

OXFORD'S HIDDEN (CATHOLIC) HISTORY

Mythical Origins

When the high festival of Whitsuntide began to draw nigh, Arthur, filled with exceeding great joy at having achieved so great success, was fain to hold high court, and to set the crown of the kingdom upon his head, to convene the Kings and Dukes that were his vassals to the festival so that he might the more worshipfully celebrate the same, and renew his peace more firmly amongst his barons. [...] Messengers were sent forth into the divers kingdoms, and all that owed allegiance throughout the Gauls and the neighbour islands were invited unto the court. Came accordingly [...] Boso of Ridoc, that is Oxford...

– Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1095-c.1155) *History of the Kings of Britain*, chapter xii.

It is related that amongst the warlike Trojans, when with their leader Brutus they triumphantly seized upon the island, then called Albion, next Britain, and lastly England, certain Philosophers came and chose a suitable place of habitation in this island, on which the Philosophers who had been Greek bestowed a name which they have left behind them as a record of their presence, and which exists to the present day, that is to say, Grekelade. Not far from this it is known that the town of Oxford is situated, which because of the presence of the rivers, meadows and woods adjoining it, antiquity formerly named Bellesitum; afterwards the Saxon people named it Oxford from a certain neighbouring ford so called, and selected it as a place of study.

– *Historiola of Oxford* from the Chancellor or Commissary's Book (mid 14th century).

About the time that Samuel the servant of God was judge in Judea, King Magdan had two sons; that is to say Mempricius and Malun. The younger of the two having been treacherously killed by the elder, he left the kingdom to the fratricide. He (Mempricius) was a man full of envy and cruelty [...] At length, in the twentieth year of his reign, he was surrounded by a large pack of very savage wolves, and being torn and devoured by them, ended his existence in a horrible manner. Nothing good is related of him except that he begot an honest son and heir by name Ebrancus, and built one noble city which he called from his own name Caer-Memre, but which afterwards, in course of time, was called Bellisitum, then Caerbossa, at length Ridohen, and last of all Oxonia, or by the Saxons Oxenfordia. [...] Many are of the opinion that the University of Greklad was transferred [here] while the Britons ruled in the island; and the church of S. Giles, which was dedicated under the name of some other saint, was the place for the creation of graduates, as now is the Church of S. Mary which is within the walls. Of this noble University I shall touch more fully when I come to the times of King Alfred.

–John Rous (1411/20-1492), *History of the Kings of England*.

St Frideswide

Adaptation of the Longer and Shorter Medieval Lives:

St Frideswide was born in Oxford, to King Didan and Sefreth. She was a bright and beloved child, who took to fasting on barley bread and cold water. She asked her father to allow her to become a nun in the church of St Mary, which he had founded: he agreed, and Bishop Edgar of Lincoln formally established the convent with Frideswide and twelve others. She was tempted by a devil but resisted. After her father died, his successor Algar wanted to marry her. When she refused him, Algar tried to abduct her.

Longer Version | She fled and found a ship sent by God which took her to Bampton. Algar searched for her, but the people would not tell him where she was, and he was struck blind. Later, nuns at Binsey complained of having to go a long way to fetch water. At Frideswide's prayer, a well sprung up with healing properties.

Shorter Version | She hid outside Oxford at Binsey. On Algar's approach, she returned to Oxford. He followed her back but, just outside the city gates, fell from his horse and broke his neck.

She remained abbess of the Oxford monastery, where she was later buried, until her death in 735.

Friar Bacon and the Brazen Head



Roger Bacon (c.1219/20-c.1292), Franciscan friar, scholar, alchemist, polymath. This picture shows 'Friar Bacon's Study', on the left (city side) of Folly Bridge. It was demolished in the 1700s.

"Fryer Bacon reading one day of the many conquests of England, bethought himselfe how hee might keepe it hereafter from the like conquests, and so make himselfe famous hereafter to all posterities: this (after great study) hee found could be no way so well done as one; which was to make a head of Brasse, and if he could make this head to speake (and heare it when it speakes) then might hee be able to wall all England about with Brasse. To this purpose hee got one Fryer Bungey to assist him, who was a great Scholler and a Magician, (but not to bee compared to Fryer Bacon) these two with great study and paines so framed a head of Brasse, that in the inward parts thereof there was all things (like as is in a naturall mans head): this being done: they were as farre from perfection of the worke as they were before, for they knew not how to give those parts that they had made motion, without which it was impossible that it should speake: many bookes they read, but yet could not finde out any hope of what they sought, so that at the last they concluded to raise a spirit, and to know of him that which they could not attaine to by their owne studies. To do this they prepared all things ready and went one Evening to a Wood thereby, and after many ceremonies used, they spake the words of coniuration, which the Devill straight obeyed and appeared unto them, asking what they would? Know, said Fryer Bacon, that wee have made an artificall head of Brasse, which wee would have to speake, to the furtherance of which wee have raised thee, and being raised, wee will here keepe thee, unlesse thou tell to us the way and manner how to make this Head to speake. The Devill told him that he had not that power of himselfe: beginner of lyes (said Fryer Bacon) I know that thou dost dissemble, and therefore tell it us quickly, or else wee will here bind thee to remaine during our pleasures. At these threatnings the Devill consented to doe it, and told them, that with a continuall fume of the six hottest Simples it should have motion, and in one month space speake; the Time of the moneth or day hee knew not: also hee told them, that if they heard it not before it had done speaking, all their labour should be lost: they being satisfied, licensed the Spirit for to depart.

Then went these two learned Fryers home againe, and prepared the Simples ready, and made the fume, and with continuall watching attended when this Brasen head would speake: thus watched they for three weekes without any rest, so that they were so weary and sleepy, that they could not any longer refraine from rest: then called Fryer Bacon his man Miles [and] intreated Miles that he would watch whilest that they sleep, and call them if the Head speake. Feare not, good Master (said Miles) I will not sleepe, but harken and attend upon the head, and if it doe chance to speake, I will call you: therefore I pray take you both your rests and let mee alone for watching this head. After Fryer Bacon had given him a great charge: The second time, Fryer Bungey and he went to sleepe, and left Miles alone to watch the Brasen head: Miles, to keepe him from sleeping, got a Tabor and Pipe, and being merry disposed, sung [a] Song to a Northern tune. [The Head says: Time was; and Time is; and Miles continues to sing, and to taunt the Head for its taciturnity].



Then the Brazen-head spake againe these words; Time is past: and therewith fell downe, and presently followed a terrible noyse, with strange flashes of fire, so that Miles was halfe dead with feare: At this noyse the two Fryers awaked, and wondred to see the whole roome so full of smoake, but that being banished they might perceiue the Brazen-head broken and lying on the ground: at this sight they grieved, and called Miles to know how this came. Miles halfe dead with feare, said that it fell downe of it selfe, and that with the noyse and fire that followed he was almost frighted out of his wits: Fryer Bacon asked him if hee did not speake? yes (quoth Miles) it spake, but to no purpose. [...]Alas (said Miles) I thought he would have told me some long Tale, and then I purposed to have called you: then halfe an houre after he cried Time is past, and made such a noyse, that hee hath waked you himselfe mee thinkes. At this Fryer Bacon was in such a rage, that hee would have beaten his man, but he was restrained by Bungey: but nevertheless for his punishment he with his Art struck him dumbe in one whole months space. Thus that great worke of these learned Fryers was overthrowne (to their great griefes) by this simple fellow.”

--The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon (Anon., 16th century).

Two Catholic Cathedrals

The Diocese of Oxford was created by letters patent from Henry VIII on 1 September 1542, out of part of the Diocese of Lincoln. Osney Abbey was designated the original cathedral, but in 1545 this was changed to St Frideswide's which became Christ Church Cathedral.



The first bishop was Robert King (d.1558) was a Cistercian, suffragan bishop of Lincoln, and abbot of Osney. King was initially bishop of Thame and Osney, until the following year when the diocese of Oxford was formed. The old priory of St Frideswide became the cathedral. On King's death, Mary I wanted Thomas Goldwell, bishop of St Asaph, to succeed him, but died before the appointment could be finalised. Goldwell gave Cardinal Pole the last rites: he had been Pole's chaplain, and later assisted in his episcopal consecration. Subsequently, the authorities alleged that, since he had been nominated to Oxford, he was no longer bishop of St Asaph, but that as he had not kissed hands (done homage) for Oxford, he was not its bishop either. He would not do this and swear the Oath of Supremacy. In June 1559 he decided to leave England. Although the ports were being watched for him, he succeeded in making his escape. He was the only English bishop at the council of Trent, and in 1563 was appointed vicar-general to St Charles Borromeo, archbishop of Milan. Later, he returned to

Rome, where he is known to have ordained the famous Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria as a priest. In 1580, in spite of his advanced age, he set out for England at the head of the mission which included Campion and Persons, but he was taken ill at Reims and obliged to return to Rome. He died in Rome in 1585.

The Chapel of St Ignatius, St Clement's

In 1793 Father Charles Leslie, S.J., decided to move the Jesuit mission which had existed at Waterperry since the early 17th century to a less secluded and more accessible site; a move which could safely be made after the mitigation of the penal laws. Conditions in Oxford were considered to be propitious; the university had recently welcomed refugee priests from France and had conferred degrees upon Roman Catholics. The choice of St. Clement's rather than the city itself was probably determined by motives of discretion and economy; yet the parish had some sort of Roman Catholic tradition associated, perhaps, with the occasional residence of foreign craftsmen. In 1603–4 two yeomen, one, Robert Atkyns, described as 'musicus', were fined for recusancy, and another in 1625. There were anti-popish demonstrations there in 1678 and 1688, when a cross of paper and sticks was burnt and windows smashed. Hearne speaks of 'an honest Roman Catholic blacksmith' in 1725; in 1767 there was a Roman Catholic staymaker and a Roman Catholic shoemaker. The transfer of the Jesuit mission did not bring an

appreciable increase in the Roman Catholic population of St. Clement's, for the congregation of 160 was drawn from Roman Catholic families throughout the county. Father Charles Leslie was a notable figure widely known outside the Roman Catholic community. 'By his amiable manner and classical acquirements he conciliated the respect and esteem of many members of the University.'



The chapel of St. Ignatius, 'a solemn and handsome edifice decorated in a style of elegant simplicity', was built on a site at the south-east end of St. Clement's High Street. It measured 65 ft. by 30 ft. and cost £994 3s. 4d. A burial ground was consecrated in 1798. Although it lost its importance as the centre of Roman Catholicism in Oxford after the building of St. Aloysius's church in 1875, the building remained in use as a school and is still standing.



Timeline

Pre-history

Activity from the Mesolithic period onwards, attested by archaeological finds across the city.

Bronze Age burials at locations including The Hamel, Radcliffe Infirmary, Banbury Road and several university buildings.

700-1000

727 – Dida of Eynsham establishes a nunnery with Frideswide, perhaps his daughter, as abbess.

911 – First mention of Oxford, as Oxnaforda, under the authority of Edward the Elder, King of Wessex.

979 – Vikings burn Oxford (for the first of several times).

1000-1200

1002 – 13 November: St. Brice's Day massacre of Vikings: Monastery of St Frideswide destroyed.

c. 1085 – First stone bridge over the River Thames at Grandpont (modern-day Folly Bridge) is built by D'Oyly.

1096 – Academic teaching at Oxford is recorded.

1122 Priory of St Frideswide established.

1129 – Osney Abbey established as a priory by Robert D'Oyly the younger. It is raised to abbey status in 1154.

1142 – The Anarchy King Stephen captures Oxford and besieges Matilda inside the castle. December: Matilda escapes from Oxford Castle across the snow in a white cape for camouflage.

1200-1300

1209 – Dissatisfied students from Oxford found the University of Cambridge.

1214 – 20 June: Papal ordinance defines the rights of the scholars at the University of Oxford.

1221 – 15 August: The Dominican Order founds Blackfriars.

1224 – c. October: Franciscans led by Agnellus of Pisa found the first Greyfriars in Oxford.

Between c. 1236 and 1272 – St Edmund Hall established.

By 1252 – University Congregation meeting in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin.

1264 14 September: Walter de Merton formally completes the foundation of the House of Scholars of Merton.

1300-1400

1348 – November: Black Death reaches Oxford, continuing until June 1349.

1355 – 10 February: St Scholastica Day riot breaks out, leaving 63 scholars and perhaps 30 locals dead in two days

1381 – John Wycliffe prohibited from teaching in the university for heresy.

1400-1500

1435 – St Mary's College is founded in the university for Augustinians.

1437 – St Bernard's College is founded in the university for Cistercians.

1478 17 December: First book printed in Oxford.

1488 – The university's Divinity School is completed with Duke Humfrey's Library on the upper floor.

1500-1600

1534 – 3 November–18 December: The Reformation Parliament passes the Act of Supremacy establishing Henry VIII as supreme head of the Church of England. All colleges and similar institutions are obliged to acknowledge this.

1536-39 Rewley Abbey, Greyfriars, Gloucester College, Osney Abbey and Godstow dissolved.

1542 – Diocese of Oxford created. In September, Osney Abbey becomes the seat of the new Bishop of Oxford, the last abbot, Robert King, becoming the first bishop. This gives the town of Oxford city status. The see is transferred to King Henry VIII's College in June 1544.

1555 St John's College founded by merchant Sir Thomas White on the site of St Bernard's College to teach Catholic theology; Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley are taken from the Bocardo Prison and burned at the stake in Broad Street following trial in the University Church.

1556 – 21 March: The third of the Oxford martyrs, Thomas Cranmer, deposed Archbishop of Canterbury, is burned at the stake for treason[26] having professed his faith at St Mary's.

1581 Undergraduates are required to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. 27 June: Copies of Edmund Campion's *Decem Rationes*, arguments against the validity of the Anglican Church, printed clandestinely at Stonor Park, are found on the benches of the University Church.

1589 5 July: Catholic priests George Nichols and Richard Yaxley, together with two helpers, are hanged in Holywell, having been arrested for celebrating mass at the Catherine Wheel inn in Magdalen Street East.

1600-1700

1603 – Antiquary William Camden publishes an edition of early British histories in which he inserts into Asser's *Life of King Alfred* a claim that Alfred the Great founded the University of Oxford in 886.

1610 9 November: Catholic priest George Napper is hanged at the Castle for celebrating mass.

1642 – 29 October: King Charles I enters Oxford and establishes his court at Christ Church.

1654 First Quaker preachers in Oxford.

By 1656 – Baptist meeting established.

1677 Elias Ashmole gifts the collection that begins the Ashmolean Museum to the university.

1687 – 4 September: King James II tries to expel the Fellows of Magdalen College for refusing to Catholicise their institution and on 25 October forcibly installs Samuel Parker (bishop of Oxford) as college President. Anti-Catholic riots ensue.

1700-1800

1715 – 28–29 May: Riots in support of Jacobitism, partly directed against Dissenters.

1729 – Charles Wesley and his brother John set up the Holy Club, origin of Methodism.

1733 Handel performs a series of concerts in Oxford.

1800-1900

1828 14 March: J. H. Newman, Fellow of Oriel, succeeds Edward Hawkins as Anglican vicar of the newly-refitted University Church of St Mary the Virgin, including pastoral care of Littlemore.

1837 – 26 March: J. H. Newman introduces the weekly celebration of communion at the University Church.

1842 February: J. H. Newman withdraws to Littlemore and establishes a semi-monastic community (leased 29 September 1841), "the house of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Littlemore". He preaches his last Anglican sermon on 22 September 1843 and takes his last Anglican communion 2 weeks later.

1845 9 October: J. H. Newman is received into the Roman Catholic church at his college at Littlemore by Dominic Barberi. On 23 February 1846 he spends his last night in Oxford until 1878 at the Radcliffe Observatory.

1875 Church of St Aloysius Gonzaga established by Jesuits in Woodstock Road, designed by Joseph Hansom.

1896 Francis Fortescue Urquhart becomes the first Roman Catholic teaching fellow in the university (at Balliol) since the Reformation.

