

## THE TOM HASSALL LECTURE FOR 2000

# Medieval Oxfordshire, 1100-1540

By JOHN STEANE

This lecture will attempt an overview of the discoveries made in the county and the city during the last twenty-five years, 1975-2000. This quarter-century coincides with my return to the county as field officer, keeper of the field section, keeper of environmental records and finally County Archaeologist (each more grandiose title was not accompanied by a corresponding salary increase!). I shall unblushingly interpret archaeology in its widest sense, the study of material remains from the medieval past: upstanding structures, artefacts and below ground features will all be grist to my mill. The period has been extremely fruitful thanks to the energetic and assiduous work of Tom Hassall himself, the first director of the newly formed Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit at the beginning of the period. His urban excavations in Oxford set a new standard in a city which had already been in the forefront of medieval archaeological studies with the work of P. Manning, T.E. Lawrence, R. Bruce-Mitford and E.M. Jope.<sup>1</sup> Secondly I must pay tribute to the sterling work of Brian Durham who has carried on Hassall's work in innumerable small-scale excavations at key points in the city which have been promptly reported in *Oxoniensia*. Like John Blair in last year's Hassall Lecture, I look forward to the definitive report *Oxford Before the University* which will sum up Durham's excavations of the last 30 years. A third figure who has taken on the mantle of Dr. H.E. Salter is Julian Munby, whose contribution to our understanding of Oxford's medieval buildings is based on an immaculate recording of standing structures and an unrivalled mastery of the written records. For sheer imaginative insight he is rivalled by David Sturdy, whose enthusiasm and initiative has resulted in much inspired fieldwork. I recall with particular pleasure the interesting walks through medieval Oxford he led for the Ashmole Club; he was aware, as Sir Mortimer Wheeler was, of engaging the curious minds of the next generation.

I propose to comment on what seem to me to be the principal discoveries in the city and the county, and then to suggest some fresh lines of enquiry which might be pursued in the next quarter-century.

### THE CITY OF OXFORD

Work on the city has concentrated round four main themes:<sup>2</sup> the origins of the medieval city; the plan and date of its defences and streets; the layout and nature of the domestic buildings; and the examination of more specialised buildings such as the castle, parish churches and religious houses. Work on the university has centred round the evolution of a number of early halls, the monastic colleges, and the analysis of architectural structures.

<sup>1</sup> Their contribution to an understanding of medieval Oxford and its ceramics is usefully summarised in M. Mellor, *Pots and People* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> T.G. Hassall, 'Archaeology of Oxford City', in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), 115-34. Twenty years before, D. Benson and J.M. Cook, *City of Oxford Redevelopment. Archaeological Implications* (1966) laid down the principles to be followed in their ground-breaking study, the first in any historic town.

The excavations in Oxford City in the late 1960s and 70s tended to be on a large scale, arising out of central town redevelopment in the areas of St. Thomas's, St. Ebbes and the Castle site. More recently in the 1990s excavations have been very small key-holes, or confined to watching the foundations of buildings under construction. The period has seen a revolution in funding from English Heritage-sponsored and financed work to developer funding following the Thatcher administration. Although research archaeology *per se* has not been possible, there are signs that with the advent of a computerised urban archaeological database which is being currently actively pursued by the City Council, English Heritage and the Oxford Archaeological Unit, future work will be subject to much more rigorous and (it is to be hoped) research-directed planning.

### *Defences*

John Blair in last year's Hassall Lecture mentioned that the defences of the Saxon town on the north were now well known; they enclosed an area considerably smaller than their medieval successors. The north gate and south gate were in the same position during both periods, being marked by the two churches dedicated to St. Michael. In addition Derek Renn, in a lecture to the O.A.H.S. two years ago, plausibly suggested that St. George's Tower was part of a late Saxon defensive system, perhaps built between 1009 and 1066, at a river crossing to the south-west and just outside the Saxon town. His speculations have been supplemented by detailed work on the documentation of the castle and a rectified photographic survey of the tower itself, both in advance of a major re-development of the Oxford Castle/Prison site.<sup>3</sup>

The second major new addition to our information is the existence of an outer city wall, 10 m. forward of the well-known portion in the grounds of New College and only 1 m. thick. This has been proved at New College and Hertford College.<sup>4</sup> A double city wall, as seen at Carcassonne in Southern France and similar to the development of concentric castles such as Harlech, Beaumaris and Caerphilly in Wales, is apparently unique in England. The third interesting observation is that the function of the tower of St. Michael's Church, Northgate is now much clearer. It was originally defensive and not directly connected to a church. The off-centre west door is likely to have belonged to a pre-church phase, functioning as a pedestrian gate, ancillary to a vehicular gate on the line of the modern street. It subsequently evolved into the turriform nave and so into the tower of a church built east of it (very much as at Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire). One last point is that the replacement of the Saxon and Norman ramparts with stone walls and semi-circular bastions was largely completed c. 1226-40. Renn noticed that the double lobe to the oilet in the arrow slits of the New College main wall bastions could be paralleled at Caernarfon Castle, begun in 1283. The implication is that the bastions were built or rebuilt later than the main stone defences, possibly at the same time as the outer wall. If so the embrasures would have been placed to see over the outer wall.

<sup>3</sup> 'Oxford Castle, Medieval and Later Buildings. Historic Building Assessment' (Oxford Archaeological Unit for the Osborne Group, 2001); J.G. Rhodes, 'Oxford Castle, Conservation Plan' (Oxfordshire County Council, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> B. Durham, C. Halpin and N. Palmer, 'Oxford's Northern Defences. Archaeological Studies 1971-1982', *Oxoniensia*, xlviii (1983), 13-40.

### *The layout of the town*

A number of sections cut through the late Saxon streets (at St. Aldates, High Street, the Turl and New Inn Hall Street) suggest that the earliest metalled streets and the grid plan date from the reign of Edward the Elder. Urban development had begun along St. Aldates by the 10th century and the street frontage was firmly established by the second half of the 11th century. Domestic tenements were built on a planned development along St. Thomas's High Street; long narrow plots were laid out by the landowners, Oseney Abbey.<sup>5</sup> The cloth trade would seem to have been the main source of employment. The proximity of the river and space for drying cloth, together with the presence of Oseney Abbey as employer and market, were predisposing favourable factors. In St. Ebbes<sup>6</sup> the area was always comparatively poor; no one founded a college here. This meant that the survival of medieval remains was high. They consisted of a complex of rubbish pits indicating the practice of textile manufacture, skinning leather and metal working. The lack of substantial structures and the very small buildings reflected the low status of the occupants. Similar downmarket housing was found at St. Aldates<sup>7</sup> while hearths and ovens were found outside buildings. At the upper end of the social stratum was a large urban estate in Norman West Oxford. Here at Frewin Hall the undercroft of an important stone house had survived, possibly originally in the ownership of Henry I's chamberlain, Geoffrey de Clinton. It ended up (1435-1540) in the hands of the Austin canons who ran St. Mary's College here until the Dissolution (Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> Detailed studies of late medieval houses facing onto the principal streets of the city showed that much of their structures could be recovered from precise recording and a trawl through the splendid topographical collections of the Bodleian.<sup>9</sup> In all these areas there was archaeological evidence for decay and decline in the economic fortunes of the city in the late Middle Ages. Pits were found in the surface of Church Street and Castle Street implying a breakdown in social organisation. Colleges crowded in like vultures on a newly expired corpse. The university took over the running of the town, not always to the town's advantage.

### *Religious houses*

Our knowledge in this area has been substantially increased in the last 30 years.

(a) *Oseney Abbey*. Visitors arriving at Oxford by train will know of the ritual stop opposite the cemetery within which are buried the remains of Oseney Abbey, the most powerful monastic institution in Oxford, with banking and financial business interests. Salvage excavations have shown that the abbey was on an island site and engaged in large-scale land reclamation,

<sup>5</sup> N. Palmer, 'A Beaker Burial and Medieval Tenements in the Hamel, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 124-225.

<sup>6</sup> T.G. Hassall, C.E. Halpin and M. Mellor, 'Excavations in St. Ebbes, Oxford, 1967-76', *Oxoniensia*, liv (1989), 71-279.

<sup>7</sup> B. Durham, 'Archaeological Investigations in St. Aldates' Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1977), 83-203.

<sup>8</sup> J. Blair, 'Frewin Hall, Oxford: A Norman Mansion and a Monastic College', *Oxoniensia*, xliii (1978), 48-99.

<sup>9</sup> J. Munby, 'Tackley's Inn and Three Medieval Houses in Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xliii (1978), 123-69; J. Munby, '126 High Street: the Archaeology and History of an Oxford House', *Oxoniensia*, xl (1975), 254-308; J. Munby, 'Zacharias's: a 14th-century Oxford New Inn and the Origins of the Medieval Urban Inn', *Oxoniensia*, lvii (1992), 245-311.



Fig. 1. The gatehouse of St. Mary's College, Oxford, looking out into New Inn Hall Street and St. Peter's College. John Blair's study in 1978 showed that this was the side wall of the pre-Dissolution gatehouse of a house of Austin canons. (Photo: J. Steane)

expanding west, developing a west court occupied by a range of buildings running north-south parallel with the millstream.<sup>10</sup> The surviving scheduled fragment of the monastic buildings is still in a dire state despite being recorded as long ago as 1980.<sup>11</sup>

(b) *Second site of the Dominican friary.* Through a series of salvage excavations, test holes and observations the whole ground plan of the second site of the Dominican friary was found outside the walled town to the south.<sup>12</sup> It was a long church with a north aisle; to the south were a great cloister, a little one and possibly a third. The great variety of tiles found suggests that the whole of the church, the chapter house, parts of the east range of the great cloister, the galilee and the slype all had tiled pavements. This high status building was paralleled gastronomically by the superior diet of the friars, richer by far than that enjoyed by the inhabitants of the suburban tenements such as the Hamel and St. Aldates. More beef was consumed; goose bones were more common than chicken; a high proportion of the fish bones were marine in origin despite Oxford being as far from the sea as is possible; among

<sup>10</sup> J. Sharp et al., 'Oseney Abbey, Oxford. Archaeological Investigations, 1975-83', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1985), 95-131.

<sup>11</sup> J. Steane and P. Gosling, 'Oseney Mill, surviving part of Oseney Abbey', *CBA Group 9 Newslr.* 10 (1980), 96-7.

<sup>12</sup> G. Lambrick et al., 'Further Excavations on the Second Site of the Dominican Priory, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1985), 131-209.

them was the luxury fish, sturgeon. This was followed by a great variety of fruits, grape, almond, fig, strawberry and walnut. Gardens were nearby, evidenced by box leaves and the seeds of marigold, opium poppy, greater celandine and henbane.

(c) *Greyfriars*. Not far away and straddling the city wall was the site of the Greyfriars.<sup>13</sup> Here eight phases of building were distinguished. The church developed from a simple rectangular structure (a choir) until it attained a T-shape with a choir, a 'walking place', a nave, a north aisle and, most remarkably, a large north transeptal extension with no less than ten chapels and therefore ten altars. This made Oxford Greyfriars the greatest in England, barring only the London house. The story circulated that a friar returned after death to warn that his brothers would be damned for excessive building. Archaeology confirmed that the friars took a leading part in the academic and intellectual life of the nascent university. They also attracted powerful patrons who sought burial here. Within the Greyfriars precincts were buried the heart of Richard of Cornwall, brother to Henry III, several members of the Golafre family and the bones of St. Agnellus of Pisa.

(d) *Rewley Abbey*. A fourth major religious house in Oxford was the Cistercian abbey of Rewley. This was a *studium*, founded in 1281, the first settlement of monk-students at an English university,<sup>14</sup> but as a group the white monks contributed little to the intellectual life of Oxford since this building was not large enough to accommodate them all and subsequently they were scattered throughout the city. An aisled structure containing burials was interpreted as the abbey church, 45 m. long and 15 m. wide, with no transepts. Parts of the west and north ranges were investigated and the foundations of the *rere dorter*. The construction of the Said Business School has been designed to do minimum damage to the exiguous remains. One scheduled arch, decaying disgracefully, totters by the river.

(e) *Other friary sites*. Work at two of the other friary sites, those of the Augustinians at Wadham College and the Carmelites in Beaumont Street, has been less informative.<sup>15</sup> A remnant of a buttressed north range was found in the latter but it was heavily robbed and the excavator was uncertain whether it belonged to the 12th century Plantagenet 'palace' (or king's house) or the White Friars. An orchard, indicated by rows of tree holes, was nearby and may have been part of the royal garden.

### *The medieval university*

As Oxford declined economically in the 13th and 14th centuries so the newly founded colleges were able to buy up land and deserted tenements cheaply. This resulted in the dense academic occupation east of the historic core. In general the opportunities for excavation have been slighter by comparison with the western areas. At Lincoln College, the deep footings of the 15th-century hall were found set in the unstable soil of a large Anglo-Saxon building whose floor levels had miraculously survived.<sup>16</sup> At All Souls' College, resistivity and ground penetrating radar revealed the medieval cloister underlying the Hawksmoor

<sup>13</sup> Hassall, Halpin and Mellor, op. cit. note 6, esp. pp. 182-94.

<sup>14</sup> J.R.L. Highfield, 'The Early Colleges', in J.I. Catto (ed.), *History of the University of Oxford, I: The Early Oxford Schools* (1986), 236.

<sup>15</sup> J. Blair, 'A Monastic Fragment at Wadham College', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 161-8; D. Poore, 'Oxford Sackler Library', *S. Midlands Archaeol.* 30 (2000), 68-9; D. Poore and D. Wilkinson, *Beaumont Palace and the White Friars. Excavations at the Sackler Library, Beaumont St., Oxford* (Oxford Archaeological Unit Occasional Paper no. 9).

<sup>16</sup> J. Hiller, 'Oxford, The Kitchen Project, Lincoln College', *S. Midlands Archaeol.* 30 (2000), 64-7.

quadrangle and also a wall of the medieval hall.<sup>17</sup> A lead rod with a cast decorative end was found, identified as a lead crayon for writing and drawing. It recalled the swan mussel shell containing red, blue, green and yellow pigments, the palette of a manuscript illuminator, found at St. Aldates.<sup>18</sup> In the 13th century there were workshops in Catte Street and round Northgate to supply the needs of the university for books. Another interesting find was an hour glass standard, very necessary in view of the propensity for lecturers to outstay their allotted time.

The site of the infirmary and hall of the precursor of Magdalen College, the hospital of St. John the Baptist, was investigated.<sup>19</sup> A stone-built culvert of 12th-century masonry type seems to pre-date the hospital and it is suggested that it may be part of the Mikveh, the ritual bathing place of the Jewish cemetery.<sup>20</sup> The infirmary was interpreted as having been a two-aisled hall with the residence for the warden along the Cherwell riverside. A small chapel was identified in the present college High Street range. The whole of Waynflete's college appeared to respect the layout of the former hospital.

#### *Public buildings*

Turning from the colleges to public buildings in the town and university, there have been two outstandingly interesting discoveries. The first was the recognition that the main Anglo-Saxon north-south route linking Northampton with Southampton (in Oxford the line of Cornmarket Street and St. Aldates) was provided with a more substantial bridge and causeway across the braided Thames in the late 11th century. Folly Bridge in fact had at its core a number of Romanesque arches, likely to be the work of Robert d'Oilly, William the Conqueror's first constable of Oxford Castle. If this is so, the Thames crossing at Oxford becomes 'the earliest medieval stone bridge to be firmly identified in Britain and possibly in Northern Europe'.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly dendrochronological investigations by D. Miles and J. Munby of the roof of Duke Humfrey's library in the Bodleian have established that the basic construction of the roof had been carried out in 1458. This roof was jacked up four to five feet in 1488 when the vault was inserted and intermediate arch-braced hammer beams were put in. In 1598 Bodley replaced other trusses and introduced further purlins and more rafters to create panels which were then painted with repeating armorial devices of Oxford University.<sup>22</sup>

### THE COUNTRYSIDE

#### *Pottery*

The greatest single contribution to our understanding of the county (and the city) of Oxfordshire in the Middle Ages has been M. Mellor's work.<sup>23</sup> She recognises fourteen main pottery traditions from the 700 sites which have excavated or collected pottery in the region.

<sup>17</sup> B. Durham and C. Bell, 'All Souls' College: medieval cloister', *S. Midlands Archaeol.* 23 (1993), 74.

<sup>18</sup> Durham, *op. cit.* note 7.

<sup>19</sup> B. Durham, 'The Infirmary and Hall of the Medieval Hospital of St. John the Baptist at Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lvi (1991), 17-75.

<sup>20</sup> J. Steane, *Oxfordshire* (1996), 263.

<sup>21</sup> C. Bradford and J. Steane, 'Oxford Folly Bridge', *CBA Group 9 Newslr.* 12 (1982), 108-9; B. Durham, 'The Thames Crossing at Oxford. Archaeological Studies, 1979-82', *Oxoniensia*, xlix (1984), 87.

<sup>22</sup> J. Munby, personal communication.

<sup>23</sup> M. Mellor et al., 'A Synthesis of Middle and Late Saxon, Medieval and Early Post-Medieval Pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 17-219.



Four came from production centres outside the county: Minety (North-west Wiltshire), Savernake Forest (North-east Wiltshire), Brill/Boarstall (Buckinghamshire) and Potterspury (South Northamptonshire). She has combed through the documentary sources extracting the names of potters and place-names suggesting production centres, and has drawn distribution maps. There are to date, disappointingly, no kiln sites known in the county. Among Mellor's conclusions, the marketing area of medieval potteries such as Brill/Boarstall was reckoned to be about a 50-mile radius. The pottery was taken to Oxford and thence retailed via secondary weekly markets at places like Faringdon, Bampton, Abingdon, Thame, Middleton Stoney, Bicester, Witney, Woodstock, Eynsham and Charlbury. The pots were taken round on carts or pack horses. The north of the county always looked east for its pottery. West Oxfordshire always received its pottery from kilns further to the west. Mellor points out that the Brill/Boarstall potteries produced decoratively rich wares with elaborate jugs. One has a deer head and forest leaves, perhaps commemorating a hunting party (Brill was a royal hunting lodge). In others the inspiration derived from iron-work and stained glass. Copper oxide for glazes came from France; lead was a regional import from the Mendips or Derbyshire. Concerning the functions of pottery, she points out the necessity of wine brought to royal hunting lodges being decanted into jugs and pitchers. Wide pans were used for dairy processing. Many 'cooking pots' may have ended up as chamber pots! Perhaps most important, Mellor has firmly based her dating of Oxfordshire's pottery on stratigraphical studies from a large number of sites. These began with the work of R. Bruce-Mitford and E.M. Jope in the 1950s.

#### *Houses in the Vale of White Horse*

A second major addition to knowledge about the medieval countryside has been C. Currie's work on the houses in the Vale of White Horse.<sup>24</sup> This paper is valuable in that its data brings together the results of old and recent survey work on parsonages and manor houses and firmly sets them in their economic and social contexts, emphasising the lack of locally produced timber, the shortage of building materials and the relative prosperity of the area. Oak timber had to be brought in from south of the Downs or from Windsor Forest. Elm was available from hedgerow trees in fields and closes. Oolitic limestone was imported from north of the Thames; chalk was used for dressings but seldom for structural walling. The Vale was well farmed with early extensive open fields producing a substantial economic surplus in the late 10th-11th centuries. There was dairying in the west, sheep in the south, arable in the east with high corn yields. Wheat was shipped from Harwell and Brightwell down the Thames to Wallingford and London. Henley-on-Thames was the major grain entrepot west of London. Here London grain merchants gathered and attracted grain from South Oxfordshire and South Buckinghamshire.<sup>25</sup> The greatest landowners in the Vale included Abingdon Abbey; Beaulieu Abbey which had large estates near Faringdon;<sup>26</sup> Glastonbury's possessions centred on Ashbury; and Reading Abbey had an estate at Cholsey. (This, until 1812 when it was destroyed, had the largest barn in England.)

Currie reckons that the Vale has more surviving or deducible pre-1350 wall-framing known at present than any comparable rural area in Europe. It is best seen in storeyed

<sup>24</sup> C. Currie, 'Larger Medieval Houses in the Vale of the White Horse', *Oxoniensia*, lvii (1992), 81-245.

<sup>25</sup> R. Peberdy, 'Navigation on the River Thames between London and Oxford in the late Middle Ages. A Reconsideration', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 311-40.

<sup>26</sup> G. Soffe of NMR Swindon has located from air photographs a large monastic grange at Wyke which must have paralleled the original layout of the surviving fragment (including the Great Barn) at Great Coxwell.

wings, great panels one bay wide and one storey high: the infilling is made of staves to which the horizontal lathes were attached. There was also a great diversity of roof types. Crucks were common in small houses; common rafter and crown post roofs are also found but clasped purlin types were an alternative to crown posts as early as 1280-1350. For high quality open halls where arch braced or hammer beam trusses were used, tenoned purlin construction was preferred.

#### *Dean Court*

Currie's work encompasses one aspect of the medieval landscape, the larger house. A more comprehensive study of a single grange of Abingdon Abbey at Dean Court showed the evolution of the farming centre through five centuries.<sup>27</sup> The estate largely resulted from assarting from the woodland which, as Domesday Book shows, was in short supply in former Berkshire in 1086. A prestigious domestic range and two large agricultural buildings were upgraded in the late 13th century, doubtless because the monks' investment was proving profitable. Kitchen fishponds, dovecote and chapel and a walled moated enclosure were added. The 'fish kitchen' is the first ever to have been excavated. The grange at Dean Court may well have served as a retreat to members of the monastic community overwhelmed by late medieval *accidie*.

#### *Settlement shrinkage and desertion*

From the microcosm of Dean Court to the macrocosm of the whole county, the study of settlement shrinkage and desertion has advanced in a number of directions since the seminal paper of the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group (as it was then called) in the 1960s.<sup>28</sup> Bond published maps in 1985 showing the total distribution of medieval settlements, and shrunk and deserted settlements.<sup>29</sup> 'Settlements' had replaced 'villages' as the orthodox jargon. He calculated that about 24% of all Oxfordshire's settlements were deserted between the 12th and the 18th centuries, making it one of the most heavily affected parts of England. This is paradoxical because other evidence shows that Oxfordshire was amongst the most affluent counties in the Middle Ages with a high taxable base.<sup>30</sup>

Several points might be made to try to explain what is an immensely complicated phenomenon.<sup>31</sup>

- There was still a substratum of dispersed settlements, a carryover from the early and mid Saxon periods. Much settlement shift had occurred before population optimisation of the 13th century. Some settlements were vulnerable because they were on marginal land which might become infertile through over-cropping and under-fertilisation; animal manure was ever scarcer as areas devoted to arable cultivation encroached on wastes and woodland pasture, thus reducing stocking.

<sup>27</sup> T. Allen, 'A Medieval Grange of Abingdon Abbey at Dean Court Farm, Cumnor, Oxon', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 219-447.

<sup>28</sup> K.J. Allison, M.W. Beresford and J.G. Hurst, *The Deserted Villages of Oxfordshire* (1965).

<sup>29</sup> J. Bond, 'The Oxford Region in the Middle Ages', in Briggs, Cook and Rowley, *Archaeol. of the Oxford Region*, 135-59, maps 14-15.

<sup>30</sup> R.E. Glasscock, 'England circa 1334', in H.C. Darby, *A New Historical Geography of England before 1600* (1980), 141.

<sup>31</sup> Some of the ideas in the next few paragraphs I have included in a booklet on aspects of North Oxfordshire's landscape history to be published by the Chipping Norton Local History Society.



- Early desertions were probably unconnected with depopulation (9% before 1350) and were driven by seignorial reorganisation and resettlement of communities elsewhere. There was clearance, characteristically favoured by the Cistercians. Treton in Bruern Abbey, for instance, had 23 holdings in 1086 but was converted into a grange; Fulwell became a grange of Oseney Abbey in 1205. At the end of the 13th century much of its land had converted to sheep pasture.
- In the early 14th century there was economic decline as yet unconnected with plague. Material evidence points to deterioration of the weather. At Wretchwick near Bicester deep drainage ditches were dug in the late Middle Ages. Bicester Priory is documented as destroying the last five houses in 1489 of a community which two centuries before had over 30 households. Everywhere on deserted earthwork sites clay platforms lifting houses out of the mud are found; excavation has shown that many yards were paved. Famine came to Oxfordshire as elsewhere in Midland England in 1315-18. The population of Langley, in a bleak and exposed position on the Windrush/Evenlode watershed, reduced from 18 tenants in 1279 to 4 in 1327.
- Substantial reduction of population can be attributed to the Black Death of 1349. Clerical mortality indicates the likely scale. The normal number of new institutions of clergy for the county in any one year was 13 or 14. In 1349 it had leapt to 103. The death rate, in fact, was seven times what it normally was.<sup>32</sup> There are *au contraire* remarkably few villages that can be proved to have disappeared entirely because of the plague. Tusmore in the far north-east of the county is one. Tilgarsley near Eynsham heathland is another. In 1327 there were 28 taxpayers but by 1359 all the inhabitants were stated to have died.<sup>33</sup>
- When the circumstances of an individual settlement are put under the microscope a more credible picture emerges than that derived by testing unproven models against disparate and scattered evidence. At Thomley, for instance, a hamlet on the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire border, Holden's researches reveal the marginal character of a settlement between two fairly flourishing villages; the lack of basic services such as a church, a market, a fair or a mill; the absence of unifying lordship and the tendency for land to be bought up by outsiders, thus undermining the village community. Taken together they explain Thomley's disappearance from the landscape.<sup>34</sup>
- Returning to generalities, in the absence of other well documented individual studies (which are urgently needed if the topic is to progress), it was small, late-founded settlements on marginal land that disappeared or became seriously shrunk. Landlords attempted to recoup by diversification. They enclosed and converted to pasture, bred sheep, sold wool. Parks which had formerly been on the edges of parishes were now to be found on former cultivated land. Stonor is an instance where the medieval park had been sited on the woodland edge; by 1700 it had been re-sited to the east to act as a foil for the gentry house.<sup>35</sup> One college in Oxford created a 'grove' early in the 16th century which by 1710 had become a deer park. It was a notable example of *rus in urbe*.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii. 17-18.

<sup>33</sup> D. Miles and T. Rowley, 'Tusmore Deserted Village', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 309-15. For Tilgarsley see *V.C.H. Oxon.* xii. 115-16.

<sup>34</sup> B. Holden, 'The Deserted Medieval Village of Thomley, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, l (1985), 215-37.

<sup>35</sup> J. Steane, 'Stonor, a Lost Park and a Garden Found', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 449-71.

<sup>36</sup> J. Steane, 'The Grounds of Magdalen College 1480-1880', *Oxoniensia*, lxxiii (1998), 91-105.



Fig. 2. Abingdon. Two trestles of a timber bridge dated by dendrochronology to c. 1510 AD, in the bottom of Convent Ditch (see *Medieval Archaeology*, xxxiv (1990), 206-7). (Photo: Oxford Archaeological Unit)



Fig. 3. Witney, Mount House. Base of 12th-century solar tower of bishop of Winchester's manor house, excavated by Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1984. (Photo: OAU)

## THE SMALL TOWNS

I do not wish to denigrate the historic towns of the county by referring to them as 'small'; I would simply emphasise that most of Oxfordshire's inhabitants were country dwellers. Considerable progress has been made in understanding their origins and layout by seizing advantage of survey and limited excavation in advance of central town development. In Bicester the late Saxon nucleus is now seen to be shifting from the King's End-Market End dumbbell to an area south of the causeway. As wet weather conditions deteriorated some movement north is postulated. At Banbury much more is now known of the 12th-century castle of Bishop Alexander 'the Magnificent', although unfortunately it was not discovered in time to be incorporated within the shopping precinct.<sup>37</sup> At Witney far more happily the 12th- and 13th-century bishops' fortified manor house (Fig. 3) was excavated, consolidated and eventually displayed under a Teflon tent paid for by English Heritage. It is still the only excavation undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit that has not been filled in and thus lost to the public. We know very little more in 2001 than we did since Rodwell's survey of 1975 about the origins and layout of the other medieval towns.<sup>38</sup> It is to be hoped that a start will be the systematic recording of surviving early buildings in places like Burford, Thame and Henley. *The Victoria County History* for Oxfordshire is beginning to show promising signs of working to promote more active building recording.

## THE NEXT 25 YEARS

- The completion of an urban archaeological database for Oxford and the appointment of a City Archaeologist to the planning team should provide consistency of purpose and vision to the archaeology of the city in place of the *ad hoc* arrangements in the past, rich though their results have been.
- It is to be hoped that the present proposals for 'developing' the crucially important Castle/Prison site in Oxford will be prefaced by a programme of research-directed archaeology to match the admirable documentary surveys.
- A determined attempt should be made to record all the upstanding medieval buildings of Oxfordshire, the barns, churches, farmhouses, dovecotes and so on. In fact to apply what one might call the 'Currie' methodology to the whole county. As pointed out in the section on rural settlement more detailed studies on individual communities along the lines of Tusmore and Thomley are required. It is possible that these are tasks suitable to be co-ordinated by the Oxfordshire Buildings Record, newly established in 1999/2000.
- A county-wide survey of building materials used in the Middle Ages should be mounted. This would include a study of re-used Roman materials, a more extensive programme of dendrochronological recording, an updating of Arkell's and Aston's pioneer works on stone and slate and a greater concentration on timber, bricks, tile, flint and chalk.
- Studies concentrating on the vernacular interior (as adumbrated by James Ayres' *The Shell Book of the Home*) should be undertaken to complement the detailed building recording called for above. Similarly the work of John Edwards in recording the county's ecclesiastical mural painting should be completed. The stained glass, thankfully, has already been splendidly studied and published.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> S. Litherland and K. Nichol, 'Banbury Town Centre', *S. Midlands Archaeol.* 29 (1999), 40-2.

<sup>38</sup> K. Rodwell, *Historic Towns of Oxfordshire* (1975).

<sup>39</sup> P.A. Newton, *The County of Oxford. A Catalogue of Medieval Stained Glass (Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi)*, Great Britain, i (1979).

- Further work on the archaeology of the parish church should be done as opportunity arises when new heating systems, coffee parlours and lavatories are installed. Despite Blair's work at Bampton, Woodeaton, Tackley and Cumnor we are still largely ignorant about the earliest phases of the medieval churches in the county.
- The transition between the end of the Middle Ages and the early modern period needs further study. In particular, what happened to the monastic estates and their buildings after 1530 when the largest revolution in land ownership since the Norman Conquest took place? Also can archaeology contribute to the debate about the gradual revival of the town fortunes of Oxford in the early post-medieval period?