



NEWS

Autumn 1994

OXFORD AND THE RELIGIOUS ORDERS

During the medieval period, the head of the promontory occupied by Oxford was tinsured with the houses of many religious orders, their buildings dominating the townscape as the colleges now dominate the modern city. The establishments ranged from the simplest possible – hermits (or anchorites) lived alone at churches such as St Peters and St Johns, a reminder of the simple origins of monasticism – to the great complexes of Oseney Abbey and the Franciscan Friary. In the past, the OAU has excavated at the sites of a number of the major institutions, notably the Black Friars and Grey Friars sites in the 1960s and 70s. More recently, the unit's work has shed light on three institutions: the abbeys of Oseney, Rewley and Godstow.



Oseney Abbey and Oxford from the west, a conjectural view. The church and gate of Rewley Abbey are also shown. From a drawing by H.W. Brewer, 1891. Oseney was founded as an Augustinian Priory in 1129 and grew to be the largest and most powerful monastic establishment in Oxford. The view shown above is hardly likely to be correct in every detail, but as an illustration of the (surely deliberately) overpowering structures, it could hardly be bettered.

OSENEY ABBEY FIELD EVALUATION by Paul Booth

The medieval church and cloister lie under the modern cemetery, immediately west of the railway line, with outer courts extending west to the former mill adjacent to Osney lock. Only a single late-medieval fragment of these outer buildings now survives. An evaluation to assess part of the area in advance of a proposed redevelopment has shed further light on these outer ranges.

OAU work in the 1970s and early 1980s by Brian Durham and Jonathan Sharpe (Oxoniensia 50, 95-130) indicated that at the time of the priory foundation the area to the west was still an island separated by a channel from the main part of the precinct to the east. The channel seems to have been infilled and the abbey precinct extended, in the 13th century. The new buildings included a north-south range parallel to the line of the medieval and modern mill stream. The 1994 evaluation, funded by Aldensleigh Estates, consisted of two trenches and the re-excavation of an engineer's test pit. The approximate positions of the trenches are shown on Figure 1. Traces of the former river channel were located in the test pit and limited evidence supported a 13th century date for its infill.

A trench in the south-west corner of the expanded precinct showed that wall trenches were dug immediately after the westward extension of the Abbey precinct. The buildings, apparently two separate structures on different alignments, seem to have been at least broadly contemporary. Both were substantial and contained hearth features of more than one phase, perhaps reflecting an industrial use. Between the two buildings was a paved area which had been resurfaced many times.

The evidence for long-lived use of buildings was not found on the outer (west) side of the abbey's western range, beside the mill stream. Here there were three major construction phases, occupying slightly different positions, and dating from the 13th century onwards.

While the scale of the work does not allow individual buildings to be identified, the excavated remains indicate that the outer courts of the monastic precinct were the scene of intensive activity from the 13th century onwards; the evidence for this activity is substantial and well-preserved.

STOP PRESS -

LITIGIOUS MONKS PROVIDE THE O.J. SIMPSON FACTOR

California today is a happy hunting ground for lawyers. Oxford was once the same. Between 1155 and 1195 the communities of St Frideswide's and Osney contested 30 separate cases, mainly over disputed tithes. The frequent meeting of courts attracted lawyers, and contributed to the rise of Oxford as a judicial centre.

THE RELIGIOUS ORDERS AND THE UNIVERSITY - MONKS AND FRIARS

The religious orders contributed to the rise of the medieval University of Oxford in many ways, both direct and indirect. In the case of Osney, for example, the documents make no mention of any schools actually at the Abbey, and in general monks came to Osney to study at Oxford, and not the other way round. However, the abbey, like many of the other institutions, both supported masters and owned a number of the halls (i.e. teaching rooms and accommodation for students and master) in the town. Rewley (see below) differed from Osney in that although an abbey in its own right, it was also a *studium* for Cistercian monks. The intention was that every Cistercian abbey with more than 20 monks would send a monk to Rewley, but a combination of Abbots unwilling to pay for their student monks, and the difficulty of reconciling spartan Cistercian ideals with higher education, meant that the enterprise enjoyed limited success.

Oxford did produce famous and learned monks (e.g. the Benedictine, Uthred of Boldon, fourteenth-century master of Durham College), but the real stars of the religious academic community were the friars with their well-organised schools and libraries. The Dominicans and Franciscans dominated the study of theology in England, and were responsible for Oxford's eminence in the subject. The OAU's excavations in St Ebbe's during the 1960s and 70s provided the proof in stone of the friars' success in Oxford.

KEY TO MEDIEVAL MAP

- AUGUSTINIAN
 - 1 Osney Abbey - Augustinian Canons 1129
 - 2 St. Frideswide's Priory. Saxon - refounded 1122 Augustinian Canons
 - 3 St. Mary's College - Augustinian Canons 1435
- CISTERCIAN
 - 4 Rewley Abbey 1282
 - 5 St. Bernard's College 1437
- BENEDICTINE
 - 6 Gloucester College 1283
 - 7 Durham College 1291
 - 8 Canterbury College 1362
- FRIARIES
 - 9 Franciscans (Grey Friars or Minors) 1224
 - 10 Dominicans (Black Friars or Preachers) 1221
 - 11 Carmelites (White Friars) 1256
 - 12 Augustinians (Austin Friars) 1268
 - 13 Friars of the Sack 1261 - 1310
 - 14 Trinitarian Friars 1293
 - 15 Crutched Friars 1342 (no mention after 1352)
- BENEDICTINE NUNS
 - 16 Godstow Abbey c. 1133
 - 17 Littlemore Priory - Reign of Stephen (1135 - 54)
- SECULAR CANONS
 - 18 Canons of St. George 1074
- HOSPITALS
 - 19 St. Bartholomew's (Leper hospital) c.1129
 - 20 St. John the Baptist 1180 or earlier
 - 21 St. Clement first mentioned 1336
 - 22 St. Giles first mentioned 1330
 - 23 St. Peter first mentioned 1338
 - 24 Sandford Preceptory - Knights Templars 1239 - also in Cowley 1136



The religious orders of Oxford. At the time of the foundation dates given, some orders (e.g. Franciscans) occupied much smaller sites within the town, later acquiring the larger sites which are illustrated here. (Map compiled by J.T. Munby)

STOP PRESS -

BISHOP REBUKES GAMBLING BROTHERS!

1423 - After visiting St Frideswide's Priory, the Bishop orders that the jewels are to be recovered from pawn, and that no sporting dogs are to be kept in the monastery.

UNCONVENTUAL BEHAVIOUR

1284 - Archbishop Peckham orders the nuns of Godstow to be careful of scholars, priests and monks, in connection with whom scandal was particularly likely to arise.

1432 - Scholars boast that at Godstow they could have 'all kinds of good cheer with the nuns, to the heart's desire'.

THE ORIGINS OF REWLEY ABBEY by David Wilkinson

The OAU carried out evaluations at the site of Rewley Abbey in 1967, 1986 and 1993-4, and the most recent results were summarised in the OAU Annual Report, 1993-94. One interesting question not discussed there, however, concerns the origins of the abbey buildings, and pre-abbey activity on the site.



Evaluation trenches at Rewley Abbey, March 1994

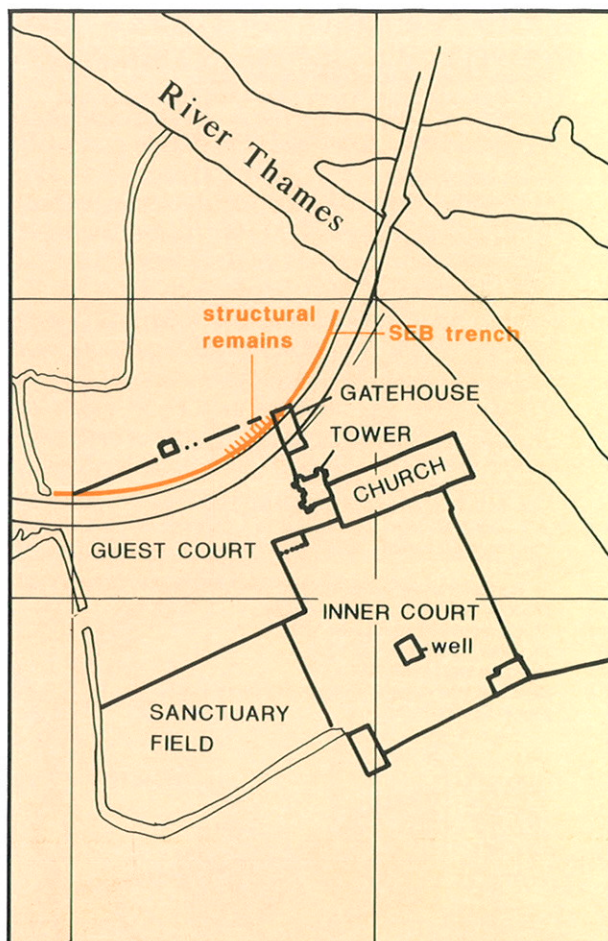
Historically, the origins of the abbey are reasonably clear. It was founded by Edmund, Earl of Cornwall, in 1280 in memory of his father Richard (Holy Roman Emperor). Given that Edmund was lord of North Osney (Rewley comes from 'Rois leie', meaning 'royal place') this was an obvious site for the foundation. I am grateful to Brian Durham and Julian Munby for the suggestion, prior to evaluation beginning, that North Osney manor may have contained buildings before the abbey was founded, and the results of the trial trenches mean that this is now a strong possibility.

In the first place, pottery dating from the 11th to mid 13th centuries was recovered from the site's lowest levels. This material was present in sufficient quantities to suggest occupation, rather than just agricultural activity. Furthermore, a roughly-built stone wall revealed near the west moat of the abbey was clearly seen to pre-date the wall of the abbey's west range. Further analysis of the data (and perhaps further excavation) still remains to be carried out; another possibility is that the rough wall represents the first phase of the the abbey, later rebuilt. Nevertheless this is a tantalising glimpse of what might, just, be the manor buildings of North Osney.

A WATCHING BRIEF AT GODSTOW, by Jonathan Hiller

In October 1993 the Southern Electricity Board excavated a cable trench to the north of the Godstow-Wytham road. The visible remains of Godstow Abbey lie south of the road. Situated in the north-west corner of the parish of Binsey, the abbey was considerably larger than the ruins that can be seen today. At its height it comprised an inner court (the walls of which still stand), with the church on the north side, a 'Sanctuary Field' to the west and a Guest Court to the north of the 'Sanctuary Field'. The abbey was entered via the Wytham-Godstow road through a two-storeyed gatehouse. In 1959 traces of structures apparently within the Guest Court were excavated by the Oxford University Archaeological Society. On the site of the present Wytham-Godstow road were found walls of two timber buildings, thought to be contemporary with the initial phase of the abbey.

In 1993 the remains of at least one stone building with an associated mortar floor were observed within the confines of the SEB trench. A second structure was suggested by an isolated portion of wall. The character and function of the structures is uncertain, but the finds, though unstratified, suggest that they were substantial and well furnished, probably with a tiled floor and roof. The position of these remains suggests, therefore, that there was a range of buildings along the north side of the court, rather than just a boundary wall running west as shown on Hurst's 1880 plan. The watching brief was funded by the Southern Electricity Board.



Godstow Abbey and its environs, showing the location of the 1993 watching brief. The Abbey was founded in c. 1133 for Benedictine Nuns. It was an aristocratic institution, and many leading families sent their daughters, especially in the 12th century. At the consecration of the church in 1139 the guest list included the King and Queen, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the bishops of Lincoln, Salisbury, Exeter and Worcester.

L A T E N E W S -

FAMOUS NAMES

The twelfth-century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, author of *Historia Regum Britanniae* was a Canon of St George's, within the walls of Oxford Castle.

Remains of St. George's Church, Oxford Castle c. 1751



A series of six Wednesday night lectures on **Monastic History** begins on the 19th of October 1994 at Rewley House. David Wilkinson will lecture on **Rewley Abbey** on the 2nd of November at 7.30 p.m. Tickets are available at the door, space permitting, at £3.00 each. Full details of all lectures are available from the Local History Course Secretary, OUDCE, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JA (tel. 0865 270396)

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