OXFORD: THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY AND THE TOWN

Julian Munby

1. The origins of Oxford

Oxford is situated in the valley of the River Thames, on an ancient river crossing at the confluence with the River Cherwell. The nearest Roman town was at Dorchester, 10 km to the SE, and the Roman road system by-passed Oxford, passing an area to the east of the medieval town where there was an extensive Roman pottery industry.

The gravel terraces of the River Thames had been settled throughout prehistory, with good soils for agriculture and access both to alluvial valleys with their hay meadows, and to poorer soils with woodland or heathland grazing. The site of Oxford, next to a wide curve of the River Thames, and flanked by the River Cherwell, was able to provide very extensive areas of meadow and pasture, which made it suitable as a place of assembly for armies and for national meetings.

By the middle Saxon period Oxford had a village settlement next to the southern river crossing – the ‘Ox – ford’ that later became Grandpont, and a patron saint in the person of St Frideswide, whose church was later to become an Augustinian monastery and is today the cathedral.

The incursions of the Vikings in the later 9th century on England, and especially up the Thames valley were a profound threat to the kingdom of Wessex under Ethelred (AD 866-710) and Alfred (AD 871-899 AD). Oxford was one of a number of towns around Wessex that were created and fortified as strongholds against the Vikings in the reign of Alfred or Edward the Elder (AD 899-925). In 912 Oxford was first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle alongside London, and clearly existed as a town. Topographical and archaeological examination of towns such as Winchester, Oxford and Wallingford have shown the similarities in their rectangular street plan, with central cross-roads, and intra-mural roads. In Oxford the earliest paved streets have been found below the modern streets, with indications of 9th-century dating.

By the time of the Norman Conquest, Oxford had already expanded beyond its primary walls, both with an east and a west suburb, though much of the latter was to disappear under the new castle built by
Robert D’Oilly, the new Norman constable of Oxford. The description of Oxford in Domesday Book (AD 1087) shows that the county landowners had many property interests in the town, and also that the surviving English (and Danish) population had retained a significant amount of property. The free men of the city had a pasture outside the walls (on Port Meadow) that they still hold today.

2. The early university – halls and their distribution

The late Saxon town had already become a prominent regional centre, being used for national councils, and also functioning as a market town for the county of Oxfordshire, and one of the select group of towns with a mint <monnaie>. All of this continued after the conquest, and Oxford was assured of prominence on the Thames valley and Wessex circuit of the peripatetic Norman and Angevin monarchy. The Kings of England regularly travelled out from Windsor round a circuit of royal castles, houses, and monasteries. Oxford was en route from Windsor – Reading – Oxford – Woodstock, where the royal palace (now Blenheim Palace) was adjacent to the royal forest of Wychwood. Oxford castle was a royal castle, but the kings preferred to stay in Beaumont Palace (under the present Beaumont Street), which from the time of Henry I until Edward II was an important royal house, in which both King Richard I (Coeur de lyon) and King John (Sans terre) were born.

Oxford had numerous churches (including the college of St George in the Castle), and Augustinian abbeys of St Frideswide and Oseney, with which schools or scholars were associated. The frequent visits of the peripatetic royal court, together with the peripatetic royal courts of justice (and ecclesiastical courts) meant that lawyers and business men were often to be found in Oxford, and towards the end of the 12th century (c. 1190) there were enough masters and pupils in Oxford scholars for the university to become a reality. The first foreign student was a Frisian Emo c. 1190, and many others are heard of in the 1190s. In 1197 Abbot Samson of Bury St Edmunds was involved in a lawsuit at Oxford, and held a dinner for the monks and invited the masters of the schools at another table. Alexander Nequam was also teaching Theology at Oxford in 1190s. The magister scolarum was first mentioned in 1201, and the university was shaped by the disputes with the townsmen over food and lodgings – on the occasion of its dispersal in 1209 the University of Cambridge came into being (and until the 19th century graduates had