

REVIEWS

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Anne Dodd (ed.), *Oxford Before the University: The Late Saxon and Norman Archaeology of the Thames Crossing, the Defences and the Town*. Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph 17, Oxford University School of Archaeology and Oxford Archaeology, 2003. xviii + 477 pp., 53 plates. £19.95.

This strikingly named book marks a major advance in our understanding of Saxon and Norman Oxford. It joins and subsumes a number of syntheses that had already been published, namely Salter (1936), Hassall (1986), and Blair (1994). Anne Dodd's essay is masterly in its wide-ranging and thought-provoking summary of the complex archaeological evidence. It is, however, curiously placed as chapter 2, near the front of the book: it might have been better located at the end of the volume, after the evidence of the previous chapters.

Oxford is seen as a substantial focus of religious activity in the Bronze Age. Parch marks in the dry summer of 1876 showed a linear spread of round barrows across the dissected turf of the University Parks. Further barrows have been excavated in Logic Lane and close to the junction of Beaumont Street and St John's Street. There were Iron Age farmsteads in Port Meadow, and a middle Iron Age settlement in Whitehouse Road. The Romans, however, avoided the site of the historic city. The nearest proven Roman settlement is in the area of the University Museum and the Science Area. Early Saxon settlement was found to the north and north-east of the medieval town: a cemetery was on the site of the Radcliffe Infirmary and another to the north-east in Kingston Road. It seems that as early as in the 7th century the chain of alluvial islands was being used as a crossing for stock – the original Ox-ford. The theory that Oxford originated as a Mercian bridgehead fortress during the reign of King Offa is mentioned, but no archaeological evidence is cited to support it. The report does not give credence to the theory that a clay bank was built as a causeway across the Thames by Offa: it takes the view that such a deposit was due to natural sedimentation. Blair's hypothesis of a triple dedication of three mid-Saxon churches in a line – St Frideswide's, St Aldate's and St Ebbe's – is seen as more plausible, but as yet there is no proof of an Anglo-Saxon church at St Aldate's. The portion of the cross shaft reused as masonry in the south wall could have been a free-standing cross in the churchyard.

We are on firmer ground following the first documented date in Oxford's history. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 911–921 recorded that Edward the Elder succeeded to Oxford and London, and Oxford is also listed in the *Burghal Hidage*, a list of places which had been fortified as defended centres against Viking raids. Jope's suggestion that the Saxon boundary would follow the line of the later medieval stone wall has been confirmed and Fig. 41 shows the evidence much as he foresaw it. The most informative section across the Saxon defences was at 24A St Michael's Street and here it was found that the burh was defended by an earth rampart, with turf facing and timber lacing, later reinforced by a stone skin. The eastern part of the late Saxon town was a later edition, possibly a response to the threat of renewed Danish attacks. Despite the thirty-eight excavations of the defences there are still major gaps in our knowledge. A southern extension of the wall found branching off south in the Clarendon Square excavations of 1899 has not been proved; nor has the western limit,

presumably masked by the later Norman castle. It is suggested that the digging of the castle moat would have incorporated the burh ditch. If, however, we accept Renn's thesis that St George's tower was late Saxon in date, defending a western river crossing, the Saxon town may well have extended to the river, including the late Saxon occupation found by Jope under the castle mound. Less is known about the gates, but the probability is that they were located on the principal axes and may, as in other Saxon towns such as Wareham and Winchester, have been associated with churches.

H.E. Salter showed astonishing prescience when he predicted in 1936 that Oxford would be found to be laid out on a grid pattern – of which no fewer than fifty-nine observations have since produced evidence. Oxford's streets were metalled at an early stage – a coin embedded in a surface in New Inn Hall Street dates from the reign of Edward the Elder – and constantly maintained. Of particular interest is the large open space created in the centre of the burh, doubtless an assembly point in troubled times or a marketing area in times of peace. It was also the site of the later guildhall. A similar continuity in communal function has been noticed in London, where the Roman amphitheatre was succeeded by the medieval guildhall. Commercial and private interests, however, started to take over even before the Norman Conquest, and the market area began to be riddled with cellars, pits and walls.

A third major theme in this book is the Thames crossing. During the late Saxon and Norman periods there was a succession of stone-paved fords, trestle bridges, and finally a major causeway with stone arches, the Grand Pont of Robert d'Oilly, which conducted the north-south route, one of the main arteries of Anglo-Saxon England, across the River Thames. Excavation has revealed concurrent attempts to stabilise the sides of alluvial islands on the line of the route with wattle, and reclamation of land by refuse dumping. The river provided water for flax retting and buildings involving earth-fast posts and base plates lined the route. Mark Robinson is to be congratulated for the remarkable series of environmental investigations, involving painstaking analysis, which have led to the idealised section of the Thames crossing (Fig. 3.3) and a series of colour maps showing the development of the channels from the final Devensian to the post-Conquest periods (Figs. 3.5–3.10).

When we begin to add flesh to the bare bones of the Saxon burh difficulties arise. Much of the upper levels has been obliterated. Also there have been few opportunities for extensive excavation of inner town areas. Waterlogging is non-existent. Consequently Oxford has not produced late Saxon houses of the range, number or dimensions found at Thetford in London and Coppergate in York. However, it does seem that the frontages of the main axial streets were built up even though the buildings along the street frontage may have been ancillary to the larger buildings that were set well back from the road. Cornmarket, for instance, was lined with rows of cellar pits which provided storage space and possibly craft workshops. The Oxford cellars were lined with walls of wattle and daub or, in the case of larger cellars, with planks and posts. Further cellar pits were found along the High Street and very likely on the site of the Examination Schools. At All Saints Church there was rare evidence for a posthole building dating to the 10th century.

Chapter 6 provides a wealth of information about crafts, industries and trade. The evidence is largely drawn from pit fills and especially cellar pits, while a good deal is derived from the dumping of waste into the channels of the Thames. Among the most interesting conclusions is that a number of sites in High Street and Cornmarket were involved in metal-working. There was also evidence for butchery, leather-working, horn-working and cloth production. We know that Oxford also had a mint, but there is no archaeological evidence for this so far. Pottery finds show that much was being imported from the East Midlands, and there are large quantities of St Neot's ware from sites in the town centre, leading Mellor to suggest that this may point to the existence of Danes in the town with a preference for the

distinctive vessel range of this pottery. The small quantities of pottery from the Continent (France, Belgium and the Rhineland) may have arrived as personal possessions or containers.

This review has concentrated on only some of the major themes but the dense text of this richly illustrated volume has much to add on diet, the environment, the effect of the Norman Conquest on the town, Oxford in Domesday Book, the churches of the late Saxon and Norman Oxford, the kings' houses, and stone houses of the early medieval town and the suburbs. It finally explains how the flourishing town was an important centre of clerical activity, favoured by ecclesiastical councils and church courts; its central position and accessibility were factors in predisposing it to be used by lawyers and other scholars from foreign parts. Its distance from the episcopal centre of Lincoln meant that the young university could grow without undue interference from the bishops, while it was near enough to the centres of royal power to draw on the support of the Crown when it needed to counter the civic authorities.

JOHN STEANE

James Bond, *Monastic Landscapes*. Tempus Publishing, Stroud, 2004. 384pp., 33 colour plates. £25.

In the Middle Ages, up to a quarter of England was held by the monastic institutions. Cumulatively, they were by far the largest landholder in the country. Yet, curiously, relatively little attention has been paid to monastic landscapes. The surviving buildings and monuments have been analysed in detail by architectural historians, and the estate records have been worked over by economic historians, but the landscape evidence has, with one or two notable exceptions, been ignored. In this elegant volume James Bond makes a compelling case for the inclusion of monastic landscapes as an essential element in the repertoire of the landscape historian. Bond's strength is that he adopts a multi-disciplinary approach and looks at all the available sources of evidence – earthworks, archaeology, buildings and documents – and blends them to produce a first-class historical analysis.

The volume begins with an account of the acquisition of estates and the range of agricultural activities associated with medieval monasteries. Apart from extensive arable and livestock farming, these included horse-rearing, market gardening, bee-keeping, cider- and wine-making and specialist herb cultivation. A chapter on monastic farm buildings is particularly thorough in its detailed examination of the wide range of buildings and structures found on the demesne farms. Monastic barns and dovecotes are already well known, but Bond introduces us to sheep cotes, wool houses and cart sheds. He also gives a full account of gardens, orchards and vineyards. Other important activities such as milling, fish-keeping and iron-working are also discussed in the context of the surviving fieldwork evidence. An account of the importance of the monastic involvement in medieval town planning in major monastic towns such as St Albans and Bury St Edmunds is supplemented by an examination of the small plantations at places such as Stow-on-the-Wold, Northleach and Moreton-in-Marsh.

In a chapter on 'Monasteries and Transport', Bond discusses the role of monasteries in the building and upkeep of roads and bridges. He also demonstrates the importance of water management in the monastic economy. This included the canalisation of streams and rivers: for example, Abingdon Abbey was involved in extensive engineering works to divert the River Thames around Abingdon in the 11th and 12th centuries. Bond admits that the

book has been twenty-five years in gestation and includes work he carried out when he was part of the field departments of both Worcestershire and Oxfordshire county museums. The reader benefits from this depth of experience and, in particular, there is a satisfying volume of Oxfordshire material to be found here.

James Bond has been a modest, patient and exemplary historian over several decades. Although always generous in his willingness to share his scholarship, he has never sought the limelight. This book will rightly give him a higher profile, and is a fitting testament to a lifetime devoted to research into the history of the English landscape. James's undergraduate contemporary, Professor Mick Aston, sums up his achievement in the foreword: 'This work is destined to become the seminal work on this topic ... There is much of inspiration for many scholars here.'

TREVOR ROWLEY

Richard Sheppard, *The Gunstones of St Clements*. Magdalen College Oxford, Occasional Paper 6, 2003. x + 81pp., 20 photographs, 1 map. Available from the Home Bursar, Magdalen College, price £11 (inc. p. & p.); £11.45 for overseas orders.

This well-produced short study centres on three generations of a family of senior servants at Magdalen College between 1800 and 1924, all of whom lived in the parish of St Clements and rose high in the college hierarchy as stewards and butlers. The last of them, Richard Gunstone (1840–1924) became nationally famous as 'Gunner', steward of the junior common room. Compton Mackenzie portrayed him as 'Venner', the wise and humorous counsellor of undergraduates, in *Sinister Street*, and the Duke of Windsor, who met him during his stay in the college as Prince of Wales, featured him in his autobiography, *A King's Story*. Journalists wrote about him in two national newspapers, and he performed his party trick, the insertion of a banana into a bottle by suction, for George V himself. His retirement dinner at the Café Royal in London was attended by the prince, the worthies of the college, and an array of peers and knights, who gave him a silver teapot and a cheque for £1,000.

Dr Sheppard has traced the history of the family back to its roots in the parish of St Clements, in the course of which he throws a good deal of light on the area during the early 19th century. The first Gunstone, William I (d. 1842), was an old-fashioned, almost medieval, steward, living from perquisites as much as from salary. His importance in the college was complemented by an equally senior status in the parish, where he was churchwarden and office-holder. He played an important part in the reform of the local charity, Dawson's Trust, and in the decision to move the parish church from its original site near Magdalen Bridge to a new larger building in Marston Road – a process illustrated in the book by some interesting drawings and engravings. In contrast his son, William II (d. 1859), was required by Magdalen College to live entirely from a salary, albeit a generous one, and took little part in parish life, while 'Gunner' himself gave all his time to the college and scarcely involved himself with St Clements at all. This reflected university reform. As colleges grew greatly in size, they needed the services of full-time, specialised servants. In the end this family, like most in Oxford, came to look beyond the colleges for its careers. 'Gunner' educated his two sons not to be servants but, in one case, a bank manager and, in the other, a pharmacist.

The author speculates on why college servants, between about 1850 and 1960, had so much influence on the young men they served. He traces it to a decline in the relationship between dons and students, as dons increasingly married and lived out. Equally, one might

suggest, the university reforms, by giving servants proper wages, made them more reliable and less predatory than they had been in the days of Robert Filcher, the aptly named scout in *The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green* (1853). At the same time the gradual opening of access to the colleges and the gradual breaking down of social barriers enabled a common-room servant like Gunner to come into contact with very large numbers of undergraduates, to have easier relationships with them and to form a focus for them as well. Altogether this well-researched and well-told study makes a valuable contribution to the social history of the university, during the Victorian era and the Indian summer of the Oxford scout in the first half of the 20th century.

NICHOLAS ORME

Visions for Oxford in the 21st Century. Oxford Civic Society, 2003. £12 (+ £2.50 p. & p.) from Oxford Civic Society, 21 Walton Street, Oxford, OX1 2HQ.

This timely commentary produced by the Oxford Civic Society was published in memory and appreciation of one of the editors, Edwin Townsend-Coles, chairman of the Civic Society during the final years of the 20th century. In many ways this volume, in its variety of style and content, truly reflects the impossibility of rationalising the many inherent conflicts that are increasingly apparent in 21st-century Oxford.

As Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, once noted, life can only be understood backwards but has to be lived forwards. It is hoped that Oxford has progressed somewhat in the thousand years since we burnt all the Danes in town, but it is certainly hard to look ahead whilst keeping one eye on the rear-view mirror, and that is what is really now required of Oxford's academics, planners and politicians as we move through the 21st century.

Some elements in this volume are truly fascinating, like the views of the late and much-missed Green city councillor, Mike Woodin, whose pithy comments include the assertion that Oxford should be 'more than a bog-standard city with heritage theme park in the middle of it' and that it has moved from 'a rural economy with a car industry to innovation hot spot'. By comparison, other sections appear rather trite or laboured, even unbalanced, like the all-important discussion on education, research, leisure and recreation which must surely be of growing concern to all. Whether we like it or not Lord Nuffield really did have a dramatic impact on this city in the last century, and the modernised plant that produces the new Mini looks remarkably healthy too, and in my view deserves more recognition. Medical research deservedly gets a mention as does the impressive Said Business School, but what about other developments, including the emerging Islamic culture with its impressive new college and mosques, or activity in the vicinity of the Kassam stadium, or the debate over Broad Street or a new Westgate Centre? In truth Oxford is really a historic city under siege. Perhaps some of these developments are true indicators for the 21st century and reflect rapidly changing cultural tourism opportunities, like the re-creation of the exciting canal basin near Nuffield College or the arrival of the 24-hour city.

But then Oxford has yet to come to terms with the real impact of travel and tourism, including the improvement of facilities for those arriving by coach or train. New transport nodes or the impact of retailing developments in the city are scarcely considered other than in the acknowledgement that Park and Ride is deservedly a success story.

The key question of housing in and around the city somehow gets lost in the demographic discussion. There is discussion of visioning within various communities, and how to harness this, yet growth and change must surely be a key issue for the future. Whether or not to

extend the city into the Green Belt and just how the various communities view this is, in my view, an unavoidable, even if unpalatable, issue for debate in a changing city. Relatively little is said about the reality of community decision making, other than asking for schoolchildren's views, yet surely that is a crucial question in 21st-century Oxford, where town and gown have held an understandably shaky truce since those first riots in 1209, but where external forces are now much more powerful.

There is a lively chapter on designing a better city by the local architect and urban designer Roger Evans, who takes on Bill Bryson's highly critical comments on the western approach to Oxford in *Notes From a Small Island*, and produces some exciting ideas for the future. Jeremy Mogford's look at restoring Oxford's image with pavement cafes is exciting too, although I personally cannot see more space for the car being created. Maureen Christian's anguished yet determined cry to remove the clutter and look more at the balance between the needs of Oxford's folk, both young and old (mobility scooters everywhere, perhaps, not just bikes), and her visitors is challenging, whilst Debbie Dance, of the Oxford Preservation Trust, relays the exciting future for the castle site. All this – along with other prospects for interpreting an increasingly interesting historic landscape whilst simultaneously greening the city and vastly improving Oxford's riverside, as John Thompson implies – makes interesting reading.

The problem is that the city has already moved into the 21st century, and the many laudable suggestions in the final section are likely to get overtaken by powerful forces. Can we really expect to find answers through yet more balanced transport, including a modified guided busway? Can we really expect a greener, more vibrant city to emerge simply after outlining these various suggestions and only then start to look at forecasting the future as this study implies? Can one really do this at this stage, and in isolation, when the city is so linked to its sub-region if not the whole of south-east England? Local Plans, Examinations in Public, and a Regional Plan are much in evidence, and surely a study like this needs to take some cognisance of these?

The truth is that Oxford has always suffered from poor leadership from its planners and politicians as well as deep divisions between town and gown engendered by who owns the land and who controls the resources, and in this increasingly complex world this volume is only a small step in the right direction. A real challenge for us all, perhaps, as we stride into the 21st century.

MIKE BREAKELL