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## The Archaeology of Oxford: Current Knowledge and Future Prospects

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### SUMMARY

This chapter offers a summary of present knowledge of Oxford's medieval and later archaeology, and, just as importantly, sets out what archaeological data can tell us about the city's development over time. Consideration is given to the strengths and weaknesses of the archaeological record, its value alongside documentary evidence, and the tension between excavation and preservation in the hope of future advances in archaeological techniques. Particular attention is paid to areas for future research and the ways in which archaeological findings can be shared with the wider public.

In an era of transnational genome studies, extensive LiDAR surveys and big data processing projects, the ongoing study of a south Midlands Anglo-Saxon town may seem to some a rather parochial activity. Surely, one might ask, we have resolved by now all the big questions relating to Oxford after almost 150 years of investigation and with urban archaeology taking centre stage in the national archaeological awakening of the post-war rescue era?<sup>1</sup> The reality is that despite major advances in our understanding of the town's material culture the reactive nature of investigation under the current development-led planning framework has left open a number of key 'building block' questions relating to Oxford's early development. For example, when and how did a middle Anglo-Saxon settlement emerge? Was it centralised or polyfocal in character? When and how was the settlement more formally laid out, extended and defended? Thus, whilst the large body of data recovered from past excavations has opened up many possible avenues of study relating to urban development, consumption, trade, wealth, health, mortality, social relations, cultural difference and so on, many of the key processes relating to the town's emergence and early evolution remain unresolved. For the late Anglo-Saxon period, long-established interpretations have been called into question by recent discoveries. For later periods the sheer volume of information being recovered presents us with major challenges in terms of synthesis and requires us to constantly refocus our enquiries, taking into account developments in medieval and post-medieval studies.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the post-war and later periods: C. Gerrard, *Medieval Archaeology: Understanding Traditions and Contemporary Approaches* (2003), pp. 95–9, 133–8.

<sup>2</sup> An extensive overview of developments in later-medieval archaeology is provided by C.M. Gerrard and A. Gutiérrez (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Later Medieval Archaeology in Britain* (2018). A regional overview of the post-medieval period is provided by J. Hind, 'The Post Medieval and Modern Period (AD 1540 Onwards): Resource Assessment', in G. Hey and J. Hind (eds.) *Solent-Thames Research Framework for the Historic Environment Resource Assessments and Research Agendas*, Oxford Wessex Monograph, 6 (2014).

## WHY IS OXFORD OF INTEREST?

The question of why we should continue to expend resources investigating Oxford can be addressed directly. The location of the town on a crossroads, on a major river, in a central location within the landmass of central-southern England should provide geographical clues to its capacity to preserve a thorough cross-section of local and imported material culture from the middle-Anglo-Saxon period onwards. Oxford remains significant and worthy of study as a border settlement influenced by the state forming processes taking place in the middle Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. It was a favoured central meeting point for late Anglo-Saxon, Danish and Norman royalty, an important cloth town in the early Middle Ages, and subsequently a university town that was European in terms of its intellectual reach and intake, even if the bulk of the student body remained predominantly 'local' in background.<sup>3</sup> Oxford attracted the full medieval urban package of defences, peripheral abbeys, mendicant friaries and hospitals with many of these institutions gaining additional complexity through their relationship with the developing university.

With its tradition of modern crime fiction, it is fitting that Oxford has been used alongside London as an exemplar of high medieval murder rates.<sup>4</sup> Such distinctive interpersonal conflict being in part a reflection of the power struggle commonly referred to as 'town versus gown', a conflict that may have been in part fuelled by the social dislocation caused by the decline of traditional trades in the thirteenth and fourteenth century and the related ascendancy of service trades that orientated around the university. Although for a time a middling town in economic terms, during the post-medieval period Oxford enjoyed renewed growth from the late sixteenth century, a brief resurgence in status as Royalist capital during the Civil War, and has remained a favoured location for architectural patronage and innovation because of its ties to money and power. The presence of the university further distorted Oxford's development as an industrial centre with disproportionately large numbers of people, in national terms, working in the domestic service sector into the early twentieth century. Whilst pockets of industrial activity developed close to the historic core, for example breweries and the first Morris car garage, these employers were ultimately forced to relocate to the suburbs in order to expand and become more central to Oxford's twentieth-century economy. These processes, only partially documented, have all left archaeological traces worthy of study.<sup>5</sup>

## TO DIG OR NOT TO DIG?

Archaeologists have excavated and therefore removed a significant amount of archaeology in Oxford since the advent of Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG16) in 1990.<sup>6</sup> This is both a cause for celebration and a suitable moment to pause and reflect on the trajectory of investigation in the coming years. Over the last decade there have been sizeable developments in the central area involving new basements, and therefore full removal of archaeological deposits

<sup>3</sup> For the regional character and background of the medieval university intake and the early ambivalence of the aristocracy to this new institution see L.W.B. Brockliss *The University of Oxford: A History* (2016), pp. 34–7.

<sup>4</sup> The examination of coroners' rolls from fourteenth-century Oxford and London has resulted in estimates in the order of 25 to 110 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, while estimates for other areas of England typically vary between 8 and 25 homicides per 100,000: M. Eisner, 'Long-Term Historical Trends in Violent Crime', *Crime and Justice*, 30 (2003), p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the original Morris Garage workshop on Holywell Street was investigated in 2017 (OA forthcoming) and the eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Swan Brewery site on Paradise Street in 2003 and 2018 (D. Hart, 'An Archaeological Excavation at Telecom House Paradise Street Oxford' (2005), unpublished JMHS report, and A. Simmonds et al., 'Former Cooper Callas Building, 15 Paradise Street, Oxford Post-Excavation Assessment', unpublished OA report (2019)).

<sup>6</sup> Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 introduced archaeology formally into the planning process and required developers to fund archaeological investigations.

at the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, the Westgate Shopping Centre car parks, The Queen's College library, Lincoln College Garden Building and Magdalen College library. This is in addition to a multiplicity of schemes involving localised piling, strip foundation or stanchion grid impacts where remains may have been partially preserved below. At the time of writing consented schemes were in the pipeline for new basements at Corpus Christi and Oriol College and more are being considered in pre-application discussions.

To understand the significance of this development trajectory one must appreciate that a great deal of the archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval town was fortuitously preserved by the laying out of College quads, gardens and kitchen yards across central Oxford from the thirteenth century onwards and within other institutional gardens and precincts. This process has created an exceptional resource, but one that is perhaps fated not to remain fossilised in perpetuity. This is because the same historical processes that led to this degree of preservation have also left a legacy of financially independent, self-governing colleges. In a parallel and ideal world, the below ground physical archive of Oxford would perhaps be preserved until archaeologists have had a chance to refine their investigation techniques and sharpen their research questions. The twenty-first century reality, with thirty-eight colleges and an expanding university, is that the heritage 'interest' and 'values' of these below ground assets must periodically go head to head with competing concepts and values such as 'public benefit' and 'architectural innovation' as institutions in constrained locations seek to update facilities and compete within dynamic local and international educational markets. If one considers that retaining a significant proportion of the town's below ground heritage is intrinsic to Oxford's 'sense of place' then this poses a significant heritage management challenge over the coming decades.

Furthermore, the desire by all tiers of government to grow the local economy, with Oxford voted by one investment firm as the eighth most dynamic city in Europe in 2018,<sup>7</sup> continues to place considerable pressure on the concept of 'sustainable development' as set out in the current National Planning Policy Framework. Archaeologists have long made the point that archaeological remains are 'finite and non-renewable' and the principle that excavation only ever provides a partial record of the complex relationships preserved within such remains is well established. In a hundred years the techniques available to us to retrieve data will certainly be more advanced. Thus, there is a precarious balance, and a necessary tension, between on the one hand producing new data to stimulate public interest in archaeology and advance our knowledge of the past, and on the other 'sustaining significance' through preservation in-situ. One cannot look at the long list of sites excavated over the last few decades balanced against those which were redesigned to secure preservation in-situ without the sense that we are perhaps expending Oxford's archaeological assets more rapidly than is prudent. It is with this caveat in mind that I discuss some of the fascinating and frustrating questions that further archaeological work in the town might help us resolve.

## MAKING SENSE OF THE VOLUME OF DATA

A number of important syntheses of the town's late-Anglo-Saxon to post-medieval archaeology have been produced since the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> In terms of the late Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods, the publication of the 2003 Oxford Archaeology monograph *Oxford Before the University*

<sup>7</sup> Savills Investment Management Dynamic Cities index 2018; <http://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/16316787.oxford-ranked-europes-eighth-most-dynamic-city/> (accessed Sept. 2018).

<sup>8</sup> E.M. Jope, 'Saxon Oxford and Its Region', in D.B. Harden (ed.) *Dark Age Britain* (1956), pp. 234–58; T. Hassall, 'Archaeology of Oxford City', in G. Briggs et al. (eds.) *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), pp. 115–34; J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994). The contribution that archaeology can make to our understanding of the medieval and post-medieval periods has also been previously been discussed by J. Steane, 'Medieval Oxfordshire 1100–1540 (The Tom Hassall Lecture for 2000)', *Oxoniensia*, 66 (2001), pp. 1–12, and J. Munby, 'Post-Medieval Oxfordshire, 1540–2000 (The Tom Hassall Lecture for 2001)', *Oxoniensia*, 68 (2003), pp. 1–15.

has provided a substantive collation of the key archaeological evidence. The collation of a similar volume for the medieval university town and later periods remains only an aspiration given existing publication commitments and funding opportunities, although a substantial new monograph on the castle was published in 2019, and another on the Franciscan friary is forthcoming.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the East Oxford Community Archaeology project has produced a monograph covering field work at Littlemore priory and Bartlemas leper hospital, and a forthcoming Historic Towns Atlas will present period-based reviews of current data.<sup>10</sup>

At a national level, outside of the specialist interest groups looking at certain artefact types such as pottery, animal bones, and metalwork finds, the wider synthesis of the large amounts of data recovered from towns in England since the advent of PPG16 (and before) has proved a challenging prospect for archaeologists, perhaps explaining why published overviews of the archaeology of post-Conquest English towns seem to have peaked in the early 1990s. In the place of a national synthesis of urban archaeology or a national medieval research agenda we have seen the development of period-based thematic regional syntheses and agenda that encompass late Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval urban themes, for example the 2014 Solent-Thames Resource Assessment and Research Agenda. For Oxford another tier has been added to this process with the production of the Oxford Archaeological Plan in 2013 and the related period based thematic resource assessments and research agendas.<sup>11</sup> Whilst these provide an important framework that allows for periodic review of the ‘value’ of material being excavated and also accountability for money spent it can be noted that the scope of the current city and regional frameworks do not always encourage perspectives or studies that necessarily transcend city and regional boundaries. For the medieval period, processes that would require a broader focus would include, for example, the impact of cloth production or the development of service trades in relation to patterns of urban growth. Another example would be studies of the material culture and architecture of academic halls and secular and monastic colleges. A full consideration of the potential for Oxford to contribute to the wide range of research themes now emerging in medieval and post-medieval studies is beyond the scope of this article; instead I will highlight some selected themes.<sup>12</sup>

## THE INFLUENCE OF THE PREHISTORIC LANDSCAPE

From the middle Neolithic through to the early Bronze Age an extensive ritual and funerary landscape of enclosures, barrows, avenues, satellite burials, flat graves, enigmatic linear features and at least one sizeable henge monument was established on the Summertown-Radley or second gravel terrace encompassing central and north Oxford. In the absence of any visible surviving earthworks in the modern townscape it is easy to forget that this busy landscape of earthworks, only partially denuded by later Iron-Age and Roman fields and droveways, was inherited by post-Roman communities.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Munby, *Oxford Castle*; B.M. Ford et al., *The Oxford Greyfriars – Excavations at the Westgate Oxford Shopping Centre 2007–2016: Late Saxon, Medieval and Post-Medieval Suburban Development at the End of the Oxford Promontory*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, in preparation.

<sup>10</sup> D. Griffiths and J. Harrison (eds.), *The Archaeology of East Oxford: Archeox, the Story of a Community* (2020); A. Crossley (ed.), *British Historic Towns Atlas, Volume VII: Oxford*, forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20200/archaeology/740/oxford\\_archaeological\\_plan](https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20200/archaeology/740/oxford_archaeological_plan) (accessed April 2019).

<sup>12</sup> In 2001 John Steane highlighted four long standing trajectories of investigations into medieval archaeology in the town: 1) the origins of the medieval city; 2) the plan and date of its defences and streets; 3) the layout and nature of its domestic buildings; 4) the examination of more specialised buildings (Steane, ‘Medieval Oxfordshire’, p. 1).

<sup>13</sup> Due to space constraints, the rural Iron-Age and Roman landscapes that underlie the town are not addressed here.