

Thames-Solent Research: Later Medieval Oxfordshire

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is a preliminary draft of an appraisal of the state of research on medieval Oxfordshire (2007). Recent surveys include those of Steane (*Oxoniensia* LXVI, 2001) and Hassall, Bond and Steane (Briggs Cook Rowley, 1986).
- 1.2 Note that Oxfordshire includes a large area of historic Berkshire.
- 1.3 Medieval archaeology has a reasonable claim to have a home in Oxfordshire. Quite apart from the pioneering work of the 17th and 18th-century antiquaries (Aubrey, Wood, Hearne), and the 19th-century rediscovery of Gothic architecture (Parker), the 20th-century re-establishment of medieval archaeology was partly led from Oxford. The excavations for the New Bodleian began the serious study of medieval pottery (Jope & Bruce Mitford 1940) and the study of standing remains (Pantin 1937), while the study of floor tiles was Oxford centred (Lloyd Haberly, 1937). Jope and Pantin made key contributions to the establishment of medieval archaeology through these and later studies. Jope lived in Oxford although nominally resident in Belfast, and Pantin was a Reader in Medieval Archaeology in the University of Oxford, and president of the Society for Medieval Archaeology. More recently the study of 'medieval' archaeology in the university has tended to be of the pre-1066 variety.
- 1.4 While Oxford pioneered the understanding of medieval archaeology as necessarily including documentary and building aspects this approach has been absent or less emphasised in some recent enterprises.

2 Bibliography

- 2.1 There is no classic county history for Oxon, though it is well-served by a current *Victoria County History* which has covered a reasonable proportion of the county (more for N and W rather than SE). There are county archaeologies for Roman Oxon (Henig & Booth) and Saxon Oxon (Blair), and good summaries of main features in the survey volume *Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (Briggs, Cook & Rowley, 1986). The earlier BAAS volume *Oxford and its Region* (Martin & Steel 1965) retains some value, especially for Jope's contributions. The Oxon section of the *Domesday Geography* is as always an important view of the county, and there is a county landscape volume (Emery 1974). The journal *Oxoniensia* has been published since 1936 by the OAHS [online] and has published signal contributions on many subjects. The former county museum once boasted the finest field section of

any county, and the impressive range of work undertaken by Aston, Bond, and Steane was often published in the CAB newsletter (*South Midlands Archaeology*) [indexed], and added to Oxford's pioneering Sites and Monument Record. Although the county has never has a county archaeological society in the manner of some other counties (and indeed has a weak sense of county identity), work undertaken by local groups and individuals has always been important alongside the (mainly prehistoric and Roman) activities of the county Unit.

3 Topics

3.1 CHRONOLOGY

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3.2 LANDSCAPE

The structure of the county's landscape is well understood (*DB Geog*; Emery), and the county lies within the 'midland' area of open fields and nucleated villages (Roberts, *Atlas*). Fieldwork of Aston & Bond, etc.

- Wychwood – study of settlement around the forest, and changing shape of the forest (Schumer)
- Otmoor – study of settlement around Otmoor (Bond)
- Yarnton – development of A-S landscape and medieval field systems (Hey)
- Thames – development of river system

3.3 SETTLEMENT AND LAND USE

TOWNS

Work on Oxford has been predominant (also well known from documentary study (Salter) and work on buildings (Pantin et al.), and VCH account. Archaeology mostly reported (*Oxoniensia*; Dodd, *Oxford before*); the UAD for Oxford has been completed in its first stage (without fully addressing buildings or documentary history). The *Small Towns Survey* (1975) has perhaps produced less results than had been hoped, and is currently being renewed (but with a narrower scope, excluding buildings).

- Oxford – excavations revealing streets, defences, houses, and formation of town (riverside reclamation, etc)
- Banbury – excavations on the castle area
- Abingdon – various excavations on domestic and monastic sites
- Bicester – information from series of minor excavations
- Henley – research of Peberdy on the role of Henley on the Thames

VILLAGES

Oxon has a study of DMVs (?) but has not had a systematic examination of village plans and types, despite important work in particular locations.

- Seacourt – pioneering excavation on DMV (Biddle et al.)
- Middleton Stoney – excavations by Rowley
- Thomley – documentary history (Holden)
- Ascot under Wychwood – village topography study (Bond)

3.4 SOCIAL ORGANISATION, ECONOMY AND SUBSISTENCE

Mainly as featured in documentary studies, such as Lennard *Rural England*, Kosminsky's *Studies in Agrarian History* (1279 Hundred Rolls). No major estate studies have touched on Oxon, except for Postles' papers on Oseney, but Harvey's *Cuxham* (monograph and records) is a major contribution on a single village. Oxfordshire has also featured in the London regional studies on 'Feeding the City' and 'Fuelling the City'. There remains much potential for study of e.g. college estate records and accounts; the Hundred Rolls; other estate records such as Bishop of Lincoln's estate survey (Queen's Coll ms) and Winchester episcopal Records of Harwell, Witney, etc. The relationship of Oxford to its countryside (food and fuel) has hardly been considered.

3.5 BUILT ENVIRONMENT

HOUSES

A long tradition of building investigation has made the county especially rich in vernacular architecture studies.

- Currie's thesis on Harwell and Steventon (Berks) showed the astonishing number of 'early' houses surviving in those villages. Numerous investigations by Steane have revealed many other buildings of interest.
- Dendrochronology, pioneered locally by Dr Fletcher, and continued by Miles, has provided dates for a large number of buildings in the county
- Studies of Oxford houses by Pantin and Spokes, Sturdy, Blair and Munby have allowed an understanding of medieval housing in the city, and its change to post-medieval types. The quality of Oxford's documentary sources (Salter) and tradition of topographical drawing (Buckler) has often allowed lost buildings to be reconstructed, and added to the meagre survival rate of medieval buildings.
- Excavations in Oxford (especially in St Aldate's (Durham) and St Thomas's Hamel (Palmer) have revealed sequences of minor domestic architecture and outbuildings.
- Excavations at Witney Palace uncovered major high-status buildings of the Bishops of Winchester. At Dean Court the excavation of a monastic grange were very informative (especially on fish diet), and the exploration of Chalgrove moat has proved to be a text-book example of the development of a moated site as a home of county gentry.

UNIVERSITY

The university's impact on the town was only gradually felt from college building, and was initially from the number of students occupying academic halls.

- The medieval university buildings have been described and partially investigated (Congregation House and Library; Divinity School). The 1960s investigations at the Bodleian (Myres) have recently been re-examined with the aid of dendrochronology, from which the history of Duke Humfrey's Library and the Divinity School has been re-written.
- College building has long been a subject of study, from fabric investigation (St John's) and building accounts (All Souls, Christ Church). Excavations in Magdalen (Durham), Lincoln (Hiller) and Merton (forthcoming) have shown that much more can be learnt about the college economy and building activities.
- Halls have been studied by Pantin, who reconstructed typical halls from records, and published the classic account of Tackley's Inn, which influenced his general account of medieval English town houses (*Med Arch art*)

HOSPITALS

As a key indicator of medieval urban settlements, the importance of hospitals has often been ignored or misunderstood. Abingdon has an astonishing number, mostly post-medieval, but only in Oxford has one been excavated.

- Excavation at Magdalen College Oxford revealed important remains of St John's Hospital, once a major town institution outside the east gate.

3.6 TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATION

The roads and bridges of the county have been little studied (Radcot), except as aspects of settlement history (e.g. Oxford). More has been done on the River Thames.

- Excavations in Oxford have revealed much of the Grandpont causeway and its bridges at Folly Bridge and Red Bridge
- Peberdy's important study of Henley has shown much about river transport on the Thames, and the significance of early mills and weirs.

3.7 MATERIAL CULTURE

Finds from excavations in Oxford and elsewhere; pottery studies (see below) Domestic interiors in medieval Oxford (furnishing, book ownership).

Important collections of Oxford colleges include silver plate, and memorabilia of founders (crossiers, hats, shoes, stockings, etc).

3.8 CRAFTS, TRADES AND INDUSTRIES

Building trades (masons and carpenters) have been well studied in Oxford, as has the specialist book trade of the university town, and the county's stained glass.

- Maureen Mellor's study of the county's pottery products has been a major contribution, though products are better understood than production sites
- Stone quarrying and industry, studies by Arkell, and Gee on Masons, and studies on building accounts (Jacob)
- Tiles Leading study by Haberly, and later finds from (mainly) Oxford

- Book trade of medieval Oxford has been studied from documentary sources for book production (Pollard), surviving manuscripts (de Brailes workshop), bindings (Pollard), and occasional finds of writing materials (All Souls)

3.9 CEREMONY, RITUAL AND RELIGION

There has been interest in the fabric of medieval churches and lost abbeys since the 17th century, and a huge amount of information was gathered and sorted in the 19th century. Studies of glass (Newton), monumental brasses and furniture have continued through the 20th century, with Oxon examples often figuring in national studies (Howard and Crossley: *Woodwork*). Developer-led excavation has had a great impact on the understanding of monastic sites, and to a lesser extent parish churches.

MONASTIC

- Oseney Abbey (Aug): a series of watching briefs have given a complex if confusing picture of the monastic precincts, without touching on the church (Oxon. art)
- St Frideswide's Priory Excavations in and around the church have uncovered some of the story of the development of the church from its early origins (Blair et al Oxon.); the story of the surviving fabric has also been examined in detail (ditto)
- A modest series of investigations at Rewley (Cist) have revealed the location of the abbey-cum-college (forthcoming)
- Godstow Nunnery still requires investigation, but existing knowledge has been summarised (Ganz), and field surveys undertaken (OAU unpublished)
- The St Ebbe's excavations in the 1960s-70s uncovered major parts of two friars' houses, the Greyfriars (Hassall) and the Blackfriars (Lambrick) Oxford Friaries
- Blairs' investigations at Frewin Hall (Oxon. art) discovered traces of St Mary's College (Aug)
- In Abingdon (Ben) the development of parts of the precinct have led to the discovery of many aspects of the surrounding features (Allan, unpublished); the church had earlier been reconstructed by Biddle (Med Arch. Art) from previous excavations.
- Thame (Cist) Work on Thame Park uncovered part of the ?infirmary cloister standing to full height (SMA), and subsequent watching briefs and surveys have determined something of the monastic plan (unpubl)
- Dorchester (Ben) excavations around the surviving monastic church have added some details to understanding of the abbey (Keevill, Rodwell)
- Bicester Priory (). Information from collected observations have pieced together the story of the priory, previously unknown (Watts Oxon.)

CHURCHES

- Oxford churches have been examined on conversion: important but unreported discoveries at St Peter in the East (Sturdy); a full sequence of development from secular to ecclesiastical at All Saints (Durham – *Oxford Before*), and a partial story (plus A-S sculpture) at St Aldate's (Tyler)

- Bampton has been the location of a sustained investigation by Blair of the origins of the church and parish. Many other parish churches have been subject to minor investigations in the course of liturgical re-arrangement

3.10 WARFARE, DEFENCES AND MILITARY INSTALLATIONS

CASTLES

Oxon is not a classic castle area, but boasts important early defended places, and one walled town.

- Oxford castle has been subject to a continuing series of investigations from the work in the 1940s-50s (Jope), the 1960s-70s (Hassall) and more recent excavations (Booth and forthcoming) from which the major part of the story of the development of the site has been revealed. The most outstanding alteration of previous views is the new orthodoxy that the Norman tower of St George's may be pre-conquest, since it has the Saxon town wall heading straight towards it...
- Oxford's standing walls have been almost completely neglected as an archaeological resource, but important excavations in a number of places have revealed the sequence of late-Saxon rampart to stone walls, and the nature of Oxford's unique double wall on the public (north-east) side of the town (Durham, Booth, *Oxford Before*)
- Wallingford Castle was subject to a series of important but unreported excavations (Brooks), recently revived
- Banbury Castle has been dug three times and largely destroyed (Oxon. arts A, B and forthcoming).
- Deddington Castle was studied in depth by Jope, as was Ascott Doilly (Jope, Bond)
- Shirburn, denied to antiquaries for generations, may yet prove to be of great interest.....