

TRAVEL

In Search of Oxford

By JENNIFER MOSES MARCH 21, 2014

When I took off in late October to join my husband, a law professor on sabbatical in Oxford, I thought I knew what to expect, thanks to all the books and movies that have been set in this ridiculously pretty, medieval town in south central England. Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited" — the 1945 novel that grapples with the allure of aristocracy and privilege — had prepared me for the sight of elegant undergrads romping about, perhaps carrying bottles of Champagne, on the vast green meadows of Christ Church college. Colin Dexter's "Inspector Morse" series (both the books and the television show) had warned me about the dangers of tripping over dead bodies. And that very last bit of the recent film "An Education" prepared me for flocks of students riding bicycles on their way to conquer DNA analysis on the one hand and the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism on the other.

Oxford has in fact inspired innumerable literary and cinematic works, and it's easy to see why: The place is a many-layered confection of history, aspiration, ambition, class, elegance, yearning, wealth, trade and all-things-poetic, including poetry-spouting students and bona fide poets (among them, Philip Larkin, W. H. Auden and John Betjeman). But it's also a working city filled with people who have nothing to do with lofty language — though the vision of the 19th-century poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold is, in fact, ubiquitous: "And that sweet city with her dreaming spires,/ She needs not June for beauty's heightening ..."

Perhaps the best way to get a handle on the whole megillah is atop the

University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, with its 14th-century spire, right smack dab in the middle of the action, on High Street at Radcliffe Square. From here you can take it all in: the town's location in the Thames Valley, the silky silver river itself (also locally called the Isis, especially in regard to rowing), the site of the original "oxen ford" at Folly Bridge, the rail lines, the gardens and meadows, the canals and, of course, the 38 separate colleges, with their quadrangles, porter's lodges, towers and glowing facades, that together make up the University of Oxford.

Yes, the university is everywhere, and it's reason enough for the town to exist, because without the university — which started out as a collection of medieval monastic communities and evolved into "academic halls" before giving birth to the first colleges — there would be no city walls (the remnants of which can still be seen in glimpses), no shopping streets, no Victorian extravaganzas of turrets and gables and, certainly, no pubs or flocks of speeding, zigzagging bicyclists rushing off to their next lectures.

Nor would there be so much confusion (at least among Americans) about just what this place is, anyhow, because unlike most universities, Oxford (and its kissing cousin, Cambridge) operates on a hybrid system composed of the separate colleges and the university as a whole. In fact, the system is so complex and status-driven that it would take a colonial like me a lifetime to get it right.

But just because I wasn't an insider did not mean that the place wasn't ready and willing to be explored. Which meant wheels of my own, specifically a sturdy three-speed equipped with mudguards, which I rented from a shop on Cowley Road.

It may not be an obvious place to start, but I began my own meandering exploration of all-things-Oxford in Iffley Village, once a separate entity but now within the city limits. I wanted to get a sense of what Oxford may have been like before it became synonymous with the University of Oxford, and Iffley — with its typically English mix of thatched-roof and half-timbered houses with names like Grist Cottage and the Malt House, centuries-old stone walls, winding lanes, fields, geese and

late-Victorian terrace houses — does just that.

On just about any lane or meadow in Iffley you can imagine yourself in medieval Oxford, its fortified center surrounded by the watery stew that was once the marshy convergence of the Thames and the River Cherwell. In those days, Oxford was a north-south, east-west trading hub with its center, to this day, at Carfax Tower, about a five-minute walk uphill from the Thames. (“Carfax” is derived from the French *carrefour*, or in English, “crossroads.”)

If it’s just post-Norman Conquest you’re after, St. Mary the Virgin is in itself worth the field trip to Iffley. Sitting amid an ancient graveyard, the church is very much in use, its pews full on Sunday mornings. With its list of “incumbents” dating all the way back to Oliver of 1170, its original square stone font, its soaring roof held up by locally quarried stone, St. Mary the Virgin is the kind of place that stuns you into reverent silence.

Afterward you can get a pint and fish and chips at the Prince of Wales on Church Way (a dog-and-child-friendly traditional pub that is a favorite of my husband’s) or, if your stomach can wait, cross the Thames at the elevated crossing at Iffley Lock and walk upstream on the towpath to the Isis Farmhouse, a popular watering-and-grazing spot that serves basic pub fare — casseroles, mash, roasts, stews and homemade baked goods — with tables inside by the fire or outside overlooking the water. If you’re lucky you might see college rowing teams being put through their paces. Also ducks and swans, moored houseboats and, depending on the season, either a lot of rain or a lot of wildflowers.

As I was in the neighborhood in late fall, I had no choice: If I wanted to wander by bike, I had to be prepared for the damp. And what, after all, is a little rain? You will notice that the natives don’t seem to mind it, and go tramping around in all kinds of weather, their dogs bounding ahead of them and their lower extremities encased in muddy Wellies.

And here they are, the intrepid English, farther up the river, in the vast Port Meadow just northwest of the center of Oxford, a place used continuously for grazing for over 1,000 years, and where, to this day,

horses and cows outnumber *Homo sapiens*. You can wander the meadow or continue on the footpath, over the bridge, past boathouses and through various gates and, if you're game, down a path on the left to the village of Binsey, with its Treacle Well, which the Dormouse described in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

Farther on are the grassy remains of the medieval Godstow Abbey, where I stopped to imagine it filled with Benedictine nuns. Following on, I at last came to one of Inspector Morse's favorite watering holes, the Trout in Wolvercote, where I sat under a heated umbrella on the terrace overlooking the river, and had hot chocolate and a vegetable pie, admiring, all the while, the ducks and geese and the sturdy clientele enjoying their Sunday outings.

By the time I had finished, the shadows were growing long, so instead of returning the way I had come I high-tailed it back into town on the east side of the river, first by road and then along the stretch of the canal that runs roughly parallel with Woodstock Road and divides Oxford's northern neighborhoods from acres of watery meadowlands, and which gave me the back-end view of gardens, alleys and steep canalside houses.

A note for those inclined to fashionable footwear: Don't even think about it. And that's because in Oxford, these boots are made for walking: through the winding streets, over cobblestones, up battlements and along all kinds of footpaths, including the towpath that lines the 78-mile-long canal, which once served as part of a trade link between the Midlands and London. (The canal is part of the 2,000 miles of the Canal & River Trust.) Now the canal forms the western boundary of North Oxford's Jericho section — where Jude's three children come to a terrible end in "Jude the Obscure" — located at that time outside the city wall. Today the area is one of the trendiest in Oxfordshire, where one night my husband and I had a good if unremarkable dinner surrounded mainly by undergrads and their parents at the très chic Brasserie Blanc.

With the 19th-century Oxford University Press spreading itself out along north-south Walton Street like some great winged beast, Jericho

gives way to cafes, bookstores and residential blocks of graceful Victorian and Edwardian houses, with other styles — neo-Georgian, late Gothic, Arts and Crafts — sprinkled in. But some 224 years ago when the canal arrived, it was a place of pestilence and poverty, where workers typically lived in “two up, two down” houses, which can still be seen on Cranham Street, though today they are far more likely to house college professors or publishers than laborers.

If you’re in the mood for more Victorian slums, you can’t do any better than the small island enclave of Osney, along the river and separated from the rest of Oxford by narrow backwaters, about a 15-minute walk from the city center. Built for railroad workers in the mid-19th century, today Osney is home to tidy two-story terraced cottages laid out in the original planned grid, every inch of it considerably more costly than in yesteryear.

Another Oxford neighborhood that I like — in part for its cheap ethnic restaurants — is Cowley on the city’s southeast flank. Here, just a mile or so from Carfax, you will find a diverse neighborhood of primarily smallish early-20th-century houses built for the lower-middle and artisan classes. That was when William Morris Limited began to mass produce cars in what had once been Oxford Military College, on the Oxford Ring Road in Cowley, creating a city of two halves that exists to this day (and is captured by the saying that “Oxford is the left bank of Cowley”). Here are storefronts boasting everything from Polish and halal specialty foods to ecclesiastical garb (who knows when you might need a new cassock or verger’s gown?) and, of course, pubs.

And then there are the glories of Oxford central, the place of walled gardens and walled-off colleges, medieval lanes, ancient churches, glorious vistas, music, museums, libraries and lecture halls. The Botanic Garden alone, the oldest in the country, could absorb an entire day, and even in November intoxicated me with its grasses, dahlias, salvias, English yews and something called “purple bush.”

Riches? Oxford has them, starting with the Ashmolean Museum. This is what I like about it: 1. It’s free. 2. You can leave your stuff in a locker

downstairs for £1, but you get your money back when you return the key.

3. The museum is neither small nor large, so you don't get a museum hangover. 4. The collection.

And what a collection, from the silver and gold dinnerware that Corpus Christi College hid from Cromwell, to contemporary art and the pre-Raphaelites. It's enough to make you just stand there, blinking, trying to decide where to start. I started on the second floor in an orientation gallery, which explains the cultural explosion that happened when east-west trading routes were established in early modernity. But no sooner had I wandered one room away, into English ceramics, than I was transfixed, a deer in the headlights. Here was a fantasyland of afternoon tea, with seemingly every type of English pattern and plate ever devised, decorated with astonishingly lifelike painted flowers of rose and rose gold, pale yellow and radiant turquoise, with butterflies and climbing vines and birds. But there was more — much, much more — including the wares of Japan, China, Italy and the Netherlands, Delftware, Greek and Roman sculpture, textiles and a whole room of Pissarro and his descendants.

From the Ashmolean, it's just a few steps to everything else you may want to see in Oxford, including Blackwell's, at 51 Broad Street, perhaps England's most famous bookstore, with its gazillions of books (new as well as secondhand). From there, it's your proverbial hop, skip and jump to the Bodleian Library, which isn't anything at all like the library at the college I went to. It was in the Bodleian's original core, completed in 1488, that the first university classroom appeared independent of monastic organization. Here, divinity students were asked questions like: "How many angels live in Heaven?" under the lierne vaulted ceiling adorned with more than 400 sculptured figures. Above is Duke Humfrey's Library, added some years later, where the university's original collection of books is kept, literally under lock and key. Airport paperbacks these aren't, but rather, individually written, ancient, brittle and heavy manuscripts, as well as original leather-bound books chained to their place on the walls. (Casual visitors need to be on a tour to get in.)

Certain key scenes in the Harry Potter franchise were filmed here, but if it's more current stuff you're after, go through the courtyard to the Radcliffe Camera, a classical circular building closed to the public but open to students, who these days are as likely to be studying their Facebook pages as their Dante, but whatever. There's an almost endless amount of music, theater, dance, movies and lectures to go to in and around the university, as well as evensong at Christ Church Cathedral and various college chapels. A good place to get a sense of the cultural feast is oxfordcityguide.com.

And from here, at the Radcliffe Camera, spreads the Oxford of the dreaming spires, the ancient, walled colleges bumping up one against the other and connected by a warren of lanes and roads. Most of them are closed to visitors but can be glimpsed through arched entryways, over walls and around hedges. In the case of Christ Church, one can enter for a fee.

Speaking of Christ Church college, it too appears in the Harry Potter films, for instance, when Harry and other incoming students first get to Hogwarts and are greeted by Professor McGonagall on the 16th-century staircase to the Great Hall. More to the point, the college has a beautiful cathedral with astonishingly detailed stained-glass windows, including the 19th-century St. Frideswide Window created by Edward Burne-Jones. (Frideswide is Oxford's patron saint.)

Head down this-a-way (and it's all very well marked) to the breathtaking abundance of stuff that is the Pitt Rivers Museum, named not after an estuary, but after the lieutenant general who founded the museum in 1884, seemingly so he could have a place to put his anthropological collections, arranged thematically — in other words, by type of stuff rather than by origin or date — and today the objects number somewhere in the half-a-million range. So if you have a hankering for, say, masks from Africa, Melanesia and North America; Blackfoot and Plains Indian shirts; musical instruments from all over the globe; or the loot Capt. James Cook hauled back from his second voyage of discovery in the

Pacific, most of it arranged in large glass cases with ascending layers of displays on wraparound balconies — well, then, this is the place.

Come back to the land of chess-piece perfection and ask yourself, what next? One answer might be the Museum of Oxford, a funny little place tucked into the late-Victorian Town Hall on St. Aldate's. A series of maps shows you exactly how Oxford began, on dry land above marshy wetlands and the river, and how it then grew and changed, from its founding around 900, well before the Norman invasion, to the present.

Since I can't get enough of ye olden, olden, really olden days, I also went on the somewhat hokey but fascinating tour of the ancient Oxford Castle. It's a weird place, part 11th-century tower built for William the Conqueror to help control the area, part disused prison with a large grassy mound in the middle. Most of the original castle was destroyed in the English Civil War, but you can still get a sense of how imposing, drafty and unpleasant it must have been in its day. Today a large part of what had been the prison houses a luxurious Malmaison hotel, with cells now serving as guest rooms.

So what and where is the real Oxford? The medieval wattle-and-daub, timber-framed houses, one of which now houses Pret a Manger on Cornmarket in the central shopping district? Or the nearby Gap and Marks & Spencer stores? The endless green spaces? The lanes filled with boxlike rowhouses? The elegant architectural extravaganzas of Jericho? The houseboats parked along the canal? The rowers on the Isis? The pubs? The libraries? The lecture rooms?

For me, a more pressing question was: If there are ghosts of Sebastian Flyte and his teddy bear, Aloysius, to be found, where would they be?

And so it was with Sebastian, the charming, rich and frequently drunk protagonist of "Brideshead Revisited," in mind that, on my last day in Oxford, I romped, as Sebastian might have with his best friend, Charles Ryder, around Christ Church Meadow under a gray December sky. To my right, cows grazed; behind me, bicyclists wove in and out of traffic on busy St. Aldate's; and on the tantalizing far side of the walls, the college, with

its spires, towers, gates and Cathedral, glowed in the pale afternoon light.

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WHERE TO EAT

Cheap (£3 to £8, or about \$5 to \$13 at \$1.63 to the pound):

West Cornwall Pasty Company (5 Cornmarket Street; westcornwallpasty.co.uk) is a fast-food outlet with cheap pasties (meat, vegetable and cheese pies). Well worth the calories.

The Oxford Cafe (in the Covered Market) serves salads, soups, sandwiches and pastries.

Midrange (£10 to £20):

The Prince of Wales (73 Church Way, Iffley; 44-1865-778554) offers excellent fish and chips and a good variety of ales.

The Trout (195 Godstow Road, Lower Wovercote; 44-1865-510930; thetroutoxford.co.uk) is a classic English pub with outdoor seating overlooking the Thames. You can get everything from fish and chips to complex vegetarian salads.

Aziz Restaurant (228-230 Cowley Road; 44-1865-794945; aziz.uk.com) serves rustic Bangladeshi and Indian food.

The Magdalen Arms (243 Iffley Road; 44-1865-243159; magdalenarms.com) is said by many to serve the best pub food in Oxford.

Pricey (starting around £20):

Brasserie Blanc (71-72 Walton Street; 44-1865-510999; brasserieblanc.com) in the heart of the Jericho neighborhood, has very good, if not particularly distinctive, French-Continental food. This large, simply appointed restaurant is popular with students whose parents are visiting, and is one of many restaurants in Raymond Blanc's Brasserie Blanc empire.

WHERE TO STAY

The Tree Hotel at Iffley (63 Church Way; iffley.treehotel.co.uk), about two miles from Oxford's center, is a small hotel with single, double and "family" size rooms with plain but comfortable furnishings. Breakfast in the pub dining room downstairs is included. According to the hotel's website, rooms start at about £93 in April.

Malmaison Oxford (3 New Road, in the Oxford Castle and prison complex; malmaison.com/locations/oxford) has a high-end bar, restaurant and spa as well as luxuriously

outfitted guest rooms in what were, until not that long ago, locked cells. Sleek and stylish, if slightly spooky. Rates start at £155 in April.

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