

A Gazetteer of Our Christian Heritage

Oxford: Town and University



Above: Spires of Oxford (1906). Left: Map of southern England showing proximity of Oxford to London.

Oxfordshire.

*Oxfordshire “is a county of river valleys and river views from the broad sweep of the Thames running down from Berks and Bucks to the Oxford Canal.” Susan Hill, *The Illustrated Counties of England**

Oxfordshire Tourist Sites Spanning the Centuries:

Among the earliest remains of occupation in the county are the Neolithic and Bronze Age Rollright Stones not far from Long Compton near Chipping Norton on the borders of Oxfordshire and Warwickshire. They date from the 4th to the 2nd millennium BC.

The Roman general Aulus Plautius arrived here with four legions in 43 AD on orders of the Emperor Claudius to bring Oxfordshire under Roman rule and culture. The North Leigh Roman Villa dates from the first century AD; it was expanded over time and abandoned in the fifth century. The ruins show a handsome mosaic floor. It is an English Heritage Site.

Perhaps the most important tourist site in Oxfordshire is Blenheim Palace built between 1705 and 1722 as a gift to John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough for his victory over the French and Bavarians at the Battle of Blenheim. It replaced a lodge in which the future Queen Elizabeth was a prisoner from 1544-55.

Top: Part of the Rollright Stones: The King’s Men stone circle. Center: Ruins of North Leigh Roman villa, North Leigh Civil Parish. Below: Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, about 8 miles NW of Oxford.



Oxford Beginnings, Tensions Between Town and Gown, Growth of Colleges

The origins of the University were private institutions known as halls under monastic supervision. Some lasted through the 12th to 15th centuries, but could not survive the Reformation. Meanwhile the colleges arose, Merton and Balliol in the 13th century. The latest college founded was by W. R. Kellogg Foundation in 1990, although in 2008, Green Templeton College was formed from the merger of two older institutions. Women were received at Oxford in 1878, but had to wait until 1920 to be permitted to receive degrees. Somerville's alumnae include Rose MacCauley, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margaret Thatcher.

An influx of students, particularly in the 14th century, created a stressful atmosphere and the poor townfolk did not suffer disorderly young men gladly. The Black Death struck Oxfordshire in 1348-1349. The colleges had country places to send their students to safety, but many towns were wiped out. It is not surprising that students clashed with townfolk, especially merchants, and riots were inevitable. The last and most serious was on February 10th, 1355. It is believed that scores of students and townspeople were killed.

Nevertheless, study and teaching survived, and Oxford during the Middle Ages with great scholars such Robert Grosseteste, Duns Scotus Erigena and William of Ockham flourished. Later, in the humanist Renaissance, it nurtured such scholar/teachers as John Colet, who urged Erasmus to produce his Greek New Testament, and more names than space here provides. **Right: 700 years of Oxford Colleges:** Merton and Balliol, both 13th century; Somerville, 1879, and Kellogg College (2008)



Provisions of the Oxford Parliament of 1258

By these provisions a group of barons led by Simon de Montfort, 6th Earl of Leicester forced King Henry III to accept a government of 24 men—12 to be chosen by the king and 12 by the barons.

Sometimes believed to be England's first written constitution it did not last, being overthrown the following year by the provisions of Westminster. Nevertheless it contained the seeds of the English Common Law.

When Parliament Sat at Oxford

1236 Parliament of Merton. Produced Statute of Merton (possibly first English Statute). **1258** "Mad Parliament" (See Oxford Provisions), **1265** De Montfort's Parliament. **1644 and 1645** King Charles' attempt to rally royalist forces. All records were burned before Oxford fell to Cromwell's forces. **1655** During the Great London Plague King Charles II moved family and court to Salisbury, but after a few cases appeared there, he removed them to Oxford. Parliament sat in Oxford for the month of October. The June 29th entry in Pepys Diary notes: "*Up and by Water to White Hall where the Court full of wagons and people ready to go out of towne.*"

Oxford and Religion

The primary studies at Oxford in the Middle Ages were Theology and Philosophy augmented by the study of law, both ecclesiastical and civil. Edmund Alyard wrote to Margaret Paston that her son, Walter, was doing well and that once he received his Bachelor of Arts Degree he would be eligible to go on to read the law. (Paston Letter No. 114). This was the pattern for those students who did not choose the Church as a career. Non-clerical students represented about half Oxford's enrollment in the 15th century. Religion was strongly represented by clergy who were administrators and teachers. Nevertheless, there was a certain freedom to explore new ideas, especially in the natural sciences.

In 1636 William Laud, the University's chancellor, later Archbishop of Canterbury, and foe of Puritanism, set up a new code of statutes for the university and claimed his right to examine the religious conformity of every member of the university. He never did.

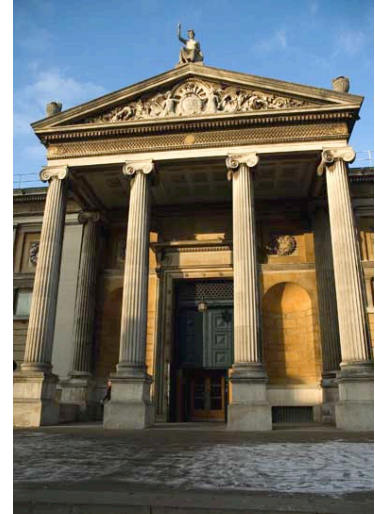
Theologians and philosophers blossomed in the atmosphere of Oxford and got on remarkably well, even though there were disagreements. Some notables were:

John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384) who began his efforts for reform at Oxford. Those students who considered themselves his followers were known as the Lollards and they were the cause of controversy. Archbishop Arundel summoned a Provincial Conference at Oxford to deal with the problem and the students drifted away. Nevertheless, Oxford protected Wycliffe and his followers on the grounds of academic freedom. In 1374 Wycliffe left Oxford to take up residence at the parish of Lutterworth.

William Tyndale, (c.1494-1536), left Oxford in 1515, after receiving his degree.

John Wesley (1703-1791) and his brother Charles (1707-1788) began a movement what would evolve into the Methodist Church. Charles stayed strictly Church of England.

The Tractarian or so-called *Oxford Movement* was sparked by 90 *Tracts for the Times* (1833-1834). An ecclesiastical, rather than a university movement, it had a part in the rejuvenation of the Anglican Church, which until then presented a wide discrepancy between wealthy and poor clergy.



Ashmolean Museum

An Oxford Student Writes to His Mother

"I write to you in this letter the whole of my expenses since I was with you till Easter last past, and also the receipts, reckoning the twenty shillings that I had of you . . . and yet I reckon no expenses since Easter, but as for them they be not great. (Signed) By your sonn and Scoler, Walter Paston. May 19, 1478." [His expenses came to £6.5.5 ³/₄, and he notes that he borrowed 8 shillings from "Master Edmund".] *Paston Letters*, No. 48.

"The truth is that Oxford is a very beautiful city in which it is convenient to segregate a certain number of the young of the nation while they are growing up." *Evelyn Waugh*

"Oxford is the most dangerous place to which young men can be sent." *Anthony Trollope*

"I wonder anybody does anything at Oxford but dream and remember, the place is so beautiful." *William Butler Yeats*

The Sciences at Oxford

Oxford is known for its religious, philosophical and classical studies, but it has explored the sciences from the time of the Franciscans Robert Grosseteste (c.1175-1253) and Roger Bacon (c.1214-1294). Thomas Linacre (d.1524), the great medical scholar and Thomas Sydenham (d. 1689) “the greatest clinician of his age”, taught at Oxford.

Bishop John Wilkins (1614-1672), friend of the freethinking Thomas Hobbes and brother-in-law of Oliver Cromwell, gathered a group of scientists who were the nucleus of the Royal Society. Wilkins taught astronomy at the old Radcliffe observatory now part of Greene Templeton College and unusable because of the urban atmosphere. He also wrote a book, about the moon: *The Discovery of a New World—with a Discourse of the Possibility of Travel to the Same* (1638).

Ernst Chain, one of several scientists escaped from Nazi Germany to Oxford, together with Lord Howard W. Florey and Alexander Fleming received the Nobel Prize in 1945 for the discovery and synthesizing of penicillin.

The University of Oxford can boast of forty-seven Nobel Laureates in various fields. Today, Oxford’s 39 colleges include departments of earth, biological, marine and computer sciences.

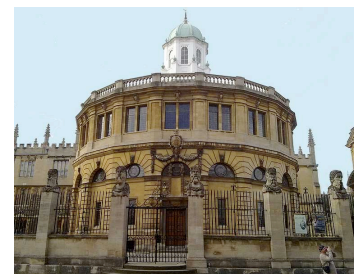
Art, Drama and Music were not an important part of Oxford’s academic history. Today, there is great emphasis on music and music research, and concerts are given at the Sheldonian theatre. Dean Fell was disturbed because of the rowdiness of the students at graduation and degree conferral ceremonies held at the university’s St. Mary the Virgin church. Gilbert Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury commissioned Christopher Wren to build the theater (1664 and 1668) not as a place of entertainment, but as a proper site for academic ceremonies.

Top: Radcliffe Camera, built between 1737 and 1749 as a science library. It is now the reading room of the Bodleian Library. *Below:* The Old Radcliffe Observatory. *Right:* The Sheldonian Theatre.



Legend makes Chaucer an Oxonian, but there is no proof that he attended any college of the University.

However, his son, Lewis, did attend, and it was for him that Chaucer wrote his treatise on the astrolabe. It is believed to be possibly the oldest description in English of a complex scientific instrument. *Shown:* An astrolabe ca. 1326.



Oxford and Oxonians

**“She was not builded out of common stone
But out of all men’s yearning and all prayer
That she might live, eternally our own,
The Spirit’s stronghold—barred against despair.”**

C. S. Lewis, *Oxford*. C. S. Lewis, *Oxford*.

The Oxonian writers we admire all spent time in the great libraries of the University. These have their roots in a small collection of chained books given to the university’s church by Thomas Cobham, bishop of Worcester, in the 14th century. Between 1435 and 1437, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (brother of Henry V) donated his large collection of manuscripts, thus more space was needed than the room provided and the books were moved to the Divinity School. The entire collection was dispersed and most books and manuscripts burned during King Edward VI’s purge against all books that might be tinged with Roman Catholicism. The University could not afford to replace them. Sir Thomas Bodley (1545–1613), a Fellow of Merton College, and other donors, provided the university with 2500 books to found a new library in 1598. It has kept growing ever since.

Perhaps this is the place to mention Oxford’s herculean task of assembling the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) begun in 1884 and first published in ten volumes in 1928. A revised version of twenty volumes was published in 1989. It contains approximately 750,000 words and went online in 2000.

Oxford’s famous students and teachers form a prodigious list of persons in many walks of life, and cannot all be recorded here. More familiar today are people such as Rowan Atkinson, Bill Clinton, T. S. Eliot, Henry Fielding, Antonia Fraser, Graham Greene, Stephen Hawking, T. H. Lawrence, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien. From the 19th century we have Hilaire Belloc, Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson), Percy Bysshe Shelley, Arnold Toynbee. Even earlier we have James Oglethorpe (founder of Georgia), William Penn (founder of Pennsylvania), Adam Smith and Jonathan Swift.

There are so many stories of people and events associated with Oxford’s continuing story that it is necessary to be subjectively selective. What characterizes Oxford as a whole? A. L. Rowse, in *Oxford in the History of England*, wrote:

“Quality is what ultimately counts; this is what Oxford always stood for and will either stand by—or fall—in what future there may be for us.”



Top: Courtyard of the Bodleian Library. *Center:* Brasenose Lane (Bola). *Below:* Sundial pillar at Christ Church College.

***Oxford’s Motto:
“The Lord is My
Light”***