

The Ford, The River and The City

By R. H. C. DAVIS

IT is well known that Oxford means 'the ford of the oxen'; the name is first recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 912 as *Oxna fforda*. Because the city's coat of arms displays an ox paddling idly in a river, it is easy to forget that in the early Middle Ages oxen were beasts of burden, used for hauling heavy loads. An oxen's ford, therefore, would be one through which oxen could draw heavy freight carts. In other words it would have to be on a main road at a spot where the river was shallow and had a hard gravelly bottom. Where was it?

The first condition for any proposed site must be a road which was genuinely important. The ford was not called after the town, but the town after the ford, and it must therefore be presumed that the town came into existence because of the ford and not *vice-versa*. For this reason it is hard to believe that the ford could have been on an east-west route, because such routes could, and did, avoid any crossing of the Thames by keeping either to the north or the south of it. In particular there would have been little point in a ford between Port Meadow and Binsey Green, though this is one of the sites which have been suggested, since having crossed the river the oxen would have had to haul their carts to the top of Wytham Hill, only to descend to a second crossing of the river at Eynsham. It is hard to see how anyone would have wanted to use such a route, any more than they would have wanted to cross the Cherwell at Magdalen Bridge, unless the town was already in existence.¹

The obvious facts of geography are that the biggest river at Oxford is the Thames, and that since it flows from west to east the traffic crossing it would be going from north to south or south to north. For this reason it used to be assumed that the most likely site of the ford was near Folly Bridge, but in 1928 H. E. Salter published evidence which convinced him that the old route to the south started out from the west gate and crossed the river on that side of the city.² The evidence consisted of a charter of 1352 and a plea of 1376. The charter, which survives in the original, is a grant by Roger Brekebek of various properties including a close (*hamma*) 'between the meadow of the Prioress and Convent of Studley on the north side, and the ford called Oxenforde near the bridge leading to North Hinksey on the south side'.³ From these indications Salter was able to locate the spot with precision; it was on the line of the present footpath from Oseney Mead to Hinksey at its crossing of the Bullstake stream. Its antiquity was specifically claimed in the plea of the mayor and citizens as recorded in the Abbot of Oseney's reply:

¹ Neither of these suggestions was ruled out of court by Andrew Clark in his discussion of the possible sites in his edition of the *Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford composed in 1661-6* by Anthony Wood (O.H.S. xv (1889), i, 46).

² H. E. Salter, 'The Ford of Oxford', *Antiquity*, II (1928), 458-9.

³ *Cartulary of Oseney Abbey*, ed. H. E. Salter, II, 161 (O.H.S. xc, 1929).

Item, as for what the mayor and commonalty say that there is a place called Oxenford, from which the town takes its name, and which is a parcel of the same town, the abbot says that the said place is within the franchise and hundred of the Northgate, and does not belong in any way to the town or its franchise.⁴

I have quoted this passage in full because it is important to recognize that it is not a historical statement but an *ex parte* claim. It comes from a lawsuit in which the burgesses were claiming that the abbot should have no jurisdiction in the Isle of Oseney since that island was really part of the town; and one of their 'proofs' was that the Oxenford was on the far side of the isle. How could that ford have given its name to the town, they argued, unless the town was on the island? True, but they lost the case.⁵ The judge (who was the Bishop of Lincoln) can hardly have been convinced about the site of the ford, and there may be some suspicion that the citizens had decided to call this particular ford 'Oxenforde' simply in order to stake a claim to the island. It is certainly strange that the only two documents to mention the place should come within 24 years of each other, some three centuries after the ford had gone out of business.

It is also strange that there is no solid evidence for the other stages of Salter's route to the south. What he claimed was that it left Oxford by the west gate, crossed four or more branches of the river (including the Bullstake stream) on its way to Ferry Hinksey, and went up Harcourt Hill (past Westminster College) to Little Bradley Farm, where it joined the main road from Cumnor to Abingdon. It is admittedly a possible route but, as Mrs. Lambrick demonstrated in this journal, its use can only be attested for pedestrians and individual horsemen. So far as the written evidence goes, all the heavy traffic, whether southbound or westbound, seems to have left the city by the south gate and proceeded along the Abingdon road to the top of Hinksey Hill where the roads for the south and the west diverged.⁶ We will therefore start with an investigation of river-crossings on this route.

Before the end of the 17th century, Folly Bridge was known as 'the great bridge' (*magna pons* or *grand pont*).⁷ According to the *Abingdon Chronicle* it was built by Robert d'Oilli, the first Norman lord of Oxford, who died in 1091 or 1092. But in the 12th century most major buildings were attributed to the Normans, and it may well be, as Salter has argued, that Robert d'Oilli did little more than repair an earlier bridge.⁸ Be that as it may, the important point to realize is that this was not just a single bridge crossing one big river, but the largest bridge in a causeway which extended for a mile or so, and which in the 17th century had a grand total of 42 arches.⁹ The present main stream has been

⁴ *Medieval Archives of the University of Oxford*, ed. H. E. Salter, 1,200 (O.H.S. LXX, 1917).

⁵ The bishop merely adjusted the boundary on the east side of the isle, awarding Warham Bank (Fisher Row) to the city. *Oseney Cart.*, II, 477.

⁶ Gabrielle Lambrick, 'Some Old Roads of North Berkshire', *Oxoniensia*, xxxiv (1969), 78-92.

⁷ The name 'Folly Bridge' first occurs in 1695, the 'folly' being the tower on the bridge which was known as 'Friar Bacon's study'.

⁸ *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (Rolls Series, 1858), II, 15 and 25. The first of the statements (which refers to 'the great bridge to the northern bank [of the river] at Oxford'—*ad septentrionalem plagam Oxoniae*) dates from the 13th century; the second (which calls it more soberly *pons Oxenfordis*) dates from the 12th. For the possible pre-Conquest origin of the bridge, see H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford* (O.H.S., c (1936), 15).

⁹ Wood's *City of Oxford*, I, 416.

deliberately canalized and deepened, both by dredging and by the construction of weirs to keep the water back. Before this had been done the various branches of the river, whose courses can be traced without difficulty, would have been more equal in size. In winter they would doubtless have flooded a large area round Oxford, but in summer they would have been very shallow. Crossing the river might then have been described as 'island-hopping', the main difference between a crossing on the west and the south being that on the south the islands were larger.

To trace the route in detail, the first stream on the north would have been the Trill Mill Stream which crosses St. Aldate's beneath the road between Brewer Street and Rose Place;¹⁰ it can be seen emerging into the open on the far side of the Christ Church Memorial Gardens.¹¹ The second was the Shirelake stream so called because it formed the boundary between Oxfordshire and Berkshire—a fact which suggests that it may once have been the main stream; it was bridged by the Denchworth Bow, just north of Folly Bridge, and then continued across the middle of Christ Church meadows—which is why the meadow floods still rise from the centre. The third was the present main stream at Folly Bridge, but even here the presence of a small island called Ailrich's Eyot meant that the crossing could be done in two stages. After this came the island of Grandpont which took its name from the great bridge or causeway, and which was divided from Hinksey by the small stream which flows past Eastwyke Farm and the north side of Hinksey Park. Hinksey was a large island (nowadays the railway and the reservoir make it look smaller than it is), and the final crossing was from Hinksey to Kennington. To make this crossing the Abingdon Road used (before the building of the new by-pass) to take a marked bend to the right, or south-west. Most motorists thought that the only object of the bend was to enable the road to bridge the railway, but in fact, it also bridged the last two branches of the Thames (here known as the Hinksey stream), one on each side of the railway.

It may at first seem that so many islands and so many crossings would have made the route more difficult than one which crossed the river in fewer stages, but on reflection it will be appreciated that multiple crossings and a large number of islands suggest a shallower river with a firmer bottom. Historically we have evidence for the existence of the two southernmost fords in the middle of the tenth century; they are mentioned in the (Anglo-Saxon) bounds of charters in favour of Abingdon Abbey, and are called *Maegtheford* (Mayweed ford) and *Stanford* (stone ford), the latter name suggesting a made-up road.¹² From Abingdon we

¹⁰ I use the current names for streets, but St. Aldate's (which in the Middle Ages was 'Fish St.') used to end at the South Gate (ie. by Brewer Street), its continuation being known as Grandpont.

¹¹ I have myself made the passage of the Trill Mill Stream in the 1930s and Mr. Hassall reports it still passable, having navigated it in 1971. The covered channel starts between Paradise Street and Opens Road and continues all the way to Christ Church Meadow.

¹² W. de Gray Birch, *Cartularium Saxonium* (3 vols. and index, London, 1885-99) no. 906. Cf. nos. 366 and 102. Both fords are mentioned in the description of the bounds which are discussed by G. B. Grundy in the *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 27 (1922), 100-2, and 30 (1925), 55-9. The (Latin) charters to which the (Anglo-Saxon) bounds are appended purport to date from the 9th and 10th centuries, but the 9th century one is not genuine. See P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated list and Bibliography* (London, 1968), nos. 183, 567 and 663.

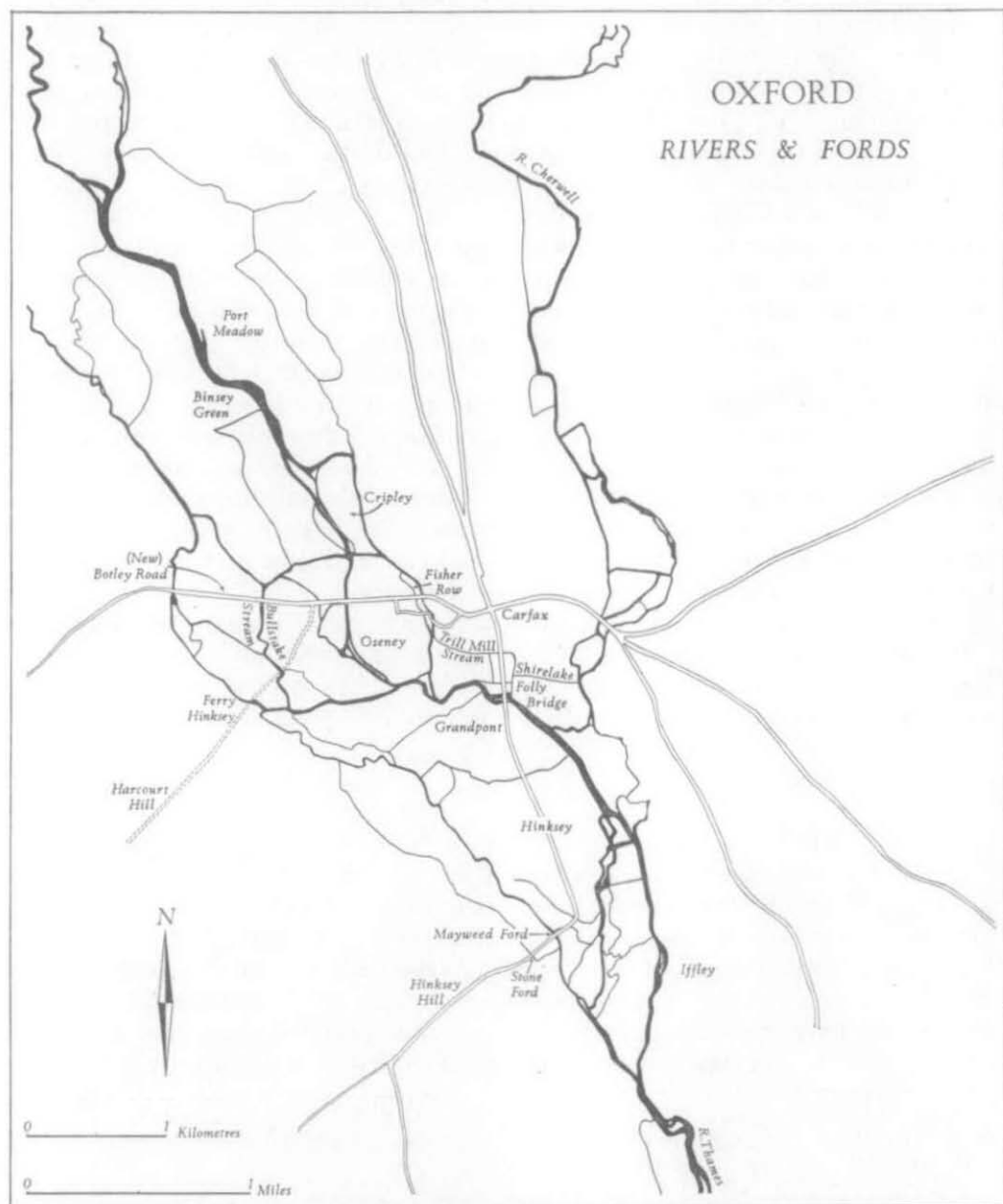


FIG. 1
The topography of Oxford. Drawing by David Sheard.

also have evidence for the northern end of the crossing, since in the time of Abbot Faritus (1100-1117) there was a mill at Oxford bridge which was suggestively called Longford (*molendinum Langeford . . . apud pontem Oxeneford positum*).¹³ Further to the north, but just south of the Trill Mill Stream, recent excavations have uncovered a clay bank which 'could have been used as a roadway into Oxford on the south' and is thought to go back 'at least to the early 9th century'.¹⁴

It is submitted therefore that the original oxen's ford was indeed on the line of St. Aldate's and the Abingdon Road, but that it did not consist of one particular ford, but of a whole series of fords which could be negotiated by heavy ox-carts. Though presumably the easiest possible ford of the Thames, it would have been by far the most serious obstacle for traffic on the route from Northampton to Southampton, and it is not in the least surprising to find that it was eventually converted into an elaborate causeway. What one has to remember is that as the causeway was improved, so the nature of the river would have been changed. In order to prevent the causeway from acting as a dam when the river was in flood, it would have been necessary to ensure that a sufficient rate of water could pass under the various arches and bridges, and the easiest way of doing this would have been to deepen and enlarge some of the channels. It has been suggested, for example, that the straight reach below Folly Bridge, along the college barges and boathouses, is an artificial cutting made to divert the main-stream from the Shirelake when the bridge was built.¹⁵

But whatever the precise details may have been, it is clear that once the causeway and bridges had been built, it would have been necessary to deepen the river at the points where it had been shallowest. In this way the fords would have been destroyed and in consequence it would be pointless to look for them now.

II

The building of the causeway would not have been the only factor which led to the deepening and canalization of the river. Another would have been the construction of water-mills. These had been virtually unknown to the Romans but were introduced into England in the middle or late Saxon period.¹⁶ An early example on the Thames has been excavated at Old Windsor and apparently dates from the 9th century, but it is not until the middle of the 10th century that references become common, the earliest mention of a mill near

¹³ *Chron. Mon. de Abingdon*, II, 123.

¹⁴ T. G. Hassall, *Oxford: the city beneath your feet, Archaeological Excavations in the City 1967-72* (Oxford, 1972), 10. See also his forthcoming article in *Archaeometry*.

¹⁵ I owe this suggestion to Mr. David Sturdy. Mr. Hassall tells me his excavations revealed 'rapid silting on the up-stream side of the clay bank in St. Aldate's suggesting it may have acted as a dam' as here suggested.

¹⁶ H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962), 356-7, and Marc Bloch, 'The Advent and the Triumph of the Watermill', translated (from *Annales* VII (1935), 538-63) in his *Land and Work in Medieval Europe* (London, 1967), 137-168. According to Richard Bennett and John Elton, *History of Corn-Milling* (4 vols. London, 1898-1904) the earliest references to mills in Anglo-Saxon charters (blatant forgeries apart) date from 762, 814 and 838 (J. M. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*) (6 vols. London 1839-48), nos cviii, ccvii and ccxxxix.

Oxford being at Abingdon, c. 954-63.¹⁷ When a mill was built it was necessary not only to dig a millstream or leat, but also to construct a weir and build up the river banks so as to hold a sufficient mass of water above the mill. As a result, if a whole series of mills was built on one river, that river would become both deeper and slower and therefore more suitable for navigation. To quote Andrew Clark :

The benefits conferred on the navigation of the Thames by mill-weirs may thus be stated. When the river ran in its natural channel, it passed through alternate series of sharp shallow streams and long deep pools. In summer many of these rapids were too shallow to float a barge. Now it was just at these shallow places that mills were generally constructed because the descent in the level of the ground which caused the rapids on the river furnished also the fall necessary for working a mill-wheel. The mill-weir, which kept back the water and forced it over the mill-fall, of course deepened the water for some distance above. Also, when a barge was approaching from below, the miller would open his weir and let a rush of water through sufficient to tide the barge over the shallows. This rush of water was called . . . 'a shoot'. For the benefit of this shoot, the barge paid the miller a fee, the original of our modern payments at locks.¹⁸

It follows from this that soon after we begin to hear of mills in large numbers we should also be hearing of navigation. The first reference we have comes from Abingdon a few years before the Norman Conquest, but in its details it implies that navigation was already on quite a large scale.

In the time of Abbot Ordric (1052-66) the river ran on the other side of the church's land (which its inhabitants call Barton) close by the hamlet of Thrupp. This caused the oarsmen no little difficulty, for the land below rose more steeply than the land above, often causing the river to run dry. For this reason the citizens of the city of Oxford (for it was their shipping which made the passage most often) besought that the course of the river should be diverted through the church's meadow, which lies below it on the south, on condition that for the rest of time 100 eels should be paid as a custom to the monks' cellarer by each one of their boats. The request was granted, the terms agreed, and the promised custom is paid to this day.¹⁹

Another reference in the same chronicle makes it clear that the 100 eels from each boat had to be paid between 2 February and Easter and served as a sort of season-ticket for the year,²⁰ but the real significance of the affair is that the abbey considered that the number of boats would be sufficient to justify the major works involved in the diversion of the river. The original course had been the so-called 'Swift Ditch' on the far side of Andersey Island, while the new course used the bed of the River Ock from the north end of the Ditch to the town, then

¹⁷ *Med. Arch.* II (1958), 183-5; *Chron. Mon. Abingdon*, II, 278-9. Cf. the interim note on 'A Saxon Water-Mill in Bolebridge Street', in the 5th Report of Excavations at Tamworth, Staffs., by P. Rahtz and K. Sheridan, *Trans. S. Staffs. Arch. and Hist. Soc.*, XIII (1971-2), 9-16; but it should be noted that though this excavation revealed a mill of some sort, the evidence for its being a water-mill is not absolutely secure.

¹⁸ Andrew Clark in *Wood's City of Oxford*, I, 431 n.1.

¹⁹ *Chron. Mon. de Abingdon*, I, 480-1; cf. II, 282. The author was a monk who entered the abbey before 1117 and was still alive in the reign of Henry II.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 119-20.

turned down the new cut (which is still so called) which ran in a straight line to the south end of the Ditch, a distance of about half-a-mile.²¹

We next hear of navigation in 1110-11 when the Oxford boatmen were accused of trying to evade the custom due to Abingdon. The abbot sued them successfully before the King's sheriffs in Oxford and had his right to the custom reinforced by a royal writ.²² In 1163 the abbot had a major dispute with the men of Oxford at Wallingford about his right to a market, the judgment which was finally given being that he could have the fullest type of market, except that it could not be used by the freight barges which plied the Thames (*navibus onerariis per aquam Tamisiae currentibus*) though he could use his own boats for his own affairs.²³

In 1205 King John granted to William son of Andrew 'that he might have one ship going and returning upon the Thames between Oxford and London', free of toll and with permission to load his ship wherever he wished on the Thames. His father, Andrew, had permission for a boat plying between Abingdon and London but he, in accordance with the judgement of 1163, could only carry 'corn, victuals and other necessities for the support of himself [presumably the abbot] and his men'.²⁴

After the early years of the 13th century, however, evidence of an effective navigation on the Thames is hard to find, and by the 14th century it seems certain that (as Thorold Rogers demonstrated) it was not Oxford but Henley which was 'the furthest point to which [the Thames] was ordinarily navigable'. When stone was being transported from Taynton (near Burford) for the building of Eton College in 1456, it was not shipped down the Thames from Oxford but was carted overland to Henley, and shipped from there.²⁵ Something had happened to make the river less navigable than it once had been.

It is surprising that this fact has received little attention from historians, for the evidence is singularly clear.²⁶ In 1197 (and again in 1199) Richard I ordered all weirs in the Thames to be removed because of the 'great detriment and inconvenience' they had caused to the city of London. In 1215 clause 33 of Magna Carta declared that all kydells (or fish-weirs) were to be pulled down in the Thames and Medway. In 1227 Henry III appointed justices to inspect and measure all weirs which had been heightened and increased to the detriment of vessels passing through them. In 1235 it was ordered that weirs should not be higher, nor with narrower openings than in the reigns of Henry II, Richard I and John. In 1253 the sheriff of Middlesex had all weirs destroyed for the whole

²¹ Fred S. Thacker, *The Thames Highway* (2 vols. 1914-20; repr. Newton Abbot, 1968), I, 13 and II, 144.

²² *Chron. Mon. de Abingdon*, II, 119.

²³ *Ibid.*, II, 229.

²⁴ *Rotuli Litterarum Patentium*, ed. T. D. Hardy (London, 1835), vol. I, pt. I, 38 and 52.

²⁵ Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones, 'The Building of Eton College, 1442-60', *Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge*, XLVI (1933), 84.

²⁶ The evidence is collected in Thacker, *op. cit.*, vol. I ch. II and Appendix II. In the latter he disputes Thorold Rogers' conclusion about Henley as the head of navigation, without apparently noticing that all his evidence was early, and all Rogers' late. Neither writer seems to have considered the possibility that the river had deteriorated between the 12th and 15th centuries, though all their evidence pointed in that direction.

length of the river to the west of London.²⁷ In 1274 the water of the Thames was to be so widened 'that ships and great barges might ascend from London to Oxford'. But complaints and injunctions continued; we read of them in 1278, 1281, 1294, 1316, 1320, 1351, 1352, 1358, 1364, 1369, 1371, 1376, 1377, 1388, 1391, 1399 and on into the 15th century. The complaint was always the same; weirs were being increased in such a way as to make the river impassable, and only too often the remedy proposed was to abolish them all.

The abolition of all weirs would in fact have been disastrous since (as we have already seen) it would have brought navigation to an end. But it was nonetheless possible to have too many weirs. Before the construction of poundlocks (which, though invented in Italy towards the end of the 15th century, were unknown on the Thames before 1624, rare till the end of the 18th century, and not universal till the 20th) boats did not go *past* weirs but *over* them, by means of a flashlock.²⁸ A flashlock was simply a section of the weir which could be opened by raising the paddles (or 'spades') so as to allow the water to rush through. This rush of water was called a 'flash' and going downstream the boatmen would 'shoot' it like a waterfall. Going upstream they would need a longer 'flash', waiting until the level of water had been somewhat reduced, before attempting to haul their boat up with a winch and tackle. As John Strype put it (1720):

Some of these locks are extraordinary dangerous in passing. The going up the Locks were so steep, that every year Cables had been broken that cost 400 l. and Bargemen and Goods drowned. And in coming down, the Waters fell so high, that it sunk the Vessels, and destroyed Corn and Malt wherewith they were laden.²⁹

As if the danger was not enough, there was also the expense and the delay. Millers often charged enormous sums for a 'flash' (30 shillings at Sutton Courtenay in the 18th century), and when the weir had been surmounted the boat might have to wait a long time for the water to rise again, since the 'flash' might have drained a whole stretch of river.

III

If this account of the development of the river is correct, it would follow that Oxford should have become a 'boom town' when the river first became navigable, and should have slumped when the navigation began to fail. There is every indication that this was in fact the case. When we first hear of Oxford in 912 it was one of the West Saxon *burhs*, and from the figures given in the Burghal Hidage (c. 911-19) we know that the circuit of its walls cannot possibly have

²⁷ *De Antiquis Legibus Liber*, ed. Thomas Stapleton (Camden Soc., 1846), 20.

²⁸ Thacker, *op. cit.*, I, 67-8. Cf. I, 125 and II, 489. The last flashlock in use on the Thames was Hart's weir near Eaton Hastings, which Thacker himself last shot in 1911 (*ibid.*, II, 48-9). Poundlocks, however, had been in use on the Exeter Canal as early as 1563.

²⁹ Quoted from Thacker, I, 46.

exceeded 2062½ yds.³⁰ The circuit which we can trace today is about 600 yds more than that, but it is clear that the extra length is due to the extension of the city eastward of what are now Radcliffe Square and Oriel Street, the actual points at which the newer walls joined the old being indicated by a marked change of direction. The date at which this extension was made is not known, but it must have been before 1086, since in Domesday Book the church of St. Peter-in-the-East is inside the city. Most probably it was before the Norman Conquest.

In the first half of the 11th century Oxford figures largely in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and its prosperity is attested by the fact that numismatists have calculated that during the reign of Edward the Confessor, its mint must have been about the fifth most important in the kingdom, since it had at least seven moneymen working at the same time. Canterbury had the same number and the only towns with more were London (21), York (12), Lincoln and Winchester (8 or 9 each). A similarly prominent position is given to Oxford if a calculation is made of the number of burgesses or houses recorded in Domesday Book. Though London and Winchester are not included in the Survey, Oxford comes fifth of the towns that are, after York, Norwich, Lincoln and Thetford.³¹ It is true that at this same time many of Oxford's houses were 'destroyed and waste', but this seems to have been a temporary disaster, since the town was well to the fore again in the 12th century.

In the Pipe Roll of 1130 Oxford was one of the six towns mentioned as having guilds—and it had two, one for the weavers and another for the shoemakers.³² Judged by the size of aids paid to the King in 1130 and 1156, Oxford would have ranked equal sixth among English towns, behind London, Winchester, York and Norwich, and about equal with Exeter and Canterbury.³³ It was also in the front rank of those towns which were seeking political liberties for themselves. It attempted to form a commune in 1147,³⁴ and though the attempt failed, it succeeded in getting a generous charter from Henry II in 1156. By this charter the men of Oxford were to have the 'customs, liberties and laws which they have in common (*habent communes*) with the citizens of London', the right of serving the King on his festival with the men of his butlery (i.e. the Londoners), and the right of trading in London in common (*communiter*) with the Londoners. If they were ever in doubt or dispute over any judicial matter, they were to send their messengers to London 'and hold firm and fast by the judgement of the Londoners

³⁰ The number of hides attributed to each burh represented the number of men required to man the walls on the basis of 4 men for every 5½ yds of wall. The most convenient text of the hidage is in A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1956), 246–9, but important emendations have been made by David Hill, 'The Burghal Hidage: the establishment of a text' *Med. Arch.*, xiii (1969), 84–92. It should be noted that earlier writers (including H. E. Salter and E. M. Jope) have been misled by Gale's edition which gave the number of hides dependent on Oxford as 2,400. This was an error; the various manuscript readings give 1300 and 1500. Mr. Hill suggests that the correct figure was 1400, and subsequent excavations on the W. line of the Anglo-Saxon ditch suggest that the resulting circuit of 1925 yards will be established. See T. G. Hassall in *Oxoniensia*, xxxv (1970), 18, and xxxvi (1971), 34–48.

³¹ For both sets of figures see F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1971), 537–8.

³² The other towns with guilds were London, York, Lincoln, Winchester and Huntingdon.

³³ F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond* (Cambridge, 1907), 175.

³⁴ R. H. C. Davis, 'An Oxford Charter of 1191 and the Beginnings of Municipal Freedom', *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968), 53–65.

... because the citizens of London are of one and the same custom, law and liberty'.³⁵ When, in 1191, London declared itself a commune, Oxford did so too. The municipal seal of Oxford, which was produced in that same year, is the earliest known in England.³⁶

But if Oxford was an important town (as opposed to university-town) in the 12th century, it was not to remain so for long. The poll tax returns of 1377 suggest that so far as population was concerned it had sunk to sixteenth place among English towns,³⁷ and its decline was to continue further. According to H. E. Salter, the wealth and population of the city were shrinking perpetually from 1250 to 1350. He reached this conclusion from a detailed study of almost all the tenements in the city, many of which seem to have been deserted in the later Middle Ages.³⁸ He found that, in spite of the general inflation, shops in the Cornmarket fetched a higher rent in 1200 than three centuries later; that the rent of Broadgates Hall (on what is now part of the Brasenose frontage in High Street) fell from 11 marks in 1293 to 8 in 1339, to 6 in 1357 and as little as 3 in 1480; and that there was a general disposition to pull down houses and use the sites as gardens. The extent to which this de-urbanization of the city took place can be appreciated visually in the garden of Merton which is on the site of ten or twelve deserted houses; or in the vast area covered by New College whose site, acquired in the 1370s, was formerly occupied by more than thirty houses. Even in the case of Oriel which was less far from Carfax, we know that the site of the college covers 17 properties, only 3 of which were inhabited when the college acquired them, and most of which were simply added (in the first place) to the college garden.³⁹

If it had not been for the university Oxford might have been reduced to a fraction of its former size. That was what made it so congenial to the poor scholars of the Middle Ages. They had no need of heavy barges on the Thames but did need a town in a central position with so many empty houses that rent and accommodation would be cheap. Oxford provided just what they wanted, thanks very largely to the river. The town had come into existence because of the ford across the river. It had become rich and had expanded when the construction of weirs had made the river navigable. And when there were so many weirs that the river ceased to be navigable its fortunes declined, the merchants moved out, and the scholars were able to take almost the whole place for themselves.

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³⁵ Octavius Ogle, *Royal Letters Addressed to Oxford and existing in the City Archives* (Oxford, 1892), 4-5. For the service in the butlery see J. H. Round, *The King's Serjeants and Officers of State* (London, 1911), 172.

³⁶ See note 34.

³⁷ J. C. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, 1948), 142.

³⁸ H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, 87. Cf. his *Survey of Oxford*, ed. W. A. Pantin and W. T. Mitchell, 2 vols., O.H.S. new series, xiv (1960) and xx (1969).

³⁹ *Oriel College Records*, ed. C. L. Shadwell and H. E. Salter (O.H.S., xci (1926), 113).