

A history of Botley and the surrounding area

Botley (also previously Botleigh), meaning 'Bota's clearing in the woods', was one of several small settlements to the west of the Thames floodplain settled in Saxon times. Other nearby settlements included Wytham and Seacourt to the north, and North and South Hinksey to the south. Evidence of human presence in the area from the Iron Age on to Saxon times remains in the form of trackways, pits, barrows, hill forts, enclosures and cemeteries, particularly around Wytham Hill.

Away from the river there was the village of Cumnor, which has also had strong ties with Botley over the centuries. Prior to the Dissolution these lands all fell within the domain of Abingdon Abbey, and practically speaking, links with Abingdon were much stronger than with Oxford. One of the reasons for this was the physical location within the northernmost loop of the Thames, as shown on the map below.

The shaded area shows the Thames floodplain in medieval times together with the contours of the surrounding countryside. Routes to the west, north and east were not simple, and required the use of several ferries and bridges. Travel to the south, on the other hand required no crossing of major waterways. On the map Botley is the middle one of seven dots shown on the west bank of the Thames. If you travelled a short distance to the west you passed through a valley between Wytham Hill and Cumnor Hill. This valley widened into the area known as Cumnor Meadow (including Far Moor) before the Thames appeared once more ahead of you.



Map showing the Thames floodplain in medieval times

In those early days Botley was on the edge of three manors and parishes (Seacourt, Cumnor, and North Hinksey), all of which formed part of the Hormer Hundred. The village of Seacourt, located about 1 mile north of Botley, was deserted by around 1440, and the manor and parish were added to Wytham in the 16th Century. Over the past 400 years or so Botley has fallen mainly within the Parish of Cumnor, only becoming part of North Hinksey Parish in 1915. Cumnor Parish was split into 7 administrative 'tythings' for most of this period – Cumnor, Whitley, Swinford, Stroud, Hill End, Botley and Chawley (going clockwise from the south), with the remaining eastern portion of the area in the map above consisting of Wytham, Seacourt and North Hinksey Parishes alongside the Thames. The primary landowner was Abingdon Abbey who effectively controlled the working lives of the majority of inhabitants.

After the Dissolution most of this larger territory was purchased by Sir John Williams of Rycote, and this was passed on to his descendants via Sir Henry Norreys to the Bertie family, who became Earls of Abingdon in 1682. In general these Lords of the Manor continued to live in Rycote or London, with only occasional periods spent at Wytham. Specific landholdings varied over the centuries, but right up to the 20th Century the majority of land remained with the Earl of Abingdon, the other major landowner in later times being the Harcourt family in North Hinksey. On a larger scale it should also be remembered that Botley and the rest of this territory fell within Berkshire, and remained there right up to the year 1974 when it was transferred into Oxfordshire as part of the newly formed Vale of White Horse District, maintaining our historical ties with Abingdon rather than Oxford.



1st Earl of Abingdon - James Bertie



7th Earl of Abingdon – Montagu Arthur Bertie

Saxton’s map of 1574 below clearly shows Botley, surrounded by Cumnor, Wytham, and North Hinksey (named as Laurence Hinksey on this map – it has also been known as Ferry Hinksey, and even Ivy Hinksey over the years). Oxford is shown covering a relatively small area, nestling between the Thames and the Cherwell.



Section of Saxton’s Map of 1574

A tapestry map of Oxfordshire commissioned by the Sheldon family in 1663 (see overleaf) likewise shows Botley nestling between Cumnor, Wytham and Hinksey with the church at Binsey also shown between Botley and Oxford but not named.



The more detailed (if in places inaccurate) Rocque 1760 map below shows in addition Dean Court, and several of the local farms. Dean Court or La Dene as it was initially known, was a hamlet established in medieval times comprising several farms. Both it and Botley Pound (where a pound was used to keep stray animals) remained distinct from Botley until the 20th Century. In fact, other than those people living within Botley, Cumnor, Wytham and North Hinksey most inhabitants of this area from the 16th to 19th Centuries were widely dispersed rather than living in a fully-fledged village or town.



Section of the Rocque Map of 1760

Links with Oxford were not that strong until relatively recently. There was a footpath across the meadows from at least 1210 but a causeway was only built in c.1530. Prior to that traffic heading west out of Oxford would either have veered north west towards Binsey, then over the bridge to Seacourt before heading over Wytham Hill to the Ferry at Swinford, or alternatively headed south west to the ferry at North Hinksey before continuing to Cumnor and beyond. After the causeway was built this became the main route west out of Oxford. There would have been a small but steady flow of traffic passing through Botley but this didn't initially result in any significant expansion, partly due to the effects of disease (primarily outbreaks of the Black Death and smallpox) and war (the prolonged siege of Oxford in the 1640's during the Civil War resulted in a number of local fatalities and damage to Botley Mill when the Parliamentary forces swept round from their base in Marston via Godstow, Wytham and the Hinkseys to the area south of Folly Bridge).

The road was turnpiked in 1767 with improvements made to the bridges at that time. This Botley Turnpike Road passed over a total of seven bridges between the outskirts of Oxford itself and Botley (the last of these being the one next to Botley Mill passing over the Seacourt Stream), hence its alternative name of Seven Bridges Road. Bridges still stand at a number of the original locations but some disappeared following the re-routing of several streams. During 1924 Botley Road was widened along with the remaining bridges but it still looked little more than a large country lane. Over the centuries the meadows to either side of the road were primarily used for grazing cattle and sheep by inhabitants of both Botley and Oxford, with rights shared between them. During the 20th century fairs and circuses also used these large open spaces – the St Giles fair often moved there after closing in Oxford and Butlin's set up a semi-permanent funfair there during WWII.

Four views looking east along Botley Road



1781 from Bulstake Bridge



1851 from Seven Arches Bridge
(no longer standing, near Lamarsh Road)



April 1903 from west of Binsey Lane



1920's from Botley Bridge with 10mph sign

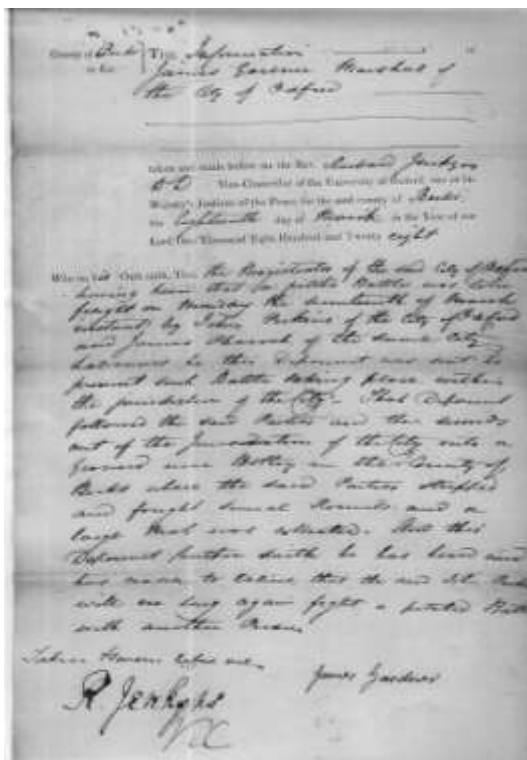
Oxford's earlier inhabitants probably viewed Botley as a slightly lawless place which you wouldn't necessarily want to live in. In 1784 the Bath coach was held up at the bottom of Cumnor Hill and the passengers robbed of £28. Highwaymen were also a regular hazard along the length of the Botley causeway. At least one criminal was buried in Botley Road as well, namely Thomas Haddon, who was arrested in February 1782 for robbing the Banbury Mail, and then condemned to death at the Oxford Assizes 5 months later. Before the sentence could be carried out, however, he hung himself from an iron bar in the window of his cell using his sheets, and because he was a suicide they interred his body in the Public Highway without a coffin. At that time the corpses of criminals were often taken for dissection after their execution, but friends of Thomas Haddon helped him avoid that fate by ripping open his belly and filling it with unslaked lime as soon as he had been thrown into the grave. Another member of the same criminal gang as Thomas Haddon was called William Best, and he also had a tenuous link with Botley. Like Haddon he was arrested in 1782, but unlike him he escaped from Oxford Castle with a third gang member in July of that year. Unfortunately for Best he was recaptured two weeks later – in Botley – and then his revised sentence of transportation for life was finally carried out.

Only one previous inhabitant of Botley is definitely known to have been executed for their crime, however, namely Alice Carpenter who, on 4th May 1680, was hanged at Green Ditch in Oxford for infanticide after killing her bastard child. Green Ditch was located in North Oxford where St. Margaret's Road now runs between Banbury and Woodstock Road, and it was one of three places used for hangings in the Oxford area, the other two being Oxford Castle, and Holywell for individuals connected to the University.

In 1828 another example of lawlessness around Botley occurred when a 'Pitched Battle of Several Rounds' was fought on 'Grounds near to Botley'. In effect this 'Battle' was a simple bare-knuckle fight between two opponents, probably for money, similar to that shown below. A Marshal of Oxford City called James Gardner gave testimony under oath (also shown below) following which one of the pugilists called John Perkins was fined a massive £40 and ordered to keep the peace for 12 calendar months.



A typical early 19th Century bare-knuckle boxing match



Transcription of main areas of text:

The Information of James Gardner Marshal of the City of Oxford

..... Who on his oath saith, That the Magistrates of the said City of Oxford having heard that a pitched Battle was to be fought on Monday the seventeenth of March instant by John Perkins of the City of Oxford and James Pharoah ? of the same City. Laborious? he this Deponent* was sent to prevent such Battle taking place within the jurisdiction of the City – That Deponent* followed the said Parties and their seconds out of the jurisdiction of the City into a Ground near Botley in the County of Berks where the said Parties stripped and fought several Rounds and a large Mob was collected. And this Deponent* further saith he has heard and has reason to believe that the said John Perkins will ere long again fight a pitched Battle with another Person.

* Deponent = someone who gives testimony under oath

The testimony under oath of James Gardner, Marshal of the City of Oxford and transcription

Being outside the Oxford City boundary (the Seacourt Stream, a.k.a. the Shire Lacce) and away from the jurisdiction of the University, Botley became a popular drinking place for students, as well as many of the townfolk, and it gained a reputation for having good quality ale. One 17th Century ballad stated:

‘Give a scholar of Oxford a pot of sixteen
And put him to prove that an ape hath no tail
And sixteen times better his wit will be seen
If you fetch him from Botley a pot of good ale’

Certainly the number of public houses in and around Botley up to the 19th Century was excessive for the number of inhabitants. In earlier days alehouses were run by Yeoman Farmers offering home brewed beer. Anthony Wood recorded in his diary in 1664 that he saw a comet or ‘blazing star’ from the ‘Botley Causey’ on the way back to Oxford from Pinnock’s Alehouse, so perhaps it was strong stuff, however other people saw it without the help of alcohol so it probably wasn’t just a hallucination. Wood also saw another comet over Botley in 1680 but neither of these were the famous Halley’s Comet which only passed in 1682.

Farming dominated the whole area, with the land mainly used to grow wheat, or as pasture for dairy cattle and sheep, although Tilbury Farm briefly became a stud farm from c.1900. Many of the fields had descriptive names such as Plough Prince and Long Prince Mead.

By the start of the 20th Century Oxford had begun to expand, but in Botley there were only a few ‘villas’ appearing on Cumnor Hill, together with the substantial ‘Oaken Holt’ off Eynsham Road, originally built by Sir Willam Wilson Hunter in 1891 as his personal retirement home. During the 20th Century it was taken over by the Westminster Bank for use as a headquarters and a training centre before being used as a Buddhist Centre and finally coming virtually full circle to operate in its current guise as a Nursing Home.

Tenant farmers worked lands owned by the Earl of Abingdon and the Harcourt Family, with agriculture still the main sector of employment, (but for less than 50% of the locals in 1900 vs. c.80% in 1850). In the area surrounding the current Elms Parade were three farms established in medieval times – Elms Farm (Nutbeams), Seacourt Farm and Tilbury Farm. To the west were Dean Court, Busby’s and Stimpson’s Farms (and up to the early 19th Century Owlington Farm, situated around the area of the current allotments, whose lands were subsequently passed on to Tilbury Farm). To the south were Hutchcomb’s Farm on Cumnor Hill, Sweatman’s Farm on Harcourt Hill, and Manor Farm in North Hinksey.

During the latter part of the 19th Century and the early years of the 20th Century the 7th Earl of Abingdon ran into a severe financial crisis, and so over a period of twenty to thirty years he sold off a large proportion of his lands in the Botley and Wytham area. Similarly the Harcourt family began selling off land in North Hinksey at around the same time. Although initially very little happened because of the effects of the First World War in the long term it resulted in developers moving in to build houses in ever increasing numbers, and gradually over the next hundred years Botley and the surrounding area took shape in the form that we know it today.