

The John Wood trail

John Wood, Swainswick and the legends of Bath

Take a walk in the Lam Valley and delve into Bath's legendary and architectural past. Stop off at the tiny 18th century church at Woolley, designed by John Wood the Younger and at St Mary's Church in Swainswick where John Wood and his family were buried. Tea, coffee - and toilet - available at Swainswick Church.

Start/Finish: The Bladud's Head, 1 Catsley Place, Bath BA1 6TA

Distance: approx. 3 ½ miles

Terrain: lanes and footpaths. Some steep sections which may be muddy if it's been raining.

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John Wood and his son (John Wood 'the Younger') were the architects of Georgian Bath, between them creating the Royal Crescent, King's Circus, Queen Square, Prior Park, North and South Parades and much else besides. But what inspired them and why are they buried in the tiny church of St Mary's in Upper Swainswick?

You might assume from the clean lines and careful proportions of Bath's 18th century architecture, that John Wood was inspired by the ancient Greeks and Romans, but the reality is more complicated, more interesting - and more eccentric.

John Wood *did* have a passion for classical architecture, but was also obsessed by the ancient, pre-Roman history of Britain – a mythology recorded in the 12th century writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Wood was convinced that the legendary King Bladud was not legendary at all, but the true founder of Bath, a city the size of ancient Babylon and the centre of an ancient Druidic kingdom. Incorporated into this kingdom were other ancient buildings, whose ruins could be seen in the stone circles at Stanton Drew (which Wood believed to have been established by Bladud as a university for Druids) and Stonehenge. Stone circles and sacred geometry fascinated him and he meticulously surveyed both of them, using the dimensions of the inner circle of Stonehenge in his design of the Circus.

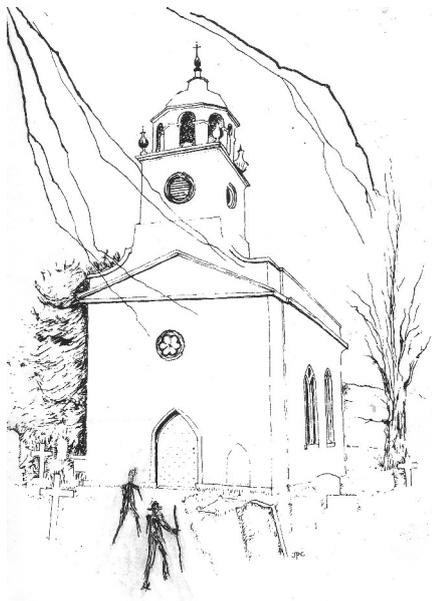
So where does Swainswick come in? Well, the most famous story about King Bladud is that of his pigs. Banished from Athens when he contracted leprosy, Bladud became a swineherd in the hills around Bath. He noticed that his pigs enjoyed rolling in the mud warmed by the hot springs – and that they didn't seem to suffer from skin conditions as other pigs did. So, as an experiment, he bathed in the mud himself and his leprosy was cured. His royal position was restored and, in thanksgiving, he founded the city of Bath. Wood believed that it was at Swainswick (Swine's-wick) that Bladud's healing took place.

Not content with a miraculous healing, King Bladud is also said to have made himself a pair of wings and attempted to fly. His maiden (and final) flight was from the Temple of Apollo, which some versions of the story say was in London and others in New Troy. But Wood believed the temple was built on the top of Solsbury Hill, the site of an iron-age settlement. So, King Bladud's ill-fated flight ended with him being dashed to pieces more or less where Swainswick Church now stands.

If King Bladud was the original founder of ancient Bath, it was as if Wood cast himself as his successor – the restorer of Bladud's lost Druid civilisation. So how appropriate that Wood should choose to be buried with his family on the spot where, in his own mythology, King Bladud had met his end.

The Walk

1. Facing the Bladud's Head, go to your right along the road, away from Larkhall. Take the first turning on the left up Valley View Rd. If you cross to the right side of the road, you can see the Lam Brook flowing down the valley.
2. Walk up the road past Meadow Farm and in about 50 yards go up some steps to your right and over a stile. Walk a few yards along an enclosed (often muddy) footpath and through a gap in the fence to your right into a field. Head upwards across the field towards a gap in the opposite field boundary.
3. Go up a step through the gap and follow the path round to the right and up through the allotments, keeping the iron railings to your right. Carry on straight ahead to an iron gate out of the allotments and into the Larkhall Sports Club car park. Walk across the car park and out on to the lane.
4. Turn right on to the lane (the top of Valley View Rd) which shortly joins Charlcombe Lane. Continue uphill for about 50 yards and, after a 20 mile an hour sign, turn right on to Woolley Lane.
5. From here, follow the lane for about a mile, past a number of houses and farms. To your right, through gaps in the hedge, there are wonderful views across the valley over Middle Swainswick to Solsbury Hill. Eventually, the lane reaches the village of Woolley. In the middle of the village, turn right down Church Street and, at the bottom, you will find **All Saints Church**.



Woolley Church – Joanna Cacas

All Saints Woolley

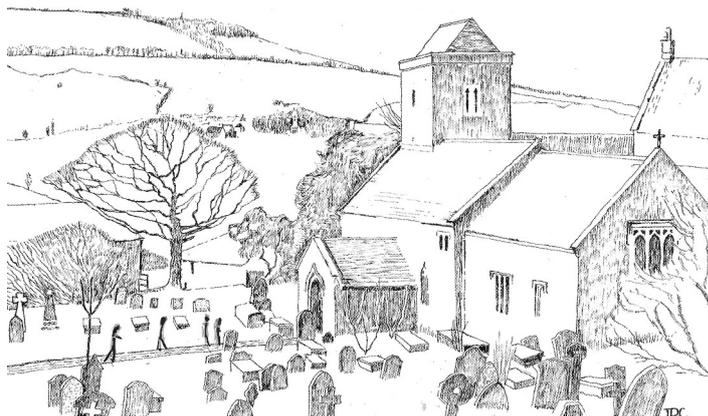
“This ancient chapel being about to collapse this more splendid one at her own expense Elizabeth Parkin of Ravensfield in the County of York and Lady of the Manor of Woolley ordered to be built. In the year of Christ 1761.”

There has been a church at Woolley since the 11th or 12th century. But by the mid-18th century, it was dilapidated and unusable. Around this time, Elizabeth Parkin inherited Woolley Manor and, in 1757, she commissioned John Wood the Younger to design and build a new church in keeping with fashionable Bath.

6. After visiting the church, turn left out of the churchyard and climb over a large, stone stile on your left. Cross the stile and walk down a narrow path to a kissing gate. Go through the gate and continue downhill through two fields with the hedge on your left until you reach a post with a footpath sign. From here, you can look across the valley to Upper Swainswick, with its large stone barn and, to the left of the barn, some stone terracing – the remains of a 17th century water garden attached to the manor house. Behind the village is Solsbury Hill, from which Bladud supposedly took his flying leap to land somewhere near the church.

7. At the sign, the path heads diagonally down to the bottom right hand corner of the field, where you come to a kissing gate and a footbridge over the Lam Brook. Cross the bridge and turn right, walking along the bottom of the field with the stream on your right. Go through a pair of gates with a small, plank bridge and follow the path as it heads diagonally left up the field towards Upper Swainswick. At the top, go through a gate and up some steps where the footpath takes your through a private garden. Walk up through the garden and out on to the lane to **St Mary's Church, Swainswick** where, in the north east chapel, you will find the stone slabs marking where John Wood and his family are buried.

“I John Wood of Queen Square in the parish of Walcot in the county of Somerset esquire do hereby make and ordain this my last will and testament in manner following (that is to say) first my will is that my body after my decease be wrapt up in cloaths then about me and that my Body without any Shroud or Winding sheet be put into a plain coffin and buried in Swainswick Church in the same grave with my deceased children and I desire that the sum of twenty pounds and no more be expended on my funeral”



Swainswick Church by Joanna Cacas

8. When you have visited the church, leave the churchyard and turn left. Don't go up the steep hill to your left, but carry on straight ahead, past the school and along the lane. Continue along the lane, enjoying the views across to the Woolley side of the valley, until you reach the old Gloucester Rd. Turn right and walk on the pavement down the road. At the second turning on your right, walk down Ferndale Rd. At the bottom, turn left and you will find yourself back at the Bladud's Head.

