

## Topic Page: [Oxford \(England\)](#)

Definition: **Oxford** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

City and county district in S central England, on the River Thames; the county town of Oxfordshire. Established as a trading centre and fort, it was raided by the Danes in the 10th and 11th centuries. During the English Civil War the city was a Royalist stronghold. Industries: motor vehicles, steel products, electrical goods, printing and publishing. Pop. (2001) 134,248.

Summary Article: **Oxford**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

University city and administrative centre of Oxfordshire in south central England, at the confluence of the rivers Thames (called the Isis around Oxford) and Cherwell, 84 km/52 mi northwest of London; population (2001) 134,250. Oxford University has 36 colleges, the oldest being University College (1249). Industries include steel products, electrical goods, car production, publishing (Oxford University Press, Blackwells), and English language schools. Tourism is important.

**Features** these include Christ Church Cathedral (12th century); the Divinity School and Duke Humphrey's Library (1488); the Sheldonian Theatre, designed by Christopher Wren (1663–69); the Ashmolean Museum (1845); and the 17th-century Bodleian Library. Other museums include the University Museum (1855–60), designed by Benjamin Woodward, the Pitt-Rivers Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art. Features of the colleges include the 14th-century Mob Quad and library at Merton College; the Canterbury Quad (1636) and gardens laid out by 'Capability' Brown at St John's College; and Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* in Keble College. The Bate Collection of Historical Instruments is housed in the Faculty of Music. The Botanic Gardens (laid out in 1621) are the oldest in Britain. On 1 May (May morning) madrigals are sung at the top of Magdalen College tower. St Giles Fair takes place every September.

**History** the town was first occupied in Saxon times as a fording point, and is first mentioned in written records in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 912. The University of Oxford, the oldest in England, is first mentioned in the 12th century, when its growth was encouraged by the influx of English students expelled from Paris in 1167. The fame of the university grew steadily, until by the 14th century it was the equal of any in Europe. As the university grew, there was increasing antagonism between it and the town. Most of the university's buildings were built during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. Oxford's earliest colleges were University College (1249), Balliol (1263), and Merton (1264).

During the Civil War, the university supported the Royalist cause while the city declared for Parliament. Oxford became the headquarters of the king and court in 1642, but yielded to the Parliamentary commander-in-chief, Gen Fairfax, in 1646.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the city had experienced rapid expansion and industrialization, and printing and publishing industries had become firmly established. In the 1920s the English industrial magnate William Morris (1877–1963), later Lord Nuffield, began a motor-car industry at Cowley, just outside the city, which became the headquarters of the Austin-Rover group. The group was sold to German car manufacturer BMW in 1994.

**Early importance** Though the town is now famous chiefly for Oxford University, it was also of some importance prior to the founding of the university. It was situated between Mercia and Wessex, on one of the best of the fords across the Thames. Oxford's importance in early times is shown by the first mention of the city in recorded history, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 912, where it is recorded that in that year Edward, son of Ethelred, took possession 'of London and Oxford and all the lands obedient to those cities'. The town probably made a stubborn resistance to the Norman invaders, and the Domesday Book shows the reprisals which followed. To prevent further revolt the Norman governor, Robert D'Oilly, built huge works to keep the town in submission. The remains of these are to be seen in the castle tower and parts of the churches of St Michael, St Peter in the East, and St Cross. The city again figures prominently in the troubles of Stephen's reign, and in 1142 the Empress Matilda (or Maud) was besieged here, escaping over the river on the ice. But, with minor exceptions, the fortress was not again seriously attacked till the 17th century, after which it ceased to rank as a place of strength and rapidly fell into decay, though D'Oilly's tower has successfully weathered the storms of 800 years, and even now is practically intact. In 1258 the Provisions of Oxford were drawn up here for the guidance of Henry III, and the Montfort rebellion was partly due to these. In the Civil War of Charles I's reign, Oxford figured as the chief royalist centre, enthusiastic in its support of the king.

**20th century expansion** Before 1914 Oxford was regarded solely as a university city and market town, printing being then its only considerable industry. Between the two wars the Oxford motor industry expanded rapidly, and the city's population rose from 67,000 in 1921 to 94,000 in 1938. By 1945 Oxford itself contained a population of 100,000. In 1962 Donnington Bridge, linking east and south Oxford, was opened to motor traffic. The university franchise, whereby Oxford University returned two members to Parliament, was discontinued in 1948.

**City layout and landmarks** The old town of Oxford is built almost entirely in the angle formed by the Cherwell and the Thames, here called the Isis. The four main roads of the town meet at the place known as Carfax (derived from Latin *quadrifurcus*, 'four-forked'). Carfax Tower, said to have been built in the reign of Edward III, may have been built at a much earlier date. It was renovated in 1896, and the curious 'Quarter Boys', relic of the past, restored to use. North from Carfax runs Cornmarket Street, continued further north as Magdalen Street. Where Cornmarket Street runs into Magdalen Street it is crossed by a single thoroughfare with several names, which are (east to west) George Street, Broad Street, Holywell Street, and Longwall Street. It sweeps round in a large curve, and roughly marks the boundaries of the ancient city in that direction. Some fragments of the old wall still remain, notably as part of the wall of Merton Gardens. West from Carfax runs Queen Street, continued as New Road. In Cornmarket Street is St Michael's church, the tower of which dates to the late 11th-century. Not far from it is the church of St Mary Magdalene, an interesting building of various dates. Nearby is the Martyrs' Memorial, a monument commemorating the martyrdom of bishops Ridley, Latimer, and Cranmer (1556), designed by Sir Gilbert Scott. South runs St Aldate's as far as Folly Bridge. Until near the end of the 18th century, an ancient water-tower, known as Friar Bacon's Study, rose over the old bridge.

Eastwards from Carfax runs the High Street, off which is the university church of St Mary the Virgin, built between the 13th and 15th centuries, except for the baroque porch, erected by the Laud's chaplain, Dr Morgan Owen, in 1637. It was to St Mary's that the remains of Amy Robsart, wife of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, were brought from Cumnor in 1560 – Dudley was suspected of murdering her; and from St Mary's pulpit the Anglican priest and religious poet John Keble preached his sermon on

national apostasy in 1833.

High Street passes over Magdalen Bridge, which commands fine views north and south, the former toward the wooded heights of Headington Hill, with St Clement's church (1828) in the middle distance, the latter toward Magdalen College School playing fields and a section of the botanic gardens. In High Street are the examination schools, used in the world wars as a military hospital, designed by Sir Thomas Graham Jackson, who also designed Oxford's 'Bridge of Sighs' (1913–14), connecting the two sections of Hertford College.

Opposite to Hertford is the **Bodleian Library** (1488), most of which was designed by Holt of York. Near it is the Clarendon Building which was for many years the home of the Oxford University Press. Designed by John Vanbrugh, both of its main elevations are stately; that on the south contains a figure of Lord Clarendon, from the proceeds of whose book, the *History of the Rebellion*, the building was erected. The New Bodleian, designed by Giles Gilbert Scott, was opened in 1947.

Christ Church cathedral, the smallest, but one of the most beautiful of English cathedrals, is a good example of English church architecture. The pier arches are early 12th-century work, as are the transepts and choir aisles. Originally the church of St Frideswide's Priory, it was incorporated by the English cleric and politician Thomas Wolsey into his collegiate foundation in the 16th century, and later designated the cathedral of Oxford by Henry VIII. Tom Tower contains the famous bell from which the tower gets its name; the upper part of the tower (1681–82) was designed by Christopher Wren.

Oxford has expanded to take in many suburbs: Osney to the west, Grandpont to the south, St Clement's, Cowley, Headington, and Iffley to the east, and St Giles's, Summertown, and Wolvercote, which form a popular residential district, to the north.

**Schools** There are several well-known schools in Oxford. Magdalen College School was founded in 1480 by William of Waynflete for instruction in grammar; the college choristers, not originally members of the school, have since 1849 been boarded in the master's house at the expense of the college. St Edward's School, founded in 1863, was originally in New Inn Hall Street, being moved to Summertown in 1873. Other schools include Headington School (1915) and Oxford High School for Girls (1875).

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Merton College

Oxford colleges

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