. A car park and picnic area are provided, but boaters and walkers have the more appealing prospect of the adjacent lock, Pinkhill – perhaps the most unspoilt on the river.

And is there a finer bridge than **Swinford** on the entire Thames? Honey-coloured Swinford Toll Bridge was built of stone in 1777 and boasts nine arches, three of which span the river. Amazingly, the toll is still applied – it costs the princely sum of 5p to go across in a car. Drivers of lorries and buses pay more, or for £1.25m you could buy the whole bridge, put up for auction this month. The money is collected by a cheerful individual protected from the elements in a makeshift shelter; the stylish toll house located on the northern approach appears to be redundant.

Walk from here, or across the fields from the lock, to the historic village of Eynsham. Despite its proximity to Oxford, it retains a

calm, unhurried air, as well as a good range of amenities. There is a Co-op supermarket to restock the larder, and plenty of places to eat and drink, including the 18th century Red Lion on the corner of the High Street. Nearby is the excellent Cornucopia delicatessen, offering a tasty array of fresh breads, pies, pastries and cakes.

A mile or so downstream is where the Cassington Cut once entered the river. Financed by the Duke of Marlborough, this short canal bypassed the River Evenlode to serve his mill at Cassington, and was last used in the late 19th century. It still plays a useful role today as a drainage channel carrying excess water into the Thames after periods of heavy rainfall.

Arguably at its most beautiful, and indubitably at its most northerly, the Thames curves seductively around Wytham Great Wood, and on past the Duke's Cut – a short-cut to the Oxford Canal. King's Lock is the final manually operated lock you will encounter, the next one, **Godstow**, being mechanised. Above the lock are the stark remains of the 12th century Godstow nunnery. While the lock cut was being constructed, so the story goes, navvies disturbed the bones of long-deceased nuns. So are you brave enough to moor here for the night? If it gets too spooky you can always take refuge in the very popular Trout (yes, another one), which overlooks the weir channel, is one of the most popular pubs on the river and deals in spirits of a far less scary nature. ➤

## EXPLORING



### WALKING AND CYCLING

Getting the best out of a boating holiday on the Upper Thames will always involve some walking, because most of the attractive villages are situated well away from the river – in some cases, two to three miles away.

Add the opportunities given by the Thames Path (see page 80), and the water Rambler is in clover. Particularly worthwhile is the walk from Lechlade to Cricklade, a distance of 11 miles. Most of the route is away from the river, across quiet farmland. (You can return to Lechlade by bus, although this does involve a change at Swindon.)

Another, shorter, walk based on Lechlade involves following the path to the left of the church, going through the churchyard and on through the fields to the Trout Inn near St John's Lock. After a quick drink or two, you can return along the riverbank to the town.

Further downstream at Godstow you can enjoy one of the classic waterway walks: the Oxford Circular. Start by Godstow Lock, then take the lane which goes past the Trout Inn, through Wolvercote and over the railway bridge. You then join the Oxford Canal towpath by Wolvercote Lock and follow it to the canal terminus in the city centre. Turn right and take the Botley Road back to the Thames at Osney, returning to Godstow by way of the Thames Path. It's approximately five miles, there are several pubs en route and a fabulous view of Port Meadow to boot.

The Thames Path above Oxford is largely unsuitable for cycling, while western Oxfordshire has too many busy roads, and too few Thames bridges, for comfort. Indeed, Oxfordshire's council abandoned its county cycleway when traffic levels at places like Newbridge became too high. That said, there are a few quiet lanes which can make for short afternoon rides.

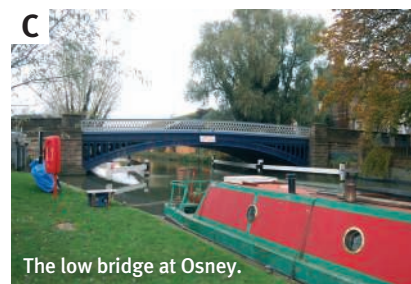
Downstream of Oxford, though, the situation is better with a lovely, well-signposted Sustrans route (5) following the Thames through the city, then heading off on quiet lanes and tracks towards Abingdon and Wallingford. (In the other direction, it heads to Banbury and is if anything even more enjoyable.) Full maps are available at [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk) and [www.opencyclemap.org](http://www.opencyclemap.org).



Dutch barge at Abingdon.



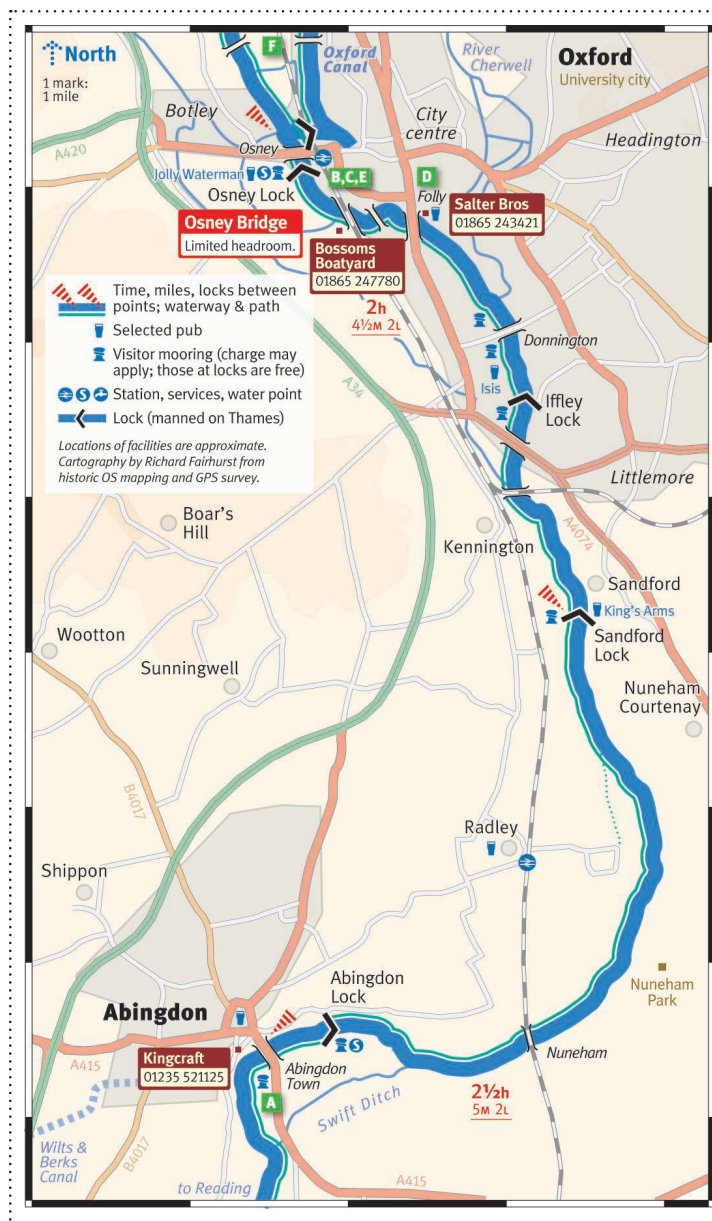
Good moorings at Osney.



The low bridge at Osney.



The Head of the River at Folly Bridge, Oxford.



## OXFORD AND ABINGDON

There is no finer way to arrive at **Oxford** than along the Thames. Across the vast expanse of Port Meadow lies the city of dreaming spires, the Bridge of Sighs, and Inspector Morse. First though, relish this wide reach of the river, which you may well have to share with rowing eights, this being a popular training area for college crews. It's tempting too, to linger awhile at the thatched Perch Inn at Binsey, renowned for its à la carte meals and good range of beers.

The Sheepwash Channel offers another chance to enter the Oxford Canal at its city centre terminus, but straight ahead lies Osney Bridge. It's thanks to this bridge that narrowboaters and small cruiser owners have the upper river to themselves: its low headroom prevents larger craft from travelling further upstream, and gives the Upper Thames its world-of-its-own character. **Osney** is a salubrious enough district and, being close to the city centre, is where many people choose to moor while they go off exploring. There's a welcoming local pub here too, the Waterman's Arms, serving bar meals at reasonable prices.

Folly Bridge is the Oxford of the tourist brochures. Salter Bros' famous steamers rest at their moorings, waiting to leave on trips to Reading, Henley, Marlow and Maidenhead; punts are available for hire; and the Head of the River – a converted grain warehouse – is busy with drinkers enjoying the extensive waterside terrace. Half a mile downstream, past the impressive headquarters of a number of rowing clubs and the pleasing backdrop of Christ Church Meadow, is the confluence with the Cherwell – this is where the serious exponents of punting go to practise their art. Take a walk alongside this most endearing of Thames tributaries and just cherish being in Oxford.

The Isis Farmhouse, just above Iffley Lock, is a marvellous curio of a pub, endearingly shabby with home-cooked vegetarian food, local ale and odd opening hours. Some love it, others fail to see the appeal, but any waterway enthusiast can appreciate the fact that beer was once delivered to this road-free destination by barge. Isis Lock is admirably maintained, its garden a riot of colour from May to September.

The next lock, Sandford, is deeper than most at 8ft 10in. It too has an attendant pub, the King's Arms, which is especially popular with families, not least on account of its attractive riverside garden.



Rowing eight in Osney Lock.

ROBIN SMITTHETT

E

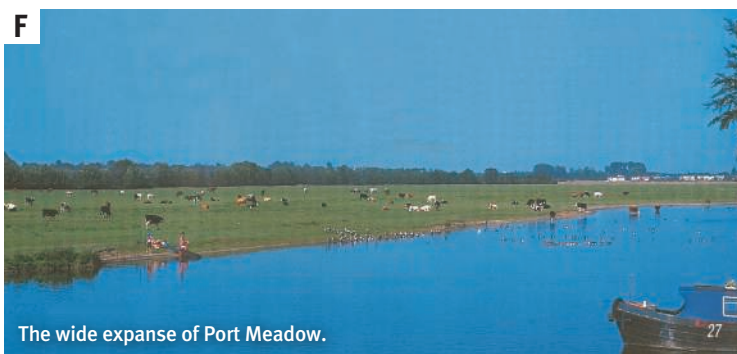
Nuneham House, built for Simon Harcourt in 1756, overlooks the river south of **Radley**. Within its magnificent grounds, designed by Capability Brown, stands the Carfax Conduit, an elaborate water outlet moved there from Oxford High Street in the 17th century. Today the house and grounds are owned by Oxford University and used by the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. You can almost feel the sense of peace and fulfilment as you cruise by! Wooded islands hereabouts mark the site of a former lock; there are none today from Sandford to Abingdon.

And so to **Abingdon**, often described as the prettiest town on the whole of the Thames. There is certainly much to enjoy in this sizeable Oxfordshire town – once the capital of Berkshire. Pride of place must go to the stylish County Hall, referred to in some quarters as the grandest town hall in England. It houses the Abingdon Museum which is well worth a visit (01235 523703).

Below the lock, extensive free (five-day) moorings are provided by the local council, either side of the elegant road bridge that spans the river. For a special night out you could try the Reaches on Thames Street, a plush hotel which welcomes non-residents to its Mill Wheel restaurant and offers secure moorings for patrons just upstream of Abingdon Bridge. For a decent pint, the Stocks Bar in the Crown & Thistle Hotel is the best in town by a long chalk, with an impressive range of well-kept ale and cider.

At one time Abingdon was the site of the junction with the Wilts & Berks Canal, a narrowbeam waterway which provided a winding cross-country link with the Kennet & Avon Canal at Semington. Little trace of the historic junction remains today: don't be fooled by the cast iron bridge with the W&B inscription, which actually crosses the River Ock. An all-new junction and several hundred yards of waterway have now been built south of Abingdon Marina.

But the Wilts & Berks is a waterway for the future. Having journeyed from the sleepy watermeadows around Lechlade, past grand manor houses and on to the bright lights of Oxford and Abingdon, the chances are you'll be keen to carry on downstream and sample some more of the delights that the majestic Thames has to offer.



The wide expanse of Port Meadow.

## NAVIGATION NOTES

- ★ The Thames above Oxford is a surprisingly quiet waterway, entirely rural and offering relaxing cruising through manned locks.
- ★ The banks are privately owned and mooring is generally only at designated locations. The towns of Lechlade, Oxford and Abingdon are all well-supplied with mooring space, but as always on the Thames, narrowboat owners should be prepared to welcome other boats to come alongside if space is tight.
- ★ Visibility can sometimes be reduced due to sharp bends and the riverbanks. Some narrowboaters have taken to flying a pennant to become more obvious, and owners of full-length boats should be especially careful. Like any river, the Thames can be prone to flooding and you should be alert to the yellow and red flood warning boards at locks.
- ★ The navigation authority is the Environment Agency, which issues its own long-term and visitor licences. The joint British Waterways/EA Gold Licence includes full access to the Thames.

## LOCKS

- ★ Lock-keepers are usually on duty from 9am each day. They go off-duty at 5.30pm in April, 6.30pm May, 7pm June–August, 6pm September, 5pm October. (From November to March, hours are 9.15am–4pm.) Blue circle signs are installed when the lock-keeper is off-duty.
- ★ Locks can be operated out-of-hours by boaters. Locks upstream of Oxford are unpowered. Those from Godstow downstream are powered, with the power system now available for user operation (the last to be converted being Iffley, this winter).
- ★ Thames lock etiquette requires that you use the engine to come to a stop, then turn your engine off and use both bow and stern ropes to keep the boat in place. At busy times, you may have to queue: lock-keepers will beckon you in one-by-one in order to make the best use of space.
- ★ In general, when sharing with fibreglass cruisers, steel boats should enter the lock first and leave last. Remember that many cruisers can move faster than narrowboats, and the 5mph limit is higher than on the canals – so if you are in a slower craft, be prepared to let faster craft pass.

## DIMENSIONS

- ★ **Cricklade–Inglesham** Generally suitable for small unpowered boats only.
- ★ **Lechlade–Osney** Length 109ft, beam 14ft 8in, draught 3ft, headroom 7ft 6in
- ★ **Oxford–Abingdon** Length 120ft, beam 17ft 3in, draught 4ft, headroom 10ft 3in (at Folly Bridge: 13ft 6in elsewhere)

## BOATYARDS

|                                          | Hire | Repairs | Call-out | Pump-out | Diesel | Chandlery |
|------------------------------------------|------|---------|----------|----------|--------|-----------|
| Lechlade Marina<br>01367 252181          | ✓*   | -       | -        | ✓        | ✓      | ✓         |
| Anglo Welsh, Eynsham<br>0117 304 1122    | ✓    | ✓       | -        | ✓        | ✓      | ✓         |
| Oxford Cruisers, Eynsham<br>01865 881698 | -    | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        | ✓      | ✓         |
| Bossoms Boatyard, Oxford<br>01865 247780 | -    | ✓       | ✓        | -        | -      | ✓         |
| Salter Brothers, Oxford<br>01865 243421  | ✓*   | ✓       | -        | -        | -      | ✓         |
| Kingcraft, Abingdon<br>01235 521125      | -    | ✓       | -        | ✓        | ✓      | ✓         |

\* day hire only

## NAVIGATION AUTHORITY

- ★ **Environment Agency:** 0118 953 5650 ([www.visitthames.co.uk](http://www.visitthames.co.uk))

## WATERWAY SOCIETIES

- ★ **River Thames Society,** 01491 612456 ([www.riverthamessociety.org.uk](http://www.riverthamessociety.org.uk))
- ★ **Inland Waterways Association:** Oxfordshire Branch 01494 783453 ([www.waterways.org.uk](http://www.waterways.org.uk))
- ★ **Cotswold Canals Trust:** 01285 643440 ([www.cotswoldcanals.com](http://www.cotswoldcanals.com))
- ★ **Wilts & Berks Canal Trust:** 0845 226 8567 ([www.wbct.org.uk](http://www.wbct.org.uk))

## OTHER MAPS AND GUIDES

- ★ **Environment Agency** River Thames Out & About Guides
- ★ **Nicholsons Guide to the Waterways 7:** River Thames and the Southern Waterways
- ★ **Pearsons Canal Companions:** Severn & Avon, Upper Thames & Cotswold Canals (above Oxford), Kennet & Avon, River Thames
- ★ **Geoprojects** The Thames, the River and the Path and Thames Ring Atlas
- ★ **Ordnance Survey** Landranger maps 163 (Cheltenham & Cirencester), 164 (Oxford & Chipping Norton)



One of two navigation channels at Folly Bridge.

## OXFORD

Oxford largely ignores its river and is positively hostile to its canal. But that doesn't mean you have to return the favour. A city rich in history, it can also be rather touristy and traffic-clogged at times – so here's our guide to the best bits.

To orient yourself, start at Carfax, the crossroads in the centre of town which, going against type, is graced by a chunky tower rather than a dreaming spire. The streets west (Queen Street) and north (Cornmarket) of here are identikit shopping thoroughfares of the sort you'd find anywhere, but things get more interesting when you walk east along "the High".

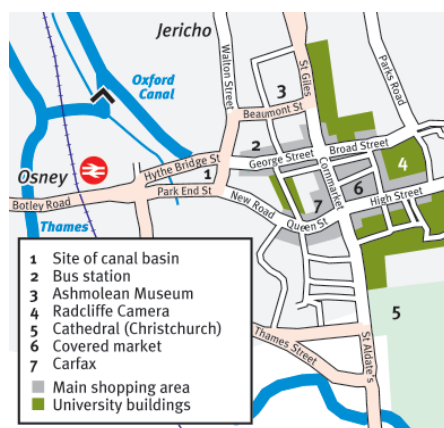
Lined with colleges, this is the heart of the famous university. The side-streets to the south (especially Merton Street) are more evocative still, while to the north you'll find the curious round Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian Library. Walking past these will take you to Broad Street, another Oxford highlight with the peerless Blackwells bookshop – a disorientating experience for anyone more accustomed to Waterstones and Borders!

Do visit the Covered Market, too, between Cornmarket and the High. It's far too tidy and upmarket to be a market in any real sense, but the butchers, cheese-shop and fishmongers are excellent, if pricey.

On Beaumont Street, just off the junction of Cornmarket and Broad Street, you'll find the Ashmolean Museum – a colossal cave of antiquities, art and archaeology. A tourist

staple for many years, it reopened to great acclaim this month after a three-year refit. Finish your Oxford tour by heading north up Walton Street to the trendy suburb of Jericho, a good place to eat or catch an art-house film.

Classic Oxford pubs include the Eagle & Child on St Giles (aka the 'Bird & Baby'), the Turf Tavern hidden off an alley around the back of Broad Street (rammed to the rafters in the evenings), and the tiny White Horse which almost seems to be part of Blackwells. For a more relaxing pint, try the Jericho Tavern on Walton Street, the Cape of Good Hope (on 'the Plain', the roundabout over Magdalen Bridge at the end of the High), and the Royal Oak on St Giles – three well-run sister establishments with good beer, cider and food, and comfortable sofas!



## THE THAMES PATH

The Thames Path is a National Trail, opened in 1996, which follows the river for 184 miles from its source at Thames Head, near Kemble in Gloucestershire, to the Thames Flood Barrier at Woolwich in London. (A further ten miles will take you past the Woolwich Arsenal and on through Erith to Crayford, if you enjoy walking through heavily industrialised areas!)

The entire length of the Thames Path proper offers comfortable walking and is, by definition, totally flat. Although the vast majority of the route is beside the river, the practicalities of land ownership mean that there are numerous diversions across meadows, into woodlands and occasionally through residential areas. Anyone with a reasonable level of fitness can complete the route in three to four weeks, with a wide range of accommodation available along the way. Many choose, however, to undertake the journey in stages over a prolonged period, just going out at weekends and doing 10 or 20 miles at a time.

Guidebooks include the *Thames Path National Trail Guide* by David Sharp and the *Thames Path Companion* – both available from the National Trails Office ([www.nationaltrail.co.uk](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk)).