DISCOVERING BRITAIN

Royal Geographical Society with IBG

Workers' playtime

A self guided walk exploring Victorian Oxford's leisure pursuits

Discover how leisure activities grew in Victorian Oxford
Find out where the city's workers spent their free time
Learn where reformers tried to cure 'habitual drunkards'
Visit the pubs, museums, theatres and galleries where vice battled virtue

www.discoveringbritain.org

the stories of our landscapes discovered through walks

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Workers' playtime

Discover how Oxford's 'habitual drunkards' were reformed into model citizens

Introduction

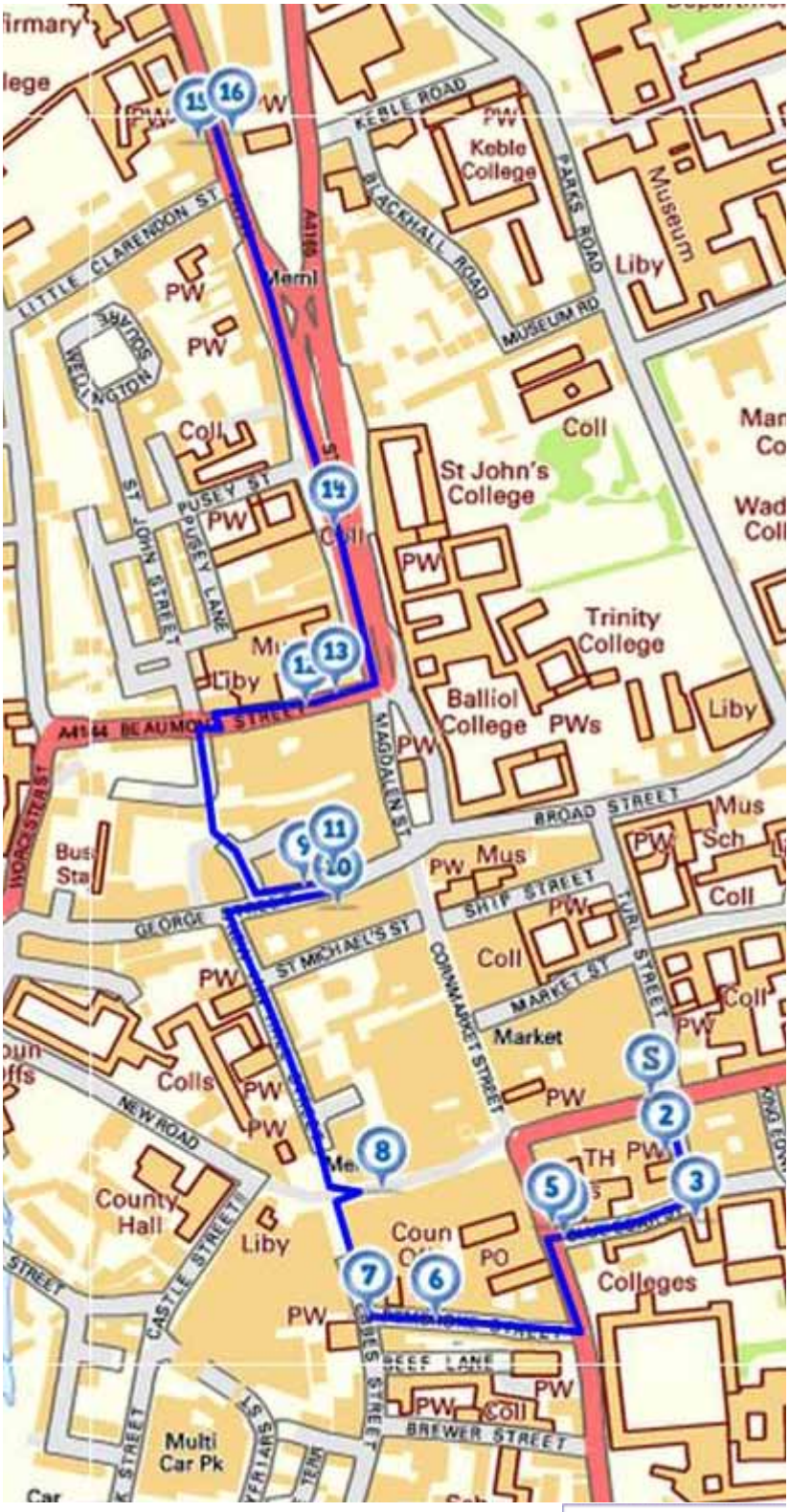
Travel back in time to the Victorian era and discover an alternative Oxford beyond its dreaming spires.

In the mid-nineteenth century the industrial revolution swept across Britain. As farm workers deserted the countryside for new jobs in towns and cities, places like Oxford were transformed. New urban lifestyles meant more money and more free time. For the first time working people discovered the concept of leisure. Pubs, theatres, music halls, travelling fairs and other 'low brow' entertainments boomed. But the middle classes had other ideas. Leisure should not only be respectable but also productive – good both for the soul and the country.

The Ashmolean Museum portico
Rory Walsh © RGS-IGB Discovering Britain

Find out how ordinary working people spent their free time. Discover why middle class reformers tried to lure them away from sinful pleasures towards more 'improving' leisure pursuits. Visit pubs and museums, theatres and libraries, hotels and gymnasiums where the struggle between vice and virtue was played out.

Route overview



Stopping points

1. The Mitre pub, High Street
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3. Former Oxford Gymnasium, corner of Blue Boar Lane and Alfred Street
4. Former public library, corner of the old Town Hall, St Aldates
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13. The Randolph Hotel, Beaumont Street
14. St Giles
15. Former Big Game Museum, Woodstock Road
16. Former Big Game Museum, Woodstock Road

Practical information

Location	Oxford, Southeast England
Getting there	**Train** - Oxford station is well served by the railway network with services to London Paddington, Reading, Didcot, Newcastle, Bournemouth, Manchester Piccadilly and Birmingham New Street. **Bus** - many city centre routes and long distance coaches, including routes to Heathrow, Gatwick and London Victoria coach station There are 5 **park and ride** depots around the city centre; Pear Tree (route 300), Redbridge (route 300), Seacourt (route 400), Thornhill (route 400) and Water Eaton (route 500) **Car** - Oxford is accessible via Junctions 8 and 9 of the M40. The city is surrounded by the Oxford Ring Road. Drivers are advised to use park and ride services into the city centre. **Bicycle** - Oxford is a very popular cycling city and features on National Cycle Route number 5 among others
Start point & postcode	The Mitre Pub, High Street, OX1 4AG
Directions from railway station to start	From the station turn right. Take care crossing between the bus and taxi stands and join Park End Street. Use the pedestrian crossings outside the Said Business School to cross over the road. Turn left in front of The Jam Factory and continue along the pedestrianised section of Park End Street. Continue into New Road then pedestrianised Queen Street which joins the High Street. The Mitre is on the left hand side before Turl Street.
Finish point	Former Big Game Museum, Woodstock Road

Onward journey	The route is almost circular - to return to the start please use the directions on page 25
Distance	1 ¼ miles
Level	Gentle - an easy flat route through the city centre
Conditions	The city centre can be busy at weekends and in the summer tourist season. Take care by busy roads.
Suitable for	**Families** - take care of children by busy roads **Dogs** - must be kept on a lead **Wheelchairs / pushchairs** - an entirely step-free route
Refreshments	There are plenty of cafes and restaurants along the route, including The Art Cafe (after Stop 8) and Greens Cafe (between Stops 14 and 15). Pubs include The Mitre (Stop 1), The Bear (Stop 2), The Royal Blenheim (Stop 7) and The Grapes (Stop 11)
Facilities	Public toilets available in the Town Hall (Stop 4), The Art Cafe, The Ashmolean Museum (Stop 12) and Greens Cafe. Also ladies toilets at Magdelen St East (after Stop 13)
Other info	**The Ashmolean Museum** is open Tuesdays to Sundays 10am - 6pm. Closed Mondays except Bank Holidays. Free admission. www.ashmolean.org (Tel: 01865 278002)
Tourist information	Oxford Visitor Information Centre, 15-16 Broad Street, OX1 3AS (Tel: 01865 252200)

1. Let me entertain you
The Mitre pub, High Street

Hello, my name's Liz Woolley. I'm a local historian and I've lived in Oxford since 1985. I'm really interested in Oxford's 'town' - as opposed to 'gown' - history, and in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens especially in the nineteeth and early twentieth centuries.

A popular drinking spot
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

I take quite a lot of groups on walking tours to look at lesser-known aspects of the city's history and it's always great to show people places which they've never noticed before, even if they've lived in Oxford for years, and to explain some of their history.

We've decided to start the walk here outside a typical Oxford pub to give you a clue to the subject of this walk. We're going to be looking at leisure and entertainment in Victorian and Edwardian Oxford and the struggle between vice and virtue that tempted its citizens. During this walk you'll find out how Oxford's workers spent their free time and how the middle classes tried to lure them away from popular entertainment towards more self-improving pursuits.

The walk is about one-and-a-quarter miles long. It's linear but the finishing point, at the southern end of the Woodstock Road, is only about ten minutes walk from the starting point. It's all on the flat and through the city centre and there are plenty of cafés along the way if you want to stop for refreshment. I hope you enjoy the walk!

Directions 1
Cross the road and walk down Alfred Street (the road directly opposite The Mitre pub).
Read Stop 2 when you get to The Bear pub.

2. Time Off

The Bear pub, corner of Blue Boar Lane (off St Aldates) and Alfred Street (off the High Street)

A major impact of the Industrial Revolution that swept across Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the mass migration of people from rural areas to towns and cities. As well as better employment prospects, this new urban way of living offered new opportunities for leisure and for entertainment. Whereas jobs in agriculture (particularly keeping livestock) meant working from dawn till dusk seven days a week, urban jobs in factories, shops and offices meant a shorter working day and formalised time off.

The Lamb and Flag pub on St Giles
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Bank holidays were introduced in 1871, the word "weekend" came into use in 1879 and from 1896, Oxford's shop workers could enjoy an early closing day.

Improved transport also meant that people wasted less time travelling to and from work so had more time for themselves. These factors, together with a rise in wages, meant that for the first time, working people found themselves with free time and spare money. Not surprisingly, after a long, hard day in factories, shops and offices most workers chose to spend their time off relaxing and socialising in places like the pub.

The Bear Inn stands cheek by jowl with the Oxford Gymnasium
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

In the early nineteenth century this idea that free time should be spent productively and in an improving manner was known as 'rational recreation'. 'Rational recreation' was spread actively to the working classes by various groups with different vested interests in how the working classes spent their time – middle class philanthropists, churches - you may have heard of the phrase 'Muscular Christianity' - and employers who were keen to ensure that their employees turned up on a Monday morning in a fit state for work.

The improved use of leisure time was also seen as an important instrument for educating the working classes in middle class social values and norms and for making a constructive contribution to the general drive for social progress and 'improvement'. The idea of self-improvement was particularly strong and was taken up by many sections of the working class themselves.

On this walk we're going to look at how rational recreation manifested itself in Oxford, and also look at some of the less 'self-improving' establishments where working people continued to spend their free time none-the-less. You'll also learn about the growing commercialisation of leisure during this period as businessmen and entrepreneurs found new ways to help workers part with their spare money.

Advertisement for Halls brewery
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

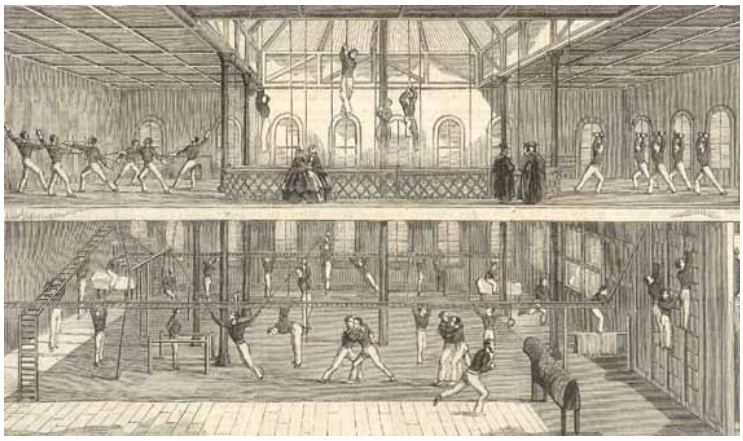
Directions 2
Walk just past The Bear pub. Stand with your back to the old stone wall and look over at the stone building with the rounded windows.

3. Healthy body = Healthy mind

Former Oxford Gymnasium, corner of Blue Boar Lane and Alfred Street

This impressive two storey building was once the Oxford Gymnasium. Whereas the hard, physical tasks associated with farm work had helped to keep workers in good physical condition, the new, more sedentary office, shop and factory jobs offered little opportunity for real exercise.

The gym's owner, Archibald McLaren, was a well-known expert in physical fitness. He invented the gymnastic training programme for the British Army and wrote books on the subject.



Interior of the Oxford Gymnasium
© Illustrated London News, 5 Nov 1859

The gym was built in 1858 by William Wilkinson who designed many of the grand villas in the middle class suburb of North Oxford as well as the Randolph Hotel which you'll see later. The classical design is very different from Wilkinson's more usual Gothic style. Look up at the roof. You might be able to make out its distinctive octagonal shape. The roof incorporated a ventilating lantern designed to allow fresh air (another Victorian obsession) into the building. The gymnasium was equipped throughout with the 'latest gymnastic contrivances': padded floors for exercises, climbing frames and ropes, and a central Norwegian climbing pole 60ft high.

The local newspaper Jackson's Oxford Journal was full of glowing praise:

> *The building is in every respect a successful one, at once substantial and elegant... It will be seen that no small amount of care and thought have been bestowed in adapting every portion of it to some important purpose. The long rows of lofty widows will be thrown wide open in summer, and when in cold or wet weather these are closed, the ventilating lantern on the top of the building, with its eight windows swinging on their centres... afford ample means for the free interchange of pure and vitiated air, far above the heads of the pupils; thus embracing all the advantages of the open air, with none of its disadvantages in this variable climate.*

Directions 3
With The Bear pub on your right, walk down Blue Boar Street until you reach the end and stand under the street sign reading 'Blue Boar Street'. Look across at the stone building opposite.

4. Rescued by books

Former public library, corner of the old Town Hall, St Aldates

Look across at the curving stone steps which lead up to a lovely wooden doorway with the words Public Library above. We've stopped here to think about Oxford's public library provision.

The Arts and Crafts style Town Hall and Public Library
© www.headington.org.uk

Lending or 'circulating' libraries had become increasingly common in the 1830s and 40s. They were normally privately run (for profit) and temporary, perhaps only lasting a few months. The Public Libraries Act of 1850 allowed large towns like Oxford to establish public libraries for the first time and, importantly, to finance them through local rates. Oxford's first was on this site in 1854 in the old Town Hall.

Candidates for the job of librarian were told that they 'had to be able to devote all their time to the library and reading room, 9am to 11pm in summer, 9am to 10pm in winter, except Sundays and meals.' The first librarian was BH Blackwell, who had run a circulating library in St Clements (his son later founded the famous bookshop). Given the rigours of the job, it's perhaps not surprising that Mr Blackwell died after only six months in post.

But the library was incredibly popular straight away: there were 100,000 visits in the first year (this was when the population of Oxford was about 28,000 so that's equivalent to 3 and a half visits for every resident). A member of the city council declared: 'Here the Working Man finds rest after a day of labour and toil and a very large number of young men find every amusement and instruction'. At first you could only read books on-site, but in 1857 a lending section was added, allowing readers to borrow books between noon and 2pm on Thursdays. Demand was such that this was soon extended to Tuesdays and Saturdays as well, and not long after to 10 hours a day.

The Victorian period was one of increasing literacy. Unlike farm work, jobs in offices and shops required their workers to be literate (as well as numerate). The reading of improving literature was considered to be a vital ingredient in the moral advancement of the working classes. An anonymous correspondent to the local newspaper probably spoke for a number of Oxford residents when he praised the library: '*Many a young man has been reclaimed from the haunts of dissipation and vice, and habitual drunkards induced to spend their evenings in the Library*'.

Directions 4
Remain here for Stop 5.

5. A little light music

Former public library, corner of the old Town Hall, St Aldates

This is no longer the city's library but you can still see the quote above the doorway which hints at the building's former life. It reads 'Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for abilities.' from the writings of the seventeenth century essayist Francis Bacon.

'Studies serve' carved in stone over the library entrance
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Several civic buildings have stood on this site over Oxford's history. A guildhall (a meeting place for craftsmen like textile workers and masons was first built on this site in 1292. It was replaced in 1752 by a Town Hall which itself was demolished in 1893 to make way for this current building, the new Town Hall. Both the old and new Town Halls included large spaces for public meetings and concerts.

Public lectures had long been popular with the middle classes but programmes of improving lectures for the working classes began to be offered by Working Men's Clubs, Mechanics' Institutes, and the YMCA, intended as an alternative to the less 'self- improving' pastimes of gambling and drinking. In 1865 a concert advertising 'light music for the working classes' was held in the Corn Exchange in the old Town Hall and attracted an audience of 1,000.

Have a look at the surrounding stonework, at the door handles and at the windows. There are lots of lovely Arts and Crafts details on this 1897 building.

Directions 5
Cross St Aldates, taking care as the traffic is often heavy. Turn left and walk down St Aldates then turn right into Pembroke Street. Stop outside Pembroke House.

6. Cleanliness is next to Godliness

36 & 37 Pembroke Street

We've stopped here to look at Pembroke House, the building which once housed the South Oxford Working Men's Club and, behind it, a set of racket courts.

Working Men's Clubs were increasingly popular in the Victorian period. They aimed to provide a place other than the pub where working men could meet and discuss subjects of interest with like-minded companions. Many played an educational role - they often had libraries and organised improving lectures on topics thought suitable for the working classes like science, geography and foreign culture.

Advertisement for Southampton Turkish Baths (1878)
© www.victorianturkishbath.org

Behind it was the nineteenth century equivalent of a leisure centre, incorporating rackets courts, billiard rooms and baths. The game of 'Racquets' was a forerunner of modern day squash. Of course at this time very few people had private baths in their houses, so public baths were very popular.

Serious cholera epidemics in the late 1840s and early 1850s had focussed attention on the city's poor sanitation and a council-owned public 'wash-house and baths for the industrious classes' was opened in Castle Street in 1852. Baths were for washing (yourself and your clothes) but also for relaxing and for swimming. Turkish baths were particularly popular. Most were privately owned and run on a commercial basis. A typical example was being advertised in Jackson's Oxford Journal in 1879: 'Merton Street Turkish Bath and Tepid Swimming Bath will be open on Monday Dec 1st. Furnished with every modern appliance. The Proprietor has retained the services of a First-class Shampooer and Teacher of Swimming who previously worked in London and Paris.' I must say that I really like the idea of having my hair washed by a first-class professional shampooer!

Directions 6
Continue along Pembroke Street until you reach the junction with St Ebbe's St. Stop outside the Royal Blenheim Pub.

7. The curse of the working classes

The Royal Blenheim pub, corner of Pembroke Street and St Ebbe's

A new wave of pubs was built in the late 19th century and this is a good example of the kind of 'Olde English' or Tudor-style Arts and Crafts architecture which many adopted. I think that it's a really attractive building. Look up at the top floor and you can see the decorative tile hanging and beautifully detailed carved bricks around the window frames on the ground floor.

The Royal Blenheim sign
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Despite the efforts of the rational recreationists who tried to provide improving alternatives, a great deal of working-class leisure took place in the pub. More than just a place to consume alcohol, pubs traditionally played a strategic role in the organisation of working class culture and politics providing venues for discussion and debate and for meetings of Friendly Societies and other groups; some even housed working men's libraries.

They were places not only to talk and to drink but also to gamble, to take part in sweepstake clubs, to watch 'penny gaff' plays, to bet on boxing, ratting, dog- and cock-fighting, and to associate with prostitutes. Mrs Fox's beer house in Merton Street had a communicating backdoor with Bull's brothel. In 1886 the appropriately named Bird in Hand beer-house in Cross Street in East Oxford lost its license because it was 'the habitual resort of prostitutes'. For these reasons pubs were seen, by the middle classes at least, as one of the main causes of social ills like poverty, crime, promiscuity and public disorder.

The results of excessive drinking were all too evident: in 1852 Elijah Noon, a plasterer from Jericho in northern Oxford, was convicted of manslaughter after accidentally killing his wife with a sword during a drunken quarrel. By the 1850s it was said that no respectable urban Englishman would enter a public house. However, despite efforts to reduce drinking, there was if anything an increase in beer consumption, especially from the 1870s onwards. In Oxford in 1883 there were no fewer than 319 pubs, beer houses, breweries and other licensed premises: one for every 110 residents. Compare this to today when according to a recent survey in January 2012, sixteen pubs a week are closing in Britain.

Directions 7
Continue up the hill along St Ebbe's Street and then turn right into Queen Street. Stop outside Marks and Spencer's and turn to look at the red brick and stone building with the three gable windows across the street.

8. The one that got away

Former Wilberforce Temperance Hotel, Queen Street

This building was once the Wilberforce Temperance Hotel. It was built in 1888 and was one of several Temperance hotels in the city. The architect was Frederick Albury of Reading, who also designed the YMCA building which you'll see a bit later on. It was built by TH Kingerlee, the largest building firm in Victorian Oxford, which is still going strong today.

The Wilberforce Temperance Hotel (c.1900)

The Temperance movement grew out of middle class concerns about how the working classes were spending their free time.

In 1868 temperance campaigners claimed that in Oxford more money was being spent on drink than on food and that 'Alcoholic drink stores produce three quarters of all the crime, sickness, lunacy and poverty in the country, but the government allows them because it derives a large revenue from them.'

The Temperance movement aimed to provide places where people could go and not drink, and where men would be encouraged to spend 'quality time' with their wives and children. It showed great energy and imagination in devising counter-attractions to the pub, developing its own friendly societies, and organising family outings and picnics. In many towns and cities Temperance halls provided what were often the only venues for large gatherings before the great town halls were built later in the century.

On the ground floor you can still make out what was once the hotel's central entranceway: it's now filled in with a double window but you can still see either side of it the granite pillars and above them two coats of arms, on the left hand side the university coat of arms with an open book and on the right hand side the city coat of arms - an ox fording a river. Either side of the original entranceway were two shops or offices, one occupied for a time by the builders Kingerlee. Through the entranceway a staircase led upstairs to 26 bedrooms, dining and sitting rooms, and rooms devoted to billiards, smoking and coffee, an alternative to alcohol.

Directions 8
Retrace your steps back to the intersection then turn right and walk down New Inn Hall Street until you reach George Street. Turn right along George Street and stop outside the Grapes pub. Look at the theatre on the opposite side of the road.

9. The play's the thing

The New Theatre, George Street

Plays and music hall entertainments became increasingly popular in the Victorian period. As early as 1835 there was a theatre on this site, just behind the current one. It had three entrances - the smartest, which led to the boxes, was down a passageway off Magdalen Street. The entrance to the pit was via Victoria Court, and the cheapest seats, in the gallery, were reached from Red Lion Square, where the stage door is now.

Plays could only be performed outside of term time. During term time they were forbidden by the university who feared for the morals of their students! Not only might they waste study time watching plays but they might meet 'actresses' of dubious reputation.

Theatre was a perennially popular entertainment for all classes and theatres were regularly packed to capacity. There had been a series of devastating and fatal fires in theatres across the country caused mainly by gas lighting, inadequate ventilation and mass overcrowding.

Art-deco style window on The New Theatre
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Legislation introduced in 1878 decreed that newly-built theatres must have a certain length of frontage to the street to allow enough exits in case of emergency. So many theatres, like the one built on this site in 1886, were built on corner sites with frontages on two sides.

Ironically, however, that theatre was badly damaged by fire only four years after it opened. It was extensively altered in 1908 and then demolished in 1933 before the present New Theatre that you see now was built.

Directions 9
Remain here and turn to look at the redbrick building with bay windows. It's the second building on the right from the New Theatre.

10. Muscular Christianity

Former YMCA building, George Street

This redbrick and stone building used to house the Oxford Young Men's Christian Association. Look up at the middle set of windows and over to the right and you can see a stone carving with the initials YMCA and a date carved into it.

The YMCA movement began in the 1840s with the aim of guiding young men spiritually, morally and physically, especially when they were newly away from home and vulnerable to the temptations of city life. The YMCA's vision was to produce young men who would act as leaders and who would in turn positively influence other young men.

As was common at the time, this YMCA building incorporated five shops on the ground floor to provide a rental income and to attract the attention of passers-by. The central entrance way is now filled in but you can still see the granite pillars which flanked it on either side. From here a staircase led to a lecture theatre, classrooms, meeting rooms, a gymnasium and restaurant. Notice how all these facilities were geared towards improvement and education.

The building's architect was FW Albury whose Wilberforce Temperance Hotel we just saw on Queen Street. The attractive facade of this building contributed to a programme of improvements that were being made to George Street at the time, as city centre streets were being redesigned to make them grander and wider for increased traffic.

YMCA
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG
Discovering Britain

Directions 10
Cross back over George Street and stand at the corner of the YMCA building to look back at the small pub.

11. A street of pubs

Beerd pub, George Street

You're standing on George Street which has always been known for drinking - there were at least 12 pubs here over the course of the nineteenth century. There was a pub called The Grapes as far back as 1820 but it was totally rebuilt in 1893. It was owned by Morrell's, one of Oxford's major brewers and the building was designed by their architect, the rather inappropriately named Mr Drinkwater.

Interior of The Grapes (1969)

Like the Royal Blenheim which we saw earlier, this was one of a new wave of pubs being built towards the end of the nineteenth century. As here, many were designed in an exuberant style to appeal to the working classes, and featured terracotta, tiles, mirrors and cut glass.

Originally the pub was partitioned into separate bars for different clientele reached by separate doors down a passageway on the right-hand side. Working class customers would have favoured the public bar whereas the middle classes drank in the saloon or lounge.

Whilst we're here, notice the advertisement for 'Toys, fancy goods and fireworks' high up on the wall of the adjacent building, which once housed De la Mare's toyshop. Have a look also at what must qualify as the most eccentric chimney in Oxford, between the two buildings.

Directions 11
Retrace your steps back past the theatre. Turn right into Gloucester Street and then right into Beaumont Street. Immediately cross the road and continue along Beaumont Street. Stop when you come to the steps of the Ashmolean Museum.

12. Cabinet of curiosities

Ashmolean Museum, Beaumont Street

Museums provided a type of 'rational recreation'. They were a further alternative to the pub, a place to educate people about the wider world, to teach them about culture, art and architecture, and a place where families could enjoy a day out together.

Donations from two well-known philanthropists, Rev Dr Francis Randolph and Sir Roger Newdigate, enabled the building of the Ashmolean Museum. Its opening in 1845 coincided with the Museums Act which paved the way for the establishment of free public museums across the country. As a result museums became increasingly popular and the Ashmolean became a well-loved weekend destination for Oxford citizens from all walks of life.

Figure atop the Ashmolean Museum
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Grecian frieze on the Ashmolean Museum
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The architect of the building was Charles Cockerell and it was described by the architectural historian Geoffrey Tyack as Oxford's finest building of the first half of the 19th century. As you can see it combines styles from a range of European classical traditions. Look up and you can see the plaited freeze along the top of the building which is Grecian. The rounded archways over the columns in the side wings of the building are Roman.

It was certainly the last major example of classical architecture in Oxford as architectural fashion had already turned to the Gothic. If you look over the road to your right, you can see the Martyrs' Memorial, a stone monument built at the same time as the Ashmolean, but definitely in the Gothic revival style. It was designed by George Gilbert Scott, who later went on to design the Albert Memorial and the Midland Grand Hotel in London.

Directions 12
Remain where you are but turn to look at the Randolph Hotel on the other side of Beaumont Street.

13. Gothic grandeur

The Randolph Hotel, Beaumont Street

Here's another good example of Gothic architecture - the Randolph Hotel, built by William Wilkinson in 1866. He was the man who designed the Gymnasium on Alfred Street, which we saw earlier on the walk, but this is much more typical of his style. The steep-pitched roof originally had tall spiky iron cresting all along the ridges which must have made it look even more like a Transylvanian castle.

The Randolph Hotel entrance (1890)

The Randolph was a new type of hotel for Oxford. It was one of the first purpose built hotels. It's large, luxurious, on a grand scale and built with 68 rooms for guests.

It's very different from old-fashioned coaching inns like the Mitre where we started the walk. Unlike this modern, purpose built hotel, the Mitre would have had far less well-appointed accommodation and acted more as a stopping off point to rest on a long journey than a destination in itself.

The Randolph isn't one of the railway hotels but it looks rather like one doesn't it? The hotel was an assertively uncompromising symbol of the change from the coaching age to the coming of the railways, and a clear indicator of the boost that the railways were giving to Oxford's tourist industry.

Directions 13
Continue along Beaumont Street then turn left into the wide thoroughfare of St Giles. Walk up St Giles and listen to the next track as you walk. Stop when you get to the St Aloysius Church about a quarter of a mile further along.

14. All the fun of the fair
St Giles

As we're walking along St Giles, I'd like to talk about St Giles Fair, possibly the most anarchic of Oxford's leisure activities and one which resisted all attempts by the rational recreationists to tame it!

St Giles' Fair still happens today. For two days in September the whole of this road is closed off and the fair takes over the whole street. Unlike St Clements Fair to the east of the city, St Giles was not a hiring fair where people went to find work but developed from the seventeenth-century St Giles parish wake.

Female wrestlers at St Giles' fair (1909)

In the early nineteenth century St Giles' was still a small children's fair, but by 1838 more adult attractions were on offer. These included freak shows like the world's fattest man, or the bearded woman, and booths for drinking and dancing. It continued to grow throughout the 19th century, becoming a major holiday for working people from the whole of Oxfordshire and beyond, a rendezvous for relations and friends otherwise separated for the rest of year as more and more people moved away from home to find work.

Later in the nineteenth century the fair grew massively - special trains brought visitors from as far afield as Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Cardiff and crowds of up to 4,000 gathered at the Great Western station. Fair time was also market time, and hawkers and other vendors came here to sell their wares. It was the end of the harvest and so farm workers had a little more money in their pockets to spend. People saved up all year and many spent recklessly over the two days.

Fair-goers dressed in their finest clothes, and groups of girls and boys paraded around, hoping to attract each other's attention. Indeed there was generally a somewhat charged atmosphere - lewd behaviour, drunkenness and even fighting became increasingly commonplace. On more than one occasion the fair was threatened with closure but the city council realised that it was better to allow it to continue as a kind of safety valve and instead brought in extra police to help control the crowds.

Open air preachers, the Salvation Army and the YMCA tried to improve the atmosphere by organising group singing of hymns. However, they were competing with attractions like flea circuses and wax-works of kings and queens and the latest notorious criminals.

The empire too provided plenty of new material for freak shows: in the 1870s there was a 'coal-black negro who ate live rats' and 'an imitation South African savage' who 'at intervals startled bystanders by rushing forth and brandishing what the proprietor informed his hearers was the leg of his sister.' Electrical shocks were offered: 'as large a dose as your nervous system can stand for a penny'. A flying trapeze was enjoyed by both men and women until ladies were banned when they realised that small boys were gathering below to catch a glimpse up their skirts.

There were male boxers and female wrestlers ready to take on anyone brave enough. Day's Travelling Menagerie exhibited over 500 wild animals including a pack of wolves. There were any number of rides. These were originally hand-pushed or pony-driven, but by the late 1860s they were much bigger affairs, resplendent with carved and gilded ornamentation and driven by steam to the accompaniment of music.

The fair went on late into the night, just as it does today. After dark, stalls were originally lit by candles and in the middle of the nineteenth century by naphtha lamps. These gave a bright light but were horribly dangerous. Later paraffin lamps were used. The arrival of three electric lights, powered by traction engines, in 1882, caused a sensation. This was ten years before the introduction of electric street lighting so it was completely new to most people. In 1905 Mr Taylor's Royal Electric Coliseum created a further stir when it brought with it a Parisian organ illuminated by 1,000 miniature coloured electric lights. In the 1890s living pictures, the forerunners of cinema were shown - footage of Gladstone's funeral was a major attraction.

Directions 14
Standing outside St Aloysius Catholic Church (the Oratory) look across the street to the building with the white-glazed porch and blue plaque on the front wall.

15. (Un) Natural History

Former Big Game Museum, Woodstock Road

This three storey redbrick building was originally a big game museum. It was built by Charles Peel in 1906 in order to display his big game hunting trophies to the paying public. As far as I can tell the collection comprised several hundred stuffed heads as well as whole animals and a large number of weapons.

Charles Peel, Oxford native and big game hunter (c.1900)

Mr Peel's aim was to encourage his visitor to emigrate to healthier climates and to adopt a healthier lifestyle. As he said in the museum catalogue:

"It is true we cannot all be big-game hunters, but it has always been a marvel and a mystery to me why so many young men, such as city clerks and shop assistants, toil away the whole of their lives indoors at fifteen shillings to thirty-five shillings a week when, by emigrating to one of our many great colonies, they would, in all probability, earn a higher wage and, what is far more important, lead a far healthier life. One of the objects of the exhibition is to show, by means of beautiful objects of Natural History, that there are other countries in the world besides over-populated little England."

In his own words he also aimed to "*stimulate a love of Natural History, which lies so dormant in the British Isles"* and hoped to achieve it by displaying animals he had shot along with the weapons they'd been killed with. The catalogue describes in some detail the hunts, in which the noble animal is pitted against Mr Peel and his large retinue of native assistants, all armed to the teeth.

The museum was open daily (except Sundays), admission 6d, ladies half-price (presumably they had to be encouraged to visit), and children were not admitted unless accompanied by responsible persons. Unfortunately for Mr Peel it was not a lasting success and it closed in 1918. Since then the building has had a chequered history. It became a car showroom, then the first home of the Oxford Playhouse before being turned into a miniature golf course then back to the theatre.

It's rather a curious building isn't it, with obvious Arts and Crafts influences - notice the decorative drainpipe heads. Cross the road and look very carefully at the glass panes over the porch. From close up you can just about make out the words 'BIG GAME MUSEUM'.

Directions 15
Remain here for Stop 16.

16. That's entertainment

Former Big Game Museum, Woodstock Road

We've reached the end of our walk. I hope that you've enjoyed finding out how Oxford citizens spent their leisure time in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. As we've seen, having the time and money for recreation was a new experience for most working people, and numerous establishments and organisations arose to fulfil the increased demand for entertainment.

Directions to the saloon still visible in The Grapes pub
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

There was an ongoing struggle between those who sought to control how the working class spent their leisure time - the Temperance movement, the church and the rational recreationists - and those who tried to encourage them to spend their time and money in pubs, at the theatre and at St Giles' Fair.

The struggle between rational recreation and the more heady form of entertainments was never really resolved; you could say it continues to this day. Pubs, though still relatively popular, are closing down every day as people choose to drink at home, the cinema has taken over from the theatre and music hall for those looking for spectacle and escapism and while gyms and fitness are big business, the growth of the internet has had a direct impact on reading rooms and libraries. Many people now spend their leisure time in out-of-town entertainment complexes - which have directly changed the topography of towns and cities like Oxford.

Directions 16
If you want to return to the starting point go back along St Giles towards the city centre and continue straight ahead along Magdalen Street and Cornmarket. At Carfax turn left into the High Street, cross at the pedestrian crossing and then turn right into Alfred Street.

Credits

This walk was created in collaboration with the Oxford Preservation Trust. For more information about their work oplease visit www.oxfordpreservation.org

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