

# Chapter 1: Introduction

By Anne Dodd

## THE CITY OF OXFORD (FIGS 1.1, 1.2)

The city of Oxford lies in the English South Midlands, on the banks of the river Thames at its confluence with the river Cherwell. The solid geology is Jurassic, the city lying towards the south-east edge of the Oxford Clay Vale. The sedimentary rocks of the Corallian series form hills to the west and east of the city, the valley between having been cut through by the rivers. During the Pleistocene extensive gravel terraces were formed in the valley bottom, creating areas of high ground that were subsequently exploited for occupation. Oxford was built on the youngest terraces, the Summertown-Radley (Second) Terrace and the Floodplain (First) Terrace, where the Second Terrace forms a promontory between the river Thames and the river Cherwell. Alluvial clay now covers the lowest part of the First Terrace, and it comprises the modern floodplain. A more detailed account of the geology will be found with the discussion of the palaeohydrology of the St Aldate's area, in Chapter 3.

The modern city, with some 146,000 inhabitants, has long outgrown its medieval core, and is largely a product of 20th-century expansion linked to the growth of the motor industry at Cowley, established in 1912. This stimulated the rapid growth of the extensive eastern suburbs of Headington, Cowley, Rose Hill and Blackbird Leys. Oxford University, with some 16,000 students in residence, is largely confined to the historic centre of the city, but some expansion has taken place principally within the 19th-century suburb of North Oxford.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT OXFORD

The history and origins of Oxford and its university have been the subject of scholarly debate since the medieval period, much of it at first motivated by the university's concern to prove its seniority over Cambridge. The earliest accounts did not differentiate between the foundation of the town and the university, and attributed the foundation of Oxford to figures derived from biblical and classical sources (Parker 1885). The most persistent belief, however, was that the university had been founded by King Alfred, and even as late as 1872 University College celebrated its millennium in the conviction that it dated from the earliest years of his reign. Although it is now known that Alfred had nothing to do with the university, the story may preserve a memory of a link between the king and the town since it is now clear that Oxford was developed as a fortified *burh* either during Alfred's reign, or during that of his son Edward the Elder. In spite of the persistence of the

myths, however, the city has a long tradition of serious study of its past, both from documentary sources and from material remains. A brief account of this is given here, since much earlier work is of great value to archaeologists today, and is extensively drawn-on in this monograph.

## Documentary sources, archaeological and historical societies

The earliest systematic documentary research was undertaken by Brian Twyne (c 1579–1644), a Fellow of Corpus Christi, who searched college archives for information to buttress the university's claims to seniority over Cambridge. In 1608, he published the *Antiquitatis Academiae Oxoniensis Apologia*, and much more of his work survives in manuscript form. An account of Twyne's career was published in *Oxoniensia* (Gibson 1940, 94–114). Anthony Wood (1632–95) continued this research, using much of Twyne's material; Wood's records are of prime importance since he saw many documents that have subsequently been lost. In 1674 he published his *History of the Antiquities of the University* and Loggan's volume of drawings of the colleges was published in 1675 to accompany it. Wood's researches into the history of the city were not published until the 19th century (*Wood City*). During the 18th century further valuable work was undertaken by Thomas Hearne (1678–1735), Assistant Keeper at the Bodleian Library; he left diaries and notebooks about university life, to which he added a series of appendices recording local antiquities. Hearne's work was edited and published by the Oxford Historical Society in a series of 11 volumes between 1885 and 1921 (*Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*). A number of views of the city were published during this period, of which the most informative are those of Ralph Agas (published in 1578) and David Loggan (published in 1675); the latter is also considered to be accurate in detail, and parts of both are reproduced in this monograph.

During the 19th century numerous societies were founded to promote the study of the medieval town and its buildings, foremost amongst them being the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society (OAHS), founded in 1839 as the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture. An account of the first 100 years of the OAHS has been produced by Pantin (1939). In later years the OAHS operated in parallel with the Oxfordshire Archaeological Society (founded in 1852), the Oxford Historical Society (OHS; founded in 1884) and the Oxfordshire Record Society (founded in 1919). In 1885 James Parker, a leading member of the OAHS,

Oxford Before the University

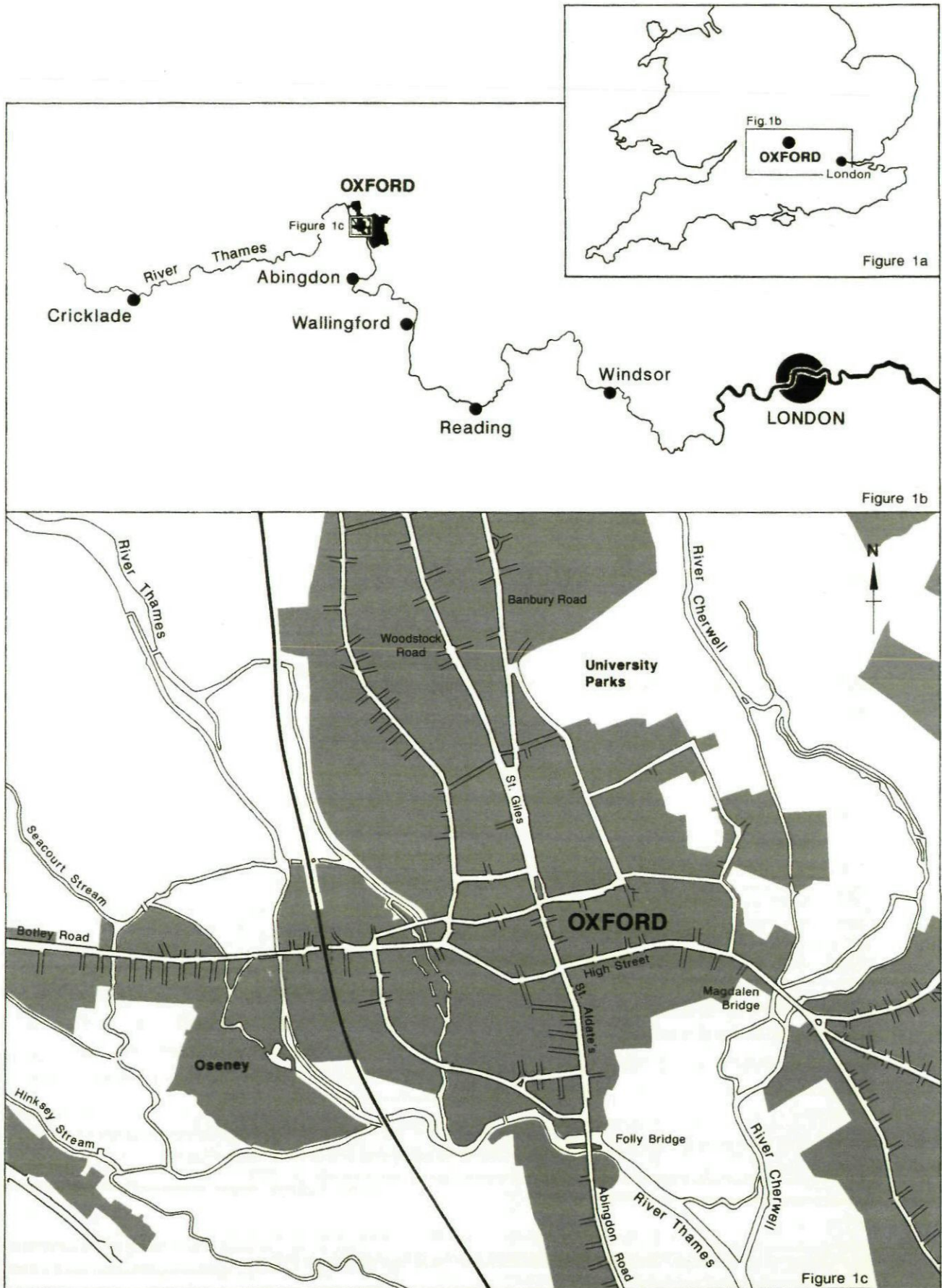


Figure 1.1 Oxford location map: a, b, c.

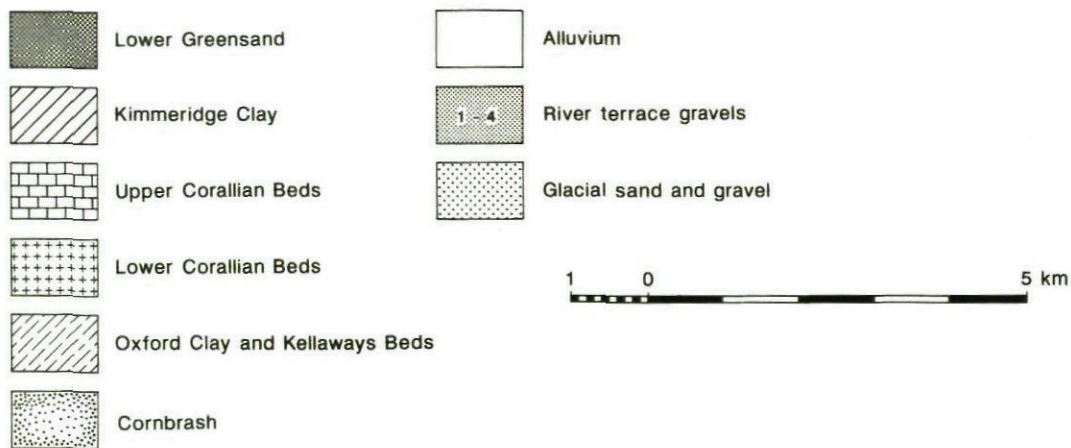
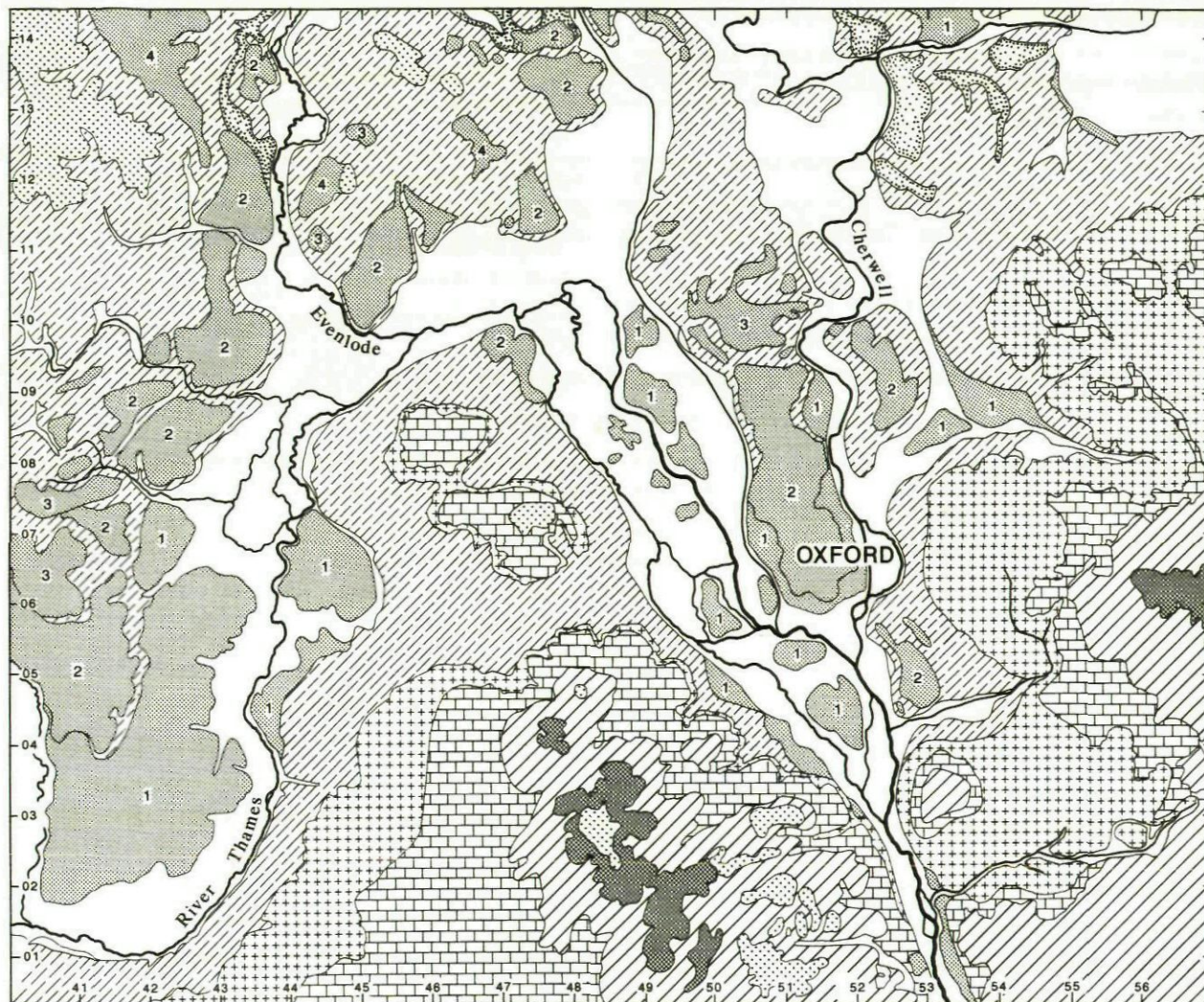


Figure 1.2 The geology of the Oxford area.

published his *Early History of Oxford*; this work, although now largely superseded, set out the first detailed rebuttal of the myths surrounding Oxford's origins, and substituted a historical perspective.

The OHS has been the primary agent for the publication of innumerable early documents that survive in Oxford archives. The leading researcher was the Revd. Herbert Edward Salter (1863–1951),

who began his work on local history while Vicar of Shirburn between 1899 and 1909. By 1942 Salter had completed the transcription and editing of 36 volumes of historical documents, among them the Cartularies of Eynsham and Osney Abbeys, and the Hospital of St John the Baptist, together with work on the college records of Balliol, Merton, St John's and Oriel. Salter recorded his prodigious knowledge of the topography of medieval Oxford in his *Map of Medieval Oxford* (1934), and his Ford lectures of 1935 were published by the OHS a year later (*Medieval Oxford*). Taking the Hundred Rolls Survey of 1279 as his starting point, Salter identified every tenement in the later medieval town, street by street. This work, his *Survey of Oxford*, was left as a series of manuscript notebooks, but was edited by Pantin, and published by the OHS in two volumes; an account of Salter's life and work can be found at the beginning of the first volume. Salter's *Survey*, and the tenement enumeration it established, is the basis of all modern work on Oxford's medieval topography and is referred to extensively throughout this monograph.

The 19th century saw the first systematic attempts to record material remains as a source of information about the city's past. The Oxford draughtsmen and architects John Buckler (1770–1851) and John Chessell Buckler (1793–1894) produced a series of well-known topographical drawings, and undertook surveys of buildings during demolition. More than 12,000 of their drawings survive in a collection in the British Library. A brief account of John Chessell Buckler's work was written by Munby (1978). Henry Minn (1870–1961), a clockmaker, devoted his leisure time to building up a collection of annotated photographs of streets and buildings; this collection is now held by the Bodleian Library (MSS Top. Oxon). Percy Manning (1870–1917) maintained a set of Ordnance Survey maps on which he marked archaeological sites. These were transferred to the Ashmolean Library in 1919, and Manning's collection of books, prints and manuscripts is now in the Bodleian Library (MSS Top. Oxon). Salter included a brief memoir of Manning in his *Surveys and Tokens* (1923).

#### Early excavations (Plate 1.1)

Although Oxford could not claim to have pioneered the study of a pre-Conquest English town by excavation, there was serious interest in excavation in the town from the later 19th century onwards, and the work of Jope, Pantin and Bruce Mitford between the 1930s and the 1950s stimulated new approaches to urban archaeology.

In 1876, the university demolished the Angel Inn on the High Street in order to build the new Examination Schools (Plate 1.1). No archaeological excavation took place, but the site was inspected by Herbert Hurst, a leading member of the OAHs. Hurst undertook building recording and archaeological observations, and he was associated with most of the earliest archaeological work, including recording during the laying of the first electricity cabling in



Plate 1.1 The site of the University Examination Schools, 1877 (Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive, OCL 2157).

the city. Apart from *Oxford Topography* (1899), much of his work remains unpublished in a series of 8 volumes of notebooks in the Bodleian library (MSS Top Oxon). The Angel Inn has become famous for its misinterpretation as a British village of pit dwellings (*Archaeologia Oxoniensis* 1892–5, 7–14); however, finds from the site were deposited with the Ashmolean Museum, and the medieval pottery (including a fine pitcher of Stamford Ware now in the British Museum) was subsequently identified and published by Bruce Mitford and Jope (1940).

In 1899, the OAHs undertook the excavation at the Clarendon Quadrangle that is reported in this monograph. Further excavations (involving T E Lawrence) took place nearby between 1909 and 1912, when an underground bookstore of two floors was constructed for the Bodleian Library in the north-west quadrant of Radcliffe Square. This was not published, but plans survive; the finds were deposited with the Ashmolean Museum and Jope subsequently published the late Saxon pottery (Bruce Mitford and Jope 1940; Jope 1952/3, 101–6).

In 1937, the building of the New Bodleian Library on the corner of Broad Street and Parks Road provided the first opportunity for the controlled recording of a large area of urban archaeology in Oxford. The work was organised by the OAHs, and involved E T Leeds, E T Long and W A Pantin. Pantin recorded the medieval and later buildings on the site during the course of demolition (Pantin 1937), developing the techniques he was later to call 'Above Ground Archaeology'. The finds were studied by R L S Bruce Mitford (1939), who used them to construct the basic typology of medieval pottery for Oxford. Further excavations took place in the Clarendon Quadrangle in 1938, and revealed part of the medieval defences (Daniell 1939).

During the 1940s and 1950s, Oxford's archaeology was dominated by the work of Pantin, Jope and D Sturdy, and was coordinated by staff of the university and the Ashmolean Museum. A number of

significant sites were recorded under their direction, in Cornmarket and Queen Street, and at Oxford Castle, and these provided the first clear excavated evidence of the late Saxon town. In 1956, Jope published a synthesis of the evidence for Saxon Oxford and its region (Jope 1956a) in which he set out a research design for the pre-Conquest town that has informed archaeological study of the period ever since.

The Oxford Excavations Committee (1959–65) was formed within the university to undertake rescue archaeology in the city and surrounding area, and latterly employed a full-time field officer. It handed over its fieldwork responsibilities to the newly-formed Oxford City and County Museum in 1965. By this time, however, the phase of piecemeal development in the city had come to an end, and the city council was proposing wholesale redevelopment of the western part of the medieval town, to create the Westgate shopping centre. The scale of archaeological destruction that this entailed led to the formation in 1967 of a full-time team of archaeologists in the city, under the control of the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee. In 1973, the excavations were taken over by the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, later known as the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU). A more complete account of the origins of the OAEU, and of the OAU's work on medieval sites during the 1970s and early 1980s, can be found in Hassall 1986; for the origins of the OAU see also Cunliffe *et al.* 1974.

### THE OXFORD (PLATE 1.2)

The name Oxford (OE *Oxnaforda*) means 'the ford of the oxen' (*PN Oxon* i, 19) and is directly comparable with other placenames such as Shifford (sheep-ford) and Swinford (swine-ford) upstream. It is first recorded in an entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 911–12, when Edward the Elder took possession of the town (Plate 1.2). The location of the original oxenford, however, and the route on which it lay, was formerly the subject of some controversy.

It was always generally assumed that the ford must have been on the north-south route that crosses the Thames in St Aldate's. This view was challenged by Salter, however, in an article in *Antiquity* (1928, 458–9), in which he published 14th-century documentary evidence that had convinced him that the old route to the south started out from the Westgate of the town, and crossed the river on that side (see also *Medieval Oxford*, 1–3). He proposed that the original ford lay on the line of the present footpath from Osney Mead to Hinksey, at its crossing of the Bulstake stream.

The argument was convincingly refuted by R H C Davis (1973, 258–262), who restated the view that the oxenford was on the line of the north-south route. He rather accurately predicted the results of the most recent research with his suggestion that the route would have been not one, but a whole series of fords, allowing travellers and their stock to 'island-hop'

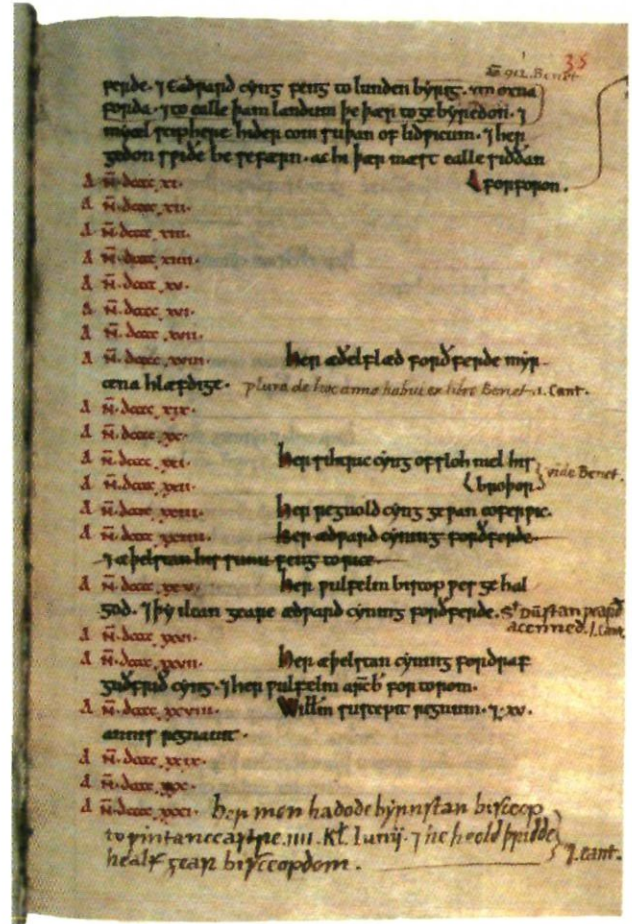


Plate 1.2 The first written mention of Oxford (*Oxnaforda*); from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 911–12 (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Laud Misc 636 fol. 35).

their way across the floodplain. Since Davis's article the controversy has not resurfaced; a fuller summary is given in *VCH* iv, 3–4.

### THE CONTENTS AND STRUCTURE OF THIS MONOGRAPH

Reports on 18 archaeological sites are presented in this volume, all of them located within the city centre. Of these, 2 were detailed watching briefs, 1 was a building survey, 2 were building surveys with limited excavation and the remainder were excavations. In addition, 57 observations have been included in a review of early street surfaces, some of which derive from the excavations reported here, and others from a series of small-scale watching briefs. Most of the fieldwork was carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU), formerly Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee, and took place over a period of 21 years, between 1973 and 1994. The majority of projects were funded by English Heritage or the Department of the Environment; watching briefs were generally funded

from grants provided by Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council, and from the late 1980s there was a small but increasing element of developer funding.

The fieldwork was undertaken in response to development by colleges and private companies, and to services works by the city council and others. It consists, therefore, of a series of separate projects, although each was designed to address existing research interests in the development of the late Saxon and medieval town. The exception was the area of the Thames Crossing in St Aldate's, where three sites became available simultaneously in the late 1980s, and provided an opportunity for more coordinated research.

The projects were identified to English Heritage as requiring publication, in two research proposals submitted in 1991. These were subsequently combined, and the post-excavation work was designed to support a synthetic, thematic publication; this approach had been followed by the OAU in earlier publications in the county archaeological journal *Oxoniensia*, in which clearly-defined themes such as the river crossing and the northern defences had been identified. The thematic structure is reflected in the chapters of this monograph; Chapter 3 dealing with the Thames Crossing, Chapter 4 with the defences, and Chapter 5 with the late Saxon and medieval town.

Work on this publication began in 1992. A substantial amount had already been done on certain projects, particularly in terms of finds and environmental analysis, and much of this work has been incorporated here. Other work was newly-commissioned. Draft texts were submitted to English Heritage for review in 1993, and it was generally felt that the report was assuming a detailed knowledge of the complex archaeological background of Oxford that readers could not generally be expected to possess or to acquire. This was a significant problem, since much of the relevant material was in unpublished archives or had been published in books and journals with a small, private circulation, and often many years ago. As a result, a gazetteer was commissioned to provide summaries and bibliographic references for the most significant sites (Appendix 1 of this volume) and a synthetic discussion of the palaeohydrology of the St Aldate's area was written by Mark Robinson (see Chapter 3, below).

During the course of preparation of the monograph in the early 1990s, the OAU undertook fur-

ther work on a number of sites that were beyond the scope of the original research proposal, but which produced important new information. The exclusion of these sites from the monograph would significantly have limited the interpretative scope of the work, and they were incorporated along with the earlier material. Two of the sites in question are the British Telecom tunnel watching brief (1991) and the Head of the River (1994); both contributed to understanding of the development of the river regime in the St Aldate's area, the former fundamentally. The third is the excavation on New College Town Wall (1993), which located the eastern rampart of the late Saxon town; this site has been fully reported in *Oxoniensia* for 1995, but a summary is presented here. The fourth arose from work carried out on the archive of the 1899 excavation at the Clarendon Quadrangle, where the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society uncovered the best evidence yet available for the original line of the eastern defences; this site has never been fully published before, and the report presented here has been compiled from the society's archive records.

The site reports are presented in three chapters, dealing with the Thames Crossing, the defences and the town; in most cases these have been revised and edited for publication from draft texts produced by the excavators. Site reports are preceded by introductory discussions of the local background to the excavations, and historical source material. Detailed reports on the associated finds and environmental evidence are presented in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively, and these preserve the thematic approach with reports and illustrations being grouped to match the structure of Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Chapters 3-7 were substantially complete in 1996.

The synthesis and discussion presented in Chapter 2 was commissioned by English Heritage in 2001, following a long pause in work on the project. Inevitably, yet more new sites had been excavated in the city centre in this period, providing a substantial body of new information. It was not practical to incorporate yet more site reports into the present volume, and most of the sites excavated between 1996 and 2001 have been published elsewhere, or will be so in the near future. The information derived from these most recent excavations has been incorporated in the synthesis and discussion presented in Chapter 2, and the sites have been added to the gazetteer.