



Royal
Geographical
Society
with IBG

City of streams and spires

A self guided walk along Oxford's waterways



Folly Bridge and island © Webb Aviation www.webbaviation.co.uk

Explore a fascinating network of rivers, streams and canals
Discover how natural and manmade waterways have shaped the city
Learn about the methods used to prevent flooding
Find out how water has inspired Oxford's industry, leisure and literature

www.discoveringbritain.org

the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks







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City of streams and spires

Explore Oxford's fascinating network of waterways

Introduction

Did you know that the city of Oxford is built on a series of islands? This walk is an opportunity to explore an intricate network of waterways that are often overlooked by visitors to the city.

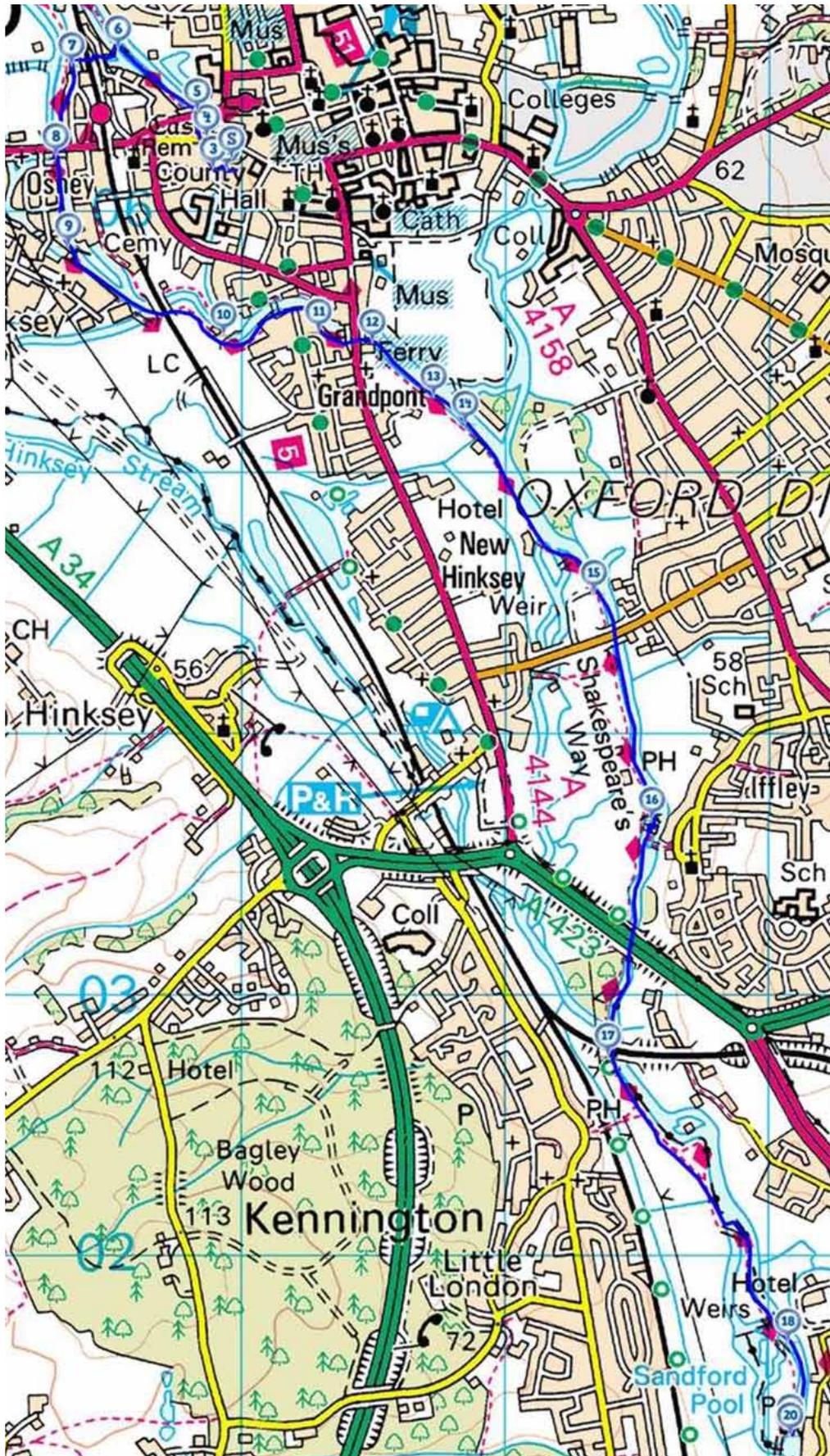
Discover gushing mill streams and picturesque flood meadows, walk along an industrial canal and a working river, watch leisure boating and competitive rowing. Look for evidence in the names of neighbourhoods, streets, bridges and pubs giving clues to the watery history of this city.



Pollarded trees at Rewley
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Discover why convicts from Oxford's prison built many of Oxford's canal, locks and other structures. Find out how the river was part of Oxford's Town and Gown division. See which parts of Oxford's rivers featured in works of literature including *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Adventures of Tom Brown* and *Three Men in a Boat*. This walk will definitely give you a different perspective of Oxford.

Route overview



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 Oxford Castle, OX1 1AY

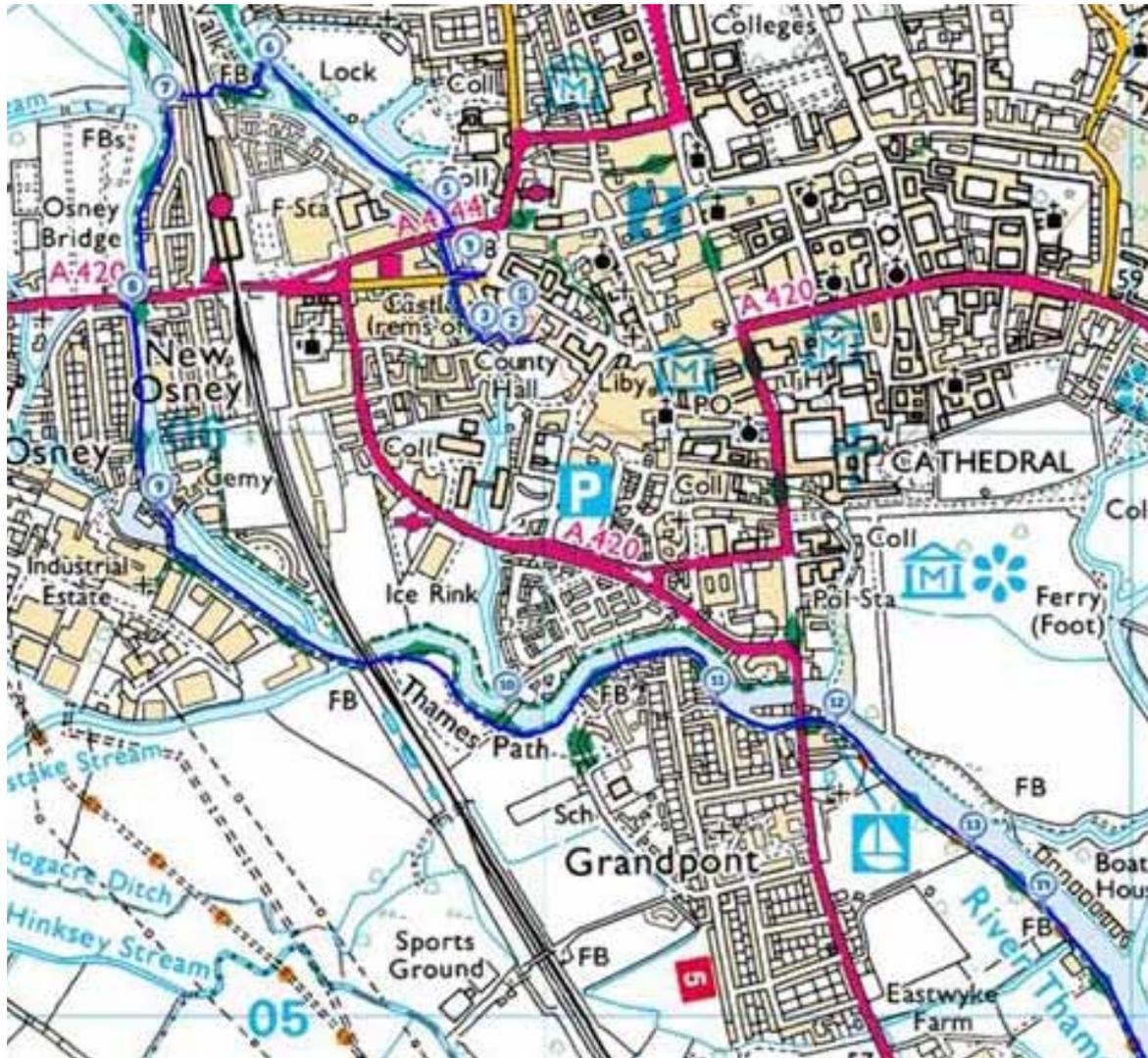
Directions from railway station to start From the station turn right. Take care crossing between the bus and taxi stands and join Park End Street. Use the pedestrian crossings outside the Said Business School to cross over the road.

Turn left in front of The Jam Factory and continue along the pedestrianised section of Park End Street. Cross the bridge over the river then turn right into Tidmarsh Lane. Oxford Castle is on the left behind the council offices.

Finish point Sandford Lock, OX4 4YD

Onward journey	To return to Oxford by public transport please use the directions on page 39. Alternatively you may want to use a taxi.
Distance	5 miles
Level	Gentle - a flat riverside route along paved town roads, towpaths and grassland
Conditions	The towpaths can be muddy and can get cold in autumn / winter. Wear suitable footwear.
Suitable for	<p>Families - plenty along the riverside to interest children</p> <p>Dogs - must be kept on a lead in the town</p> <p>Wheelchairs / pushchairs - suitable up to Donnington Bridge (Stop 16). From here there is a short cut to Redbridge Park and Ride</p>
Refreshments	Away from the town centre there are no refreshments along the route, until The King's Arms pub at the end. You may want to prepare / buy provisions beforehand. There are many ideal places for a picnic.
Facilities	No public toilets en route after leaving city centre
Other info	Oxford Castle is open daily from 10am. Guided tours available, gift shop and cafe. Tickets £8.95 adults, £5.95 children 5-15 years, £6.95 concs. (Tel: 01865 260666 www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk)
Tourist information	Oxford Visitor Information Centre, 15-16 Broad Street, OX1 3AS (Tel: 01865 252200)

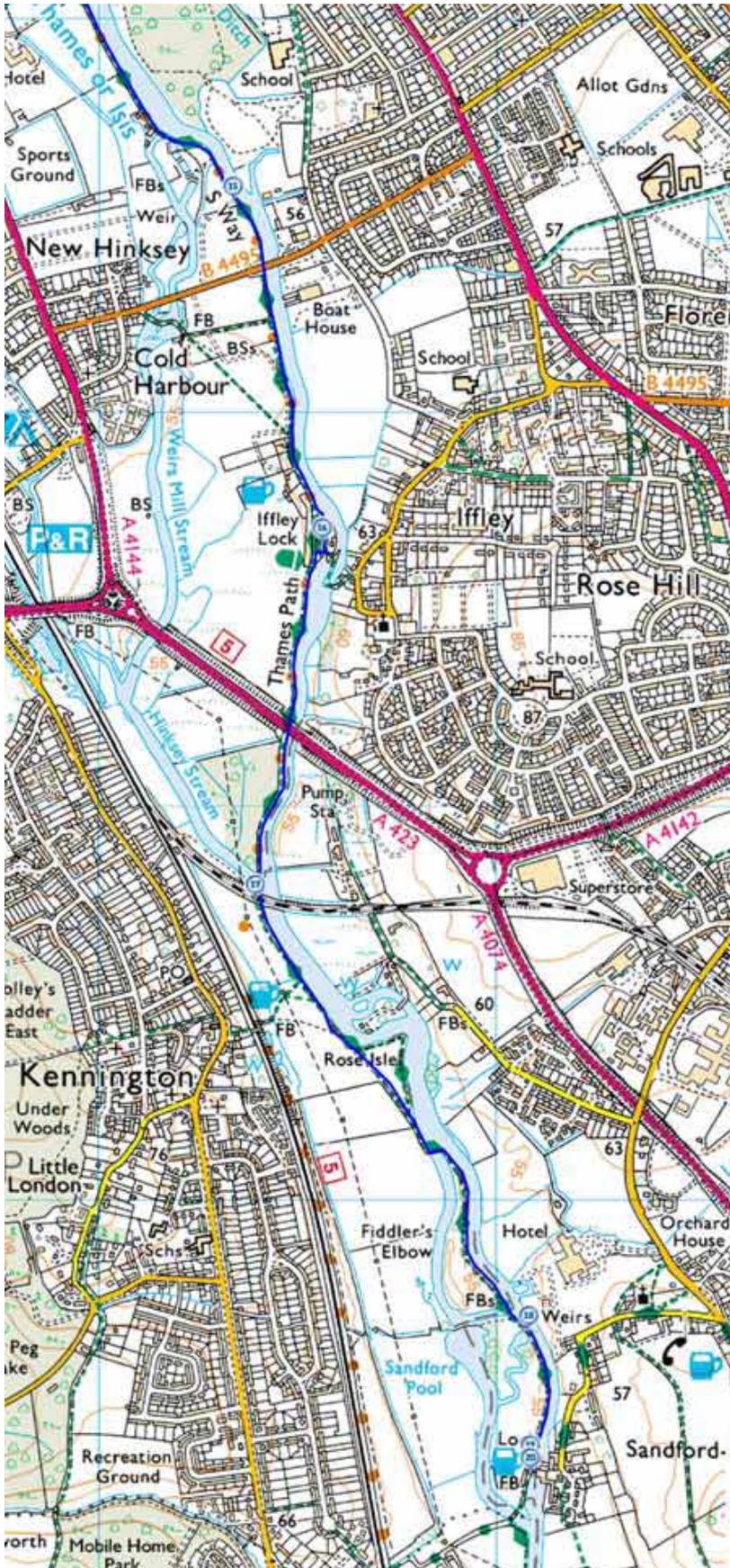
Detail of the first part of the route



Stopping points

1. Oxford Castle
2. Oxford Castle
3. Quaking Bridge
4. The Duke's Cut public house
5. Hythe Bridge Pocket Park
6. Isis Lock
7. Four Streams, Rewley
8. Corner of North Street and East Street
9. Osney Lock
10. Gas Works Bridge
11. Corner of Cobden Cresc and Buckingham St
12. Folly Bridge, downstream side
13. Confluence of the Thames and the Cherwell
14. Opposite boat houses

Detail of the second part of the route



Stopping points

15. Opposite the former Corpus Christi College Barge
16. Iffley Lock
17. Kennington Railway Bridge
18. Sandford Lasher
19. Sandford Lock
20. Sandford Lock

1. Welcome to Oxford

Oxford Castle

My name is Mark Davies. I am a Geography graduate of what was once called Middlesex Polytechnic in London. As a result of deciding to live on a canal boat in Oxford in 1992, I developed an interest in Oxford's waterways and since then have published several books all with a waterways theme. I also lead group walks along Oxford's canal and rivers and through the adjacent suburbs, and give talks and lectures on a number of topics of local interest.



Osney Bridge
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Through this walk, I hope to tell the story of Oxford and water. It will provide quite a different view to the usual story of the city and its university. You will discover how two rivers and their physical characteristics have shaped the landscape that you see today. You will see evidence of how humans have tried to control and manage water, including weirs, locks, sluices and artificially straightened channels.



Clues in pub signs
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

You will discover how humans have used water in and around Oxford for different uses ranging from industry to leisure. And you can look out for evidence of watery links in place names, street names and pub names.

The walk starts at Oxford Castle on the edge of the city centre and finishes in the village of Sandford to the south, from where you can return to Oxford by bus. It is about four-and-a-half miles long. Cyclists could walk the first part of the route in the city centre from the Castle to Folly Bridge then cycle along the towpath from there. The entire walk is alongside waterways, both natural and manmade. The paths are generally very well maintained but in many places there is no barrier between the path and the water so please take care.

Flooding is an important part of the story of this walk. Special care should be taken if you are doing this walk during times of high flow as the water level in the river can change quite rapidly. If in doubt, contact the Environment Agency for advice. The towpaths can also get very busy with cyclists, so please take care. I hope you enjoy the walk!



Some of the sites along Oxford's waterways; river boats, lock signs and anchors
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 1

Stay within the castle grounds for Stop 2.

2. Forced labour

Oxford Castle

Although this walk is about Oxford's waterways, we begin at the castle, which also used to be the county prison. The prison and its inmates actually play a significant role in the story of Oxford's waterways.



The former prison cells of Oxford Castle are now a luxury hotel
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

An especially influential governor was in charge here from 1786 to 1809 called Daniel Harris. He was appointed initially as Clerk of Works to oversee the wholesale reconstruction of the prison walls and buildings. Two substantial wings, the main gateway and parts of the remaining outer wall date from Harris' time.

At the same time, two other major projects were underway in Oxford – on the Oxford Canal and River Thames. Harris applied his building and engineering skills to these works. In his position as governor of the prison, he also provided convict labour to do the back-breaking construction work. You will hear about Harris and his prison workforce throughout the walk.

Directions 2

There are several ways in and out of the Oxford Castle complex. Make your way to the well-hidden exit near the tower between the Oxford Castle Unlocked ticket office and the Castle 1071 café. Go down the ramp to the corner of Tidmarsh Lane. Turn left and you immediately come to the Quaking Bridge over a stream. Stop on the bridge.

3. Harnessing the power

Quaking Bridge

Here is the first of the waterways on this walk. It's actually a part of the River Thames that was diverted and the name – Castle Mill Stream – gives a clue. A mill once stood adjacent to the stone tower of the castle here. In fact there was a mill here in Saxon times although all traces have now gone.

Why did a mill need a stream? A stream or river flows at a relatively steady rate down a gradient under the influence of gravity. However, it is possible to divert water from a river into a mill stream. It can be stored in a holding pond or reservoir. Then it can be released on requirement and used to turn a wheel and thereby power machines (whether a windmill or steam-driven equipment).



Castle Mill Stream showing the castle tower and mill (1901)
© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre



Wareham Stream and Morrells Brewery (1920)
© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre

This basic technology has been used all over the world for centuries. So a mill stream such as this one is evidence of a river's potential power being harnessed for industrial use.

When you walk alongside Castle Mill Stream to the next stop, look out for another smaller stream on the left. This is called the Wareham Stream. Its purpose was to ensure that water could bypass the Castle Mill at times of high flow. It probably also enabled boats to do the same via an ancient forerunner of the sluice which links the two waterways. More recently the Wareham Stream fed Oxford's last surviving brewery, Morrell's, which was located nearby.

As well as providing power for the mill the stream was a physical barrier. If anyone attacked the city from the west they would have to cross this stream. Hence the original Saxon fort was positioned behind the stream where the current castle now lies.

The role of Oxford's rivers in defending the city is something you'll hear more about later in the walk. You'll also come across more mill streams and mill sites, all of which tap into the readily-available water for power generation, manufacturing processes and the transportation of goods.



Castle Mill Stream today
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 3

From Quaking Bridge, go along Fisher Row with Castle Mill Stream on your right. Go up the steps to Park End Street and turn right. Cross over at the traffic lights. Stop at the side of The Duke's Cut public house, facing the car park behind.

Note: To avoid the steps up from Lower Fisher Row, go along Tidmarsh Lane, which runs parallel to Castle Mill Stream. At the junction with Park End Street, The Duke's Cut will be directly opposite.

4. The end and a new beginning

The Duke's Cut public house

The name of this building gives another clue about the waterways of Oxford. A 'cut' is another word for a canal. The pub name commemorates a very short stretch of canal built to link the Oxford Canal with the River Thames a few miles north of Oxford. It was financed by the Duke of Marlborough – hence The Duke's Cut.

In the late eighteenth century canals were opening up new possibilities for towns and cities throughout the land. Oxford was located far from any coalfields and ports so suffered from a scarcity of fuel. A canal would provide the answer – a link to the coalfields of central England.



The Duke's Cut pub
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Thus the Oxford Canal was constructed linking Oxford with Coventry, Banbury and Rugby to the north. It is 78 miles long and took over 20 years to build. The final stretch into central Oxford was the last bit to be completed and the car park here is the site of the original terminus of the Oxford Canal.



Oxford Canal bicentenary plaque
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

It opened on New Year's Day in 1790. According to Jackson's Oxford Journal, a weekly newspaper, the first coal boat to arrive was greeted "by a vast concourse of people, with loud huzzas, and an ox having been roasted whole upon the wharf ... the band struck up 'The Roast Beef of England', a favourite tune, and well applied".

The Oxford Canal Company soon found this first terminus was too small for their needs. They subsequently purchased the site on which Nuffield College now stands, just across the road from the car park.

Daniel Harris, the prison governor-cum civil engineer, was contracted by the canal company to undertake work in both of these wharves. His convicts were kept quite busy in completing and extending the final lines of the canal and constructing warehouses into the first years of the nineteenth century.

Both sites were sold to William Morris, the car manufacturer, in the 1930s. Nuffield College was built on one, taking its name from the title with which he was honoured in 1938: Lord Nuffield.



Nuffield College gates
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The other site, the car park, remains ripe for development. There is a strong prospect of parts of the Georgian canal infrastructure being restored as part of the design. At the next stop we will see where the canal was truncated prior to draining of the basin.

Directions 4

Go past the front of The Duke's Cut pub. After crossing the bridge turn right to continue along Fisher Row with Castle Mill Stream on your right. When you reach Hythe Bridge Street, you need to cross the road and go over the bridge to continue along the stream on the opposite side. Do use the pedestrian crossing as this road is very busy. A short way along the path is the end of the canal. Stop at a circular monument with six protruding black and white beams.

Note: To avoid the steps on Fisher Row, follow the pavement which skirts the car park alongside Worcester Street, cross Hythe Bridge Street at the lights and turn left. The canal path is on the right immediately before the bridge.

5. A thousand-year-old wharf

Hythe Bridge Pocket Park

The name of the street and bridge that you have just crossed once again provides evidence for our story of the waterways of Oxford. The word 'hythe' in the name of the street and bridge is an old English word for a wharf or landing place. This was probably the site of riverside commercial activities. Materials such as timber, slate, hay and Cotswold stone (some used in the construction of college buildings) were unloaded here and on the opposite bank for centuries. A bridge has existed here since at least the beginning of the thirteenth century.



Working narrow boats on the Oxford Canal (1927)
© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre

The route you have just walked along Lower and Middle Fisher Rows marks the edge of St Thomas' parish. Historically this was the home of many families involved in both the river and canal trade. Many delivered the malt which was essential to another mainstay of the local economy: brewing. Brewing not only relied on the river to bring in raw materials but also used a lot of water in its processes, so the prevalence of streams in this low-lying suburb made it ideal for the brewing industry.



The Oxford Retreat, formerly the Nag's Head
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Many of the streams and all the breweries have now vanished but from here, looking back across the Mill Stream, you can see two reminders of the former importance of brewing and public houses.

The Oxford Retreat markets itself as a boutique pub but for most of its existence it was the Nag's Head and known as the boating pub of Oxford. Over the last two centuries innumerable sales of boats and equipment occurred there and countless men found employment as crew or hauliers.

The building on the opposite side of the street was also formerly a pub. It was called the Running Horses. Both pub names – the Nag’s Head and the Running Horses – reflect the importance of horses in the days of the working canal boats.

We are now going to follow the canal towpath which was constructed wide enough to accommodate those horses. Nowadays you won’t see any horses but what you will see are residential narrow boats, one of several Oxford floating communities. I’ve lived here for the last twenty years and it’s the historical and aesthetic interest of this particular locality that first inspired my interest in Oxford’s waterways. I hope you’ll see what I mean as we continue.



Residential narrow boats along the Oxford Canal
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 5

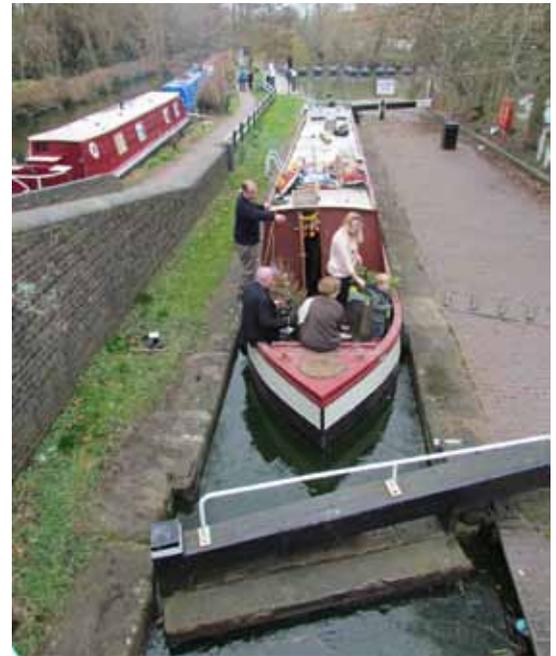
Follow the towpath with Castle Mill Stream on your left and the Oxford Canal on your right. Stop at the lock.

6. A lousy past

Isis Lock

As you heard earlier the arrival of the canal in 1790 was a cause for celebration in Oxford but its completion had a wider national importance too. The canal not only linked Oxford with the coalfields of the Midlands but also connected with the River Thames here in Oxford. It was thus the shortest water route between the Midlands and London. The idea was that boats loaded with coal and manufactured goods could move onto the Thames here or transfer their cargoes to Thames barges and continue their journey to the capital.

Obviously a manmade canal cannot simply flow into a natural river. A lock was needed to make the transition. The first lock, located near where we last stopped, proved inadequate because it consisted merely of a single gate. This meant that with every passage of a boat from one waterway to the other, the canal, being higher, lost considerable quantities of water.



Narrow boat going through Isis Lock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

So Daniel Harris, the prison governor, was asked to build a replacement. He selected this location and built it with two gates like all others on the canal. This had two main advantages: less water was used and the boats enjoyed a much smoother passage. The lock here – Isis Lock – opened in 1797. (Isis is the name for the stretch of the Thames as it passes through Oxford.)



Isis Lock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

For the next 15 years the Oxford Canal was one of the most important and profitable transport links in Britain. But its pivotal significance in connecting the Midlands with London was short-lived. The Grand Union Canal opened between London and Birmingham in 1805. It provided a more direct route between the Midlands and London and was faster because there were fewer locks. It was also wider. The importance of the Oxford Canal was further diminished half a century later when the railway reached Oxford.

Originally the Isis Lock was twice the width of the version you see today. This was to enable the wider barges of the river to access the central wharves but the traffic lost to the Grand Union Canal meant that there was little interchange between the river and the canal. The decision was made in 1844 to reduce the width of the lock chamber in order to save water.

Despite the sharp decline of commercial traffic, the lock still performs the same function today as it originally did, using much the same technology as it always has, by enabling boats to move between the River Thames and the Oxford Canal.



Thames Path sign
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 6

Cross the bridge over the canal then turn immediately left to cross the bridge over Castle Mill Stream. At Rewley Road, go straight across and follow the path under the railway bridge. This bridge is very low so please mind your head. If a train passes overhead it can be a little alarming so be prepared for that too! At the junction of waterways is a footbridge on the left. Cross the bridge and stop on the other side.

7. Where the rivers meet

Four Streams, Rewley

This spot has been known as 'Four Streams' since at least the 1750s. While many of Oxford's smaller streams and rivulets have vanished, four are still very evident here. They form a cross of rivers more or less aligned to the cardinal compass points.

We have followed the course of one – the short waterway which feeds into the Castle Mill Stream – and this is known as the Sheepwash Channel. Its evocative name probably stems from the proximity of the thirteenth-century Cistercian Abbey of Rewley which used the wool from its flocks of sheep to make the white habits which distinguish the order.



Sheepwash Channel
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Opposite is the Bulstake Stream although it is sometimes partly obscured by trees; it flows to the west. Together, the Sheepwash and the Bulstake comprised part of the main Thames navigation until the end of the eighteenth century entailing a long and troublesome westerly detour. The Sheepwash is still part of this essential navigation route; the Bulstake was closed to boats in the 1850s when an open-air bathing place was established there. It was, and still is, called Tumbling Bay which is an old term for the outfall from a river, often manmade.



Boat moored at Four Streams
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The third and fourth streams constitute today's main River Thames. We will follow the fourth, the branch of the Thames flowing south towards Osney Lock. It was only once this lock was operational that boats could avoid the Bulstake Stream and take a much shorter route. Daniel Harris was instrumental in this change, as we shall see later but his influence is also all around us here at 'Four Streams'.

It was Harris who instigated the dredging of what were formerly minor streams to make them suitable for heavy cargo boats. He also strengthened the banks, built up the towpath and oversaw various other works in the 1790s. It is just one of the many locations along a thirty-mile stretch of the river where the combination of his engineering skills and use of convict labour had immediate and lasting benefits. Harris also constructed the first bridge over the mouth of the Sheepwash; we have just walked over its more recent successor.



The main Thames channel at Four Streams
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 7

Follow the towpath with the river on your right and the backs of houses on your left. At Botley Road you need to cross the road and the bridge to continue on the towpath on the opposite side. This is a very busy road so you should use the pedestrian crossing down to the left. Immediately after crossing the bridge take the footbridge on the left and go down the steps to North Street. Stop at the corner of North Street and East Street beside the bridge.

8. Town and Gown united

Corner of North Street and East Street, Osney Island

We are now on Osney Island. The 'ey' ending in the name 'Osney' has Saxon origins. The old English word for an island – spelled eyot but pronounced aight – survives still at various points on the river both upstream and downstream from here.

The first part of the word Osney is debatable. The sixteenth-century historian, Raphael Holinshed, considered that the true name of England's principal river was the Ouse but that some people "doo ignorantlie call it the Thames".



One of the bridges onto Osney Island
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

William Camden, whose *Britannia* was the first complete topographical survey of the country, developed this theme by claiming that the very name Oxford derived from 'Ousford' on account of the many islands here being collectively known as Ouseneys. But there's a more plausible origin of the city name that we shall hear about later on.



A rare example of the University and the City
crests together
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Look at the road bridge you have just crossed. In its centre is a plaque of great significance. There are two sets of arms: the city arms of the ox and the ford on the right and the University arms of the open book and three crowns on the left. This public proclamation of 'Town and Gown' unity is almost unique. In fact there is only one other comparable example in the entire city which demonstrates just how deep-seated and enduring the centuries-old rivalry between the two factions has been.

There have been regular physical confrontations between Oxford's townsmen and its scholars since at least the thirteenth century. Bargemen were often identified as the principal troublemakers, an idea sustained in numerous works of nineteenth-century fiction. St Thomas' parish, where we have been throughout the walk so far, was home to many bargemen in those days and gained a particularly unwelcome reputation.

Osney Island, surrounded by streams, is prone to flooding. These days there are sluice gates by Osney Bridge which control the flow especially at times of high water but the island is still vulnerable. As you walk along East Street note how the foundations of the houses are lower than the river. Would you want to live in such a flood-risk area? You'll see other parts of the floodplain later in the walk and find out why no development has taken place there.



The Electric Light Company opposite Osney Island which used river water to cool the turbines
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 8

Go along East Street with the river on your left hand side. Where the road turns right into South Street is a pub which, until recently, was known as the Bargeman's Arms. Join the riverside path at this point and follow it over the overflow weirs to the lock. Stop at the far end of the lock.

9. Flooding and fiction

Osney Lock

The original lock here was completed, though not designed, by Daniel Harris in 1790. As the first lock encountered by narrowboats coming off the Oxford Canal it was, and still is, particularly important.

The two large weirs you have crossed are indicative of the volume of water which sometimes flows this way. They help ease the danger of flooding for Osney Island. Ensuring the safe passage of boats is one important duty of a lock-keeper; regulating the flow of water to minimise the risk of flooding – or indeed the risk of the river being too shallow – is another.

On the far side of the lock once stood Osney Abbey, an enormous twelfth-century building, of which only a small fragment now remains. In its prime it was not only an important religious centre but also a major contributor to the local economy. One person who found profitable employment there was John, Chaucer's fictional carpenter from *The Miller's Tale*. Composed as one of *The Canterbury Tales* at the end of the fourteenth century, *The Miller's Tale* is not only the earliest example of fiction set in Oxford but its plot also depends on the aspect of the city's geography that we have already mentioned: its vulnerability to flooding.



Osney Mill, built on the site of a 12th century abbey
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Osney Lock sign
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Osney Lock, 1857. The original was completed in 1790
The Book of the Thames by Mr & Mrs S C Hall (1859)

The choice of a miller as the narrator is also influenced by the nature of Oxford's watery environment with its many watermills – including one within the Abbey itself. Town and Gown differences are apparent too, and this use by Chaucer of Oxford's distinctive physical and human geography as the inspiration for the plot is something other authors have done ever since. Oxford features in innumerable works of fiction, and on the basis that the geography of today is the history of tomorrow, it is a city where historical insights abound within the imagination of its novelists and poets. You'll hear some more examples later in the walk.

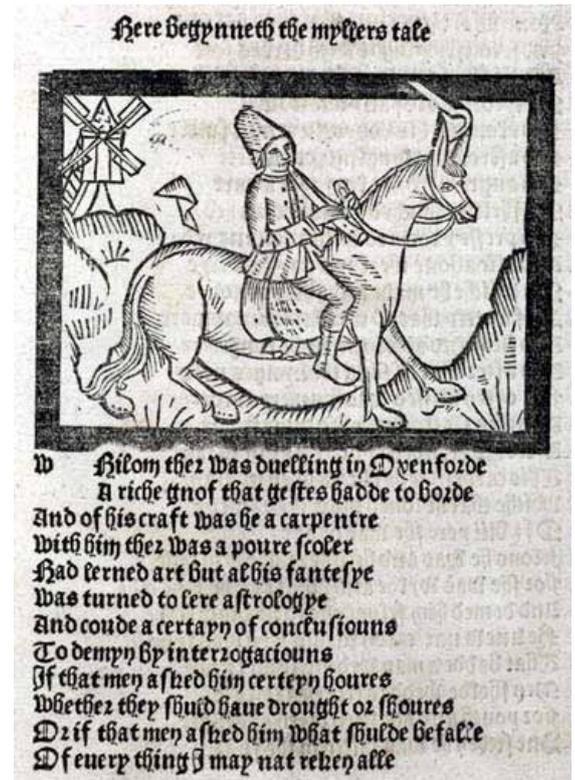


Illustration of Robin the Miller, in a 1492 edition of *The Canterbury Tales*
Wikimedia Commons
(Creative Commons License)

Directions 9

At the end of the lock cross the footbridge and off Osney Island. Continue along the towpath with the river on your left. After some distance cross another footbridge over Bulstake Stream and then under the railway. Where the path forks keep right which will lead you gently uphill and onto a path running parallel to the river. When you reach the large bridge go onto it and stop here.

10. An elevated position

Gas Works Bridge

Here's another rare reminder that the story of Oxford is not only about the University: it was also an industrial city. This bridge was constructed in 1886 as a short railway branch line which connected the gas works which formerly dominated both banks here. Once the works closed in the 1970s the open space on one side was not developed. Even though it is elevated enough to be secure from the threat of floods, the ground was too polluted. You'll see another example of how a polluting land-use has prevented development later on.



The old gasworks (1963)
© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre

Just beside the bridge you can see where the main Thames is joined by Castle Mill Stream that you walked alongside earlier on. Both Castle Mill Stream and Bulstake Stream define two islands, one on either side of the path we have taken. These two large islands are further divided by other smaller streams.

The land on the far bank was where several of the earliest theological halls were located. Names like Friars' Wharf and Old Greyfriars' Street remain as clues to the religious nature of the establishments which evolved to become the colleges of the University. But the river margins here were prone to flooding, as we have already heard, and so the colleges were established on a more elevated location on the gravel terrace moulded by the river thousands of years ago. Meanwhile the city's poorer citizens were left to deal with the river's whims as best they could. Thus Town and Gown divisions have not simply been about physical confrontations or political manoeuvrings but also about geographical placement.

Directions 10

Leave Gas Works Bridge the way you came, turn left and take the footpath on the left back down to the riverside. Follow the towpath with the river on your left. After some distance go under a footbridge and pass the end of Marlborough Road. Stop where the riverside path meets the corner of Cobden Crescent and Buckingham Street.

11. The Oxen-ford

Corner of Cobden Crescent and Buckingham Street

The stone bridge that you can see is the successor to one built here originally by the Normans. They called it Grandpont and the district to the south of the river is still known by this name. The bridge itself is now called Folly Bridge, derived from an ancient gatehouse, known as Welcome's Folly, which stood sentinel here until the 1770s.

You can see from here that the river splits into two. The wider branch to the left was formerly more of a basin where boats could moor or wait, while passing traffic used the right hand channel by means of a lock which was removed at the end of the nineteenth century. Nowadays boats can travel on either branch.



Aerial view of Folly Bridge and the island
© Webb Aviation www.webbaviation.co.uk

What is particularly significant about Folly Bridge is that it is the site of the original ford. A ford is a shallow point in a stream or river than can be crossed on foot by humans or horses – or indeed by farmers with their oxen, hence Oxen-ford. Thus this geographical feature gave name to a now world-famous city. The earliest written form of the name occurred in one of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles of 911AD. There are several other possible locations of Oxford's original ford but this is accepted as by far the most likely.

Directions 11

Continue along the riverbank. Go over the footbridge and up to Abingdon Road. Use the pedestrian crossing to go straight across and down the slope back to the riverbank. Stop on the next footbridge.

12. Leisure boating

Folly Bridge, downstream side

So far you have heard about the river being used for industrial purposes. The ferrymen and goods' wharves may long have disappeared but the river is still used for leisure purposes. Two companies offer regular passenger trips from either side of Folly Bridge: Oxford River Cruises is a small newcomer on the far side of the bridge and on this side is Salters Steamers, which have operated from here since 1858.

In many other towns and cities leisure boating is a relatively recent trend but Oxford is unusual in that respect. Its waterways have probably almost always provided some employment for recreational activities.



'Cliveden', one of Salters steamers (1911)
© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre

Successive generations of students have constituted a clientele which was virtually unique in having the time, the money, and the inclination for such frivolous pastimes. Today it is tourists which sustain this ancient hospitality trade.

Someone who regularly enjoyed outings on the Thames was the Oxford lecturer and author, Lewis Carroll. He was based at Christ Church, the nearest college to the river, and embarked on frequent summer rowing trips with the daughters of the Dean, one of whom was called Alice. As a result of these many outings in the 1850s and 1860s, Oxford's two most famous pieces of fiction were created: 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' and 'Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There'.

Continue a distance to the next footbridge. From there you will see a three-storey mansion. This is Grandpont House. A novel of the mid-nineteenth century described it as an "eccentric mansion ... possessing in the place of cellars an ingenious system of small rivers". Built in 1785 these arched foundations were one architect's way of combating the ever-present threat of flooding. As we almost instantly leave urban Oxford behind you will see that very few others have attempted the same.

Directions 12

Continue on the riverside path. Look for an arched footbridge on the opposite side of the river. Stop opposite this bridge.

13. Two become one

Confluence of the Thames and Cherwell

The river that you can see opposite, which joins the Thames at this point, is Oxford's other main river, the Cherwell. The name is spelled Cherwell, but the first 'e' is pronounced as an 'a'. It originates 32 miles away near Daventry in Northamptonshire. Whereas the Thames provided ancient defence for the city from the west and south, the Cherwell was a barrier for the eastern side of the city.

Like the Thames the Cherwell divides into several smaller streams which subsequently merge. This process is called 'braiding' and is characteristic of medium-sized rivers flowing over a flat landscape.



Confluence of the Thames and Cherwell
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

As you saw earlier at Osney Island, braided rivers often flood, which means that the braided channels of the Thames to the west of the city centre and the braided channels of the Cherwell to the east of the city centre have both constrained the city's expansion.

You can see one example of this opposite. Christ Church Meadow is completely undeveloped. The nearest building, Christ Church itself, is more than 500 metres distant. As we heard earlier the colleges wanted to establish themselves on slightly higher ground safe from potential flooding.



Colleges just visible across Christ Church Meadow
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Depending on the time of year you should be able to see through the trees the buildings of Christ Church with its cathedral spire; the tower of Merton College, just that safe little bit farther away from the river and slightly elevated; Magdalen College tower, a safe distance from the Thames but positioned immediately next to the Cherwell; and the spire of the University church of St Mary the Virgin, removed from both rivers. St Mary's is on Oxford's High Street, known simply as the High, or, in this context perhaps, the High and Dry!

The colleges' decision paid off. Christ Church Meadow has flooded a number of times. The floods were particularly severe in 1852 and again in 1860. This is thought to be the basis for the otherwise illogical 'Wool and Water' episode in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, where Alice finds herself suddenly transposed from a shop into a rowing boat. It just goes to show that even the most fantastic and imaginative of all works of Oxford fiction can teach us about the city's geography!



'The Innundation of Oxford'
A drawing of the 1852 floods which covered Christ Church Meadows
Illustrated London News (04 December 1852)



Illustrations by John Tenniel for 'Wool & Water' in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*

But just imagine if Christ Church Meadow were not flood prone land. It would have been built upon many centuries ago and we would not be able to enjoy this famous and classic view of the 'dreaming spires' skyline.

Directions 13

Continue a short distance further along the riverside path. Stop opposite the row of boathouses on the bank.

14. Flowing prose

Opposite college boathouses

All kinds of boats can be seen along this stretch of river. From the middle of the nineteenth century the bank opposite was graced by a small fleet of ornate college barges. These had two functions: to provide changing facilities for the college rowing crews and to act as a vantage point for spectators. Gradually from the 1930s onwards, these picturesque vessels were replaced by the boathouses which line the bank opposite.

Once again it is fiction which provides us with some of the best means of comprehending the sporting significance of this stretch of the river. The earliest recorded inter-college races were in 1815 but it is only since the mid-nineteenth century that rowing has been the pre-eminent University sport.



Some of the 1930s college boathouses
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



A rowing competition (c1900-1910) with spectators watching from college barges
© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre

Since then few authors of Oxford novels have been oblivious to the dramatic possibilities presented by the competitive nature these annual events where the hero could, almost inevitably, help his college triumph against the odds. These races, plus a Town and Gown riot, are two themes which very few books of the nineteenth century omit. Authors such as Thomas Hardy, Dorothy L Sayers, Thomas Hughes, Jerome K Jerome, WH Auden and Henry James have all, in some way, captured the true drama which has unfolded on this vibrant section of the river every summer for nearly two hundred years.

Directions 14

Continue along the riverside footpath for some distance. Go past a boat house on the right and then cross a pair of footbridges. A short way further and almost at the next bridge over the Thames is a boat house on the opposite bank and immediately to the left of it is a white barge. Stop opposite this barge.

15. Pollution and preservation

Opposite the former Corpus Christi College Barge

The barge opposite was formerly that of Corpus Christi College. It is one of the few remaining examples of the college barges which once lined the bank of Christ Church Meadow that we heard about at the last stop.

We have already heard that flooding is the main reason why there is no development along the river banks. Another reason is the ecological value of the river margins which is preserved thanks to the diligence of charities such as the Oxford Preservation Trust. The OPT actually own the land opposite where the barge is moored. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, mainly on account of its population of rare snakes head fritillaries (a type of wild flower with a distinctive checked marking).



The former Corpus Christi College barge
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Snake's head fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*)
© H Zill, Wikimedia Commons

There is yet another reason for the lack of development beside the river in some places – one that we came across earlier in the walk. Look back at the bank opposite the way we have come. That is Aston's Eyot. No-one seems sure who Aston was, but you heard about the word eyot earlier – a Saxon word meaning island and sometimes abbreviated to the 'ey' ending as in Osney. Aston's Eyot looks like a natural island, doesn't it? Believe it or not, it was formerly a city rubbish dump. Just as no one wanted to build on the polluted ground of the former gas works that we saw earlier, so too the former dump is unattractive for development and thus remains a semi-natural environment.

Directions 15

Continue along the riverside path. Go under Donnington Road Bridge erected in 1962 near the site of an old ferry. Continue on the path until you reach Iffley Lock. Go over the stone footbridge to the left. As you cross note the ramps and rollers once used to haul small boats from one level to the next without the need to enter the lock chamber. Stop beside the lock.

16. The Waterpoet

Iffley Lock

We heard earlier about the creation of the Oxford Canal and its connection to the Thames which was set to become the most important route between the Midlands and London. In order to take industrial barges the river needed widespread modifications because its many mills, fishing grounds, shallows, weirs and rapids presented difficulties for navigation. But the improvement works from the 1780s onwards were not the first time that the efforts were made to make the Thames more navigable.

In 1631, at the request of King Charles I, a London waterman called John Taylor made the first ever survey of the entire River Thames from source to mouth. This was a serious undertaking designed to assess the improvements needed to make the river more easily navigable.



John Taylor, the Water Poet (1630)
Wikipedia (Creative Commons License)

Slightly unconventionally, Taylor chose to compose much of his report in verse. Surely the House of Lords can never have received an official report quite like it, before or since! It began:

*Right noble Lords, with sorrow I beheld,
That which I write my duty hath compel'd,
And (from my pen) the Thames flow'd to the presse,
From thence it ebbs to you to find redresse.*



From Taylor's report we know that there were just three locks at the time on the Thames and one was here at Iffley. It was on the far side of the island on which the lock cottage now stands and was a pound or chamber lock with two gates. Most locks of the time were 'flash' locks: simple obstructions designed simply to hold back the flow and then removed temporarily to allow the boats to move over or round obstructions with the resultant surge or 'flash' of water.

Iffley Lock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

In the decade following Taylor's survey of the Thames, England was in the grip of Civil War. King Charles I was based in Oxford and the city was under siege for long periods. The rivers needed to be clean and uncluttered both for reasons of public health and to facilitate the conveyance of ammunition, fuel, supplies and men. Taylor, who had become the principal propagandist for the Royalist cause, used prisoners to clear the rivers for this purpose. This is summarised in the delightful couplet:

*And now and then was punisht a Deliquent,
By which good meanes away the filth and stink went.*

150 years later, Daniel Harris would certainly have approved of this use of convict labour.



Rollers at Iffley Lock, which allowed small boats to bypass the lock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 16

At the end of Iffley Lock cross the footbridge on the right and then turn left to continue along the riverside path with the river on your left. Go under Donnington Bridge which carries the southern ring road. After some distance go across a footbridge and then under a railway bridge. Immediately after the railway bridge is the entrance to a field which has electricity pylons running across.

Note: The route beyond Donnington Bridge is not suitable for wheelchairs. From here you can use the cycle path alongside the bypass to reach the Redbridge Park and Ride (about 700 metres) and from there catch a bus back to the city centre or collect your car.

17. The last tributary

Kennington Railway Bridge

The stream which joins the Thames here is called the Weirs Mill Stream. The confluence here constitutes the final reunification of all of the many braided branches of the Thames through and around Oxford. As a consequence the next lock at Sandford is especially capacious.

You are about to walk across the 40-acre Colin and Olive Walker Field named after the couple from whom it was purchased by the Oxford Preservation Trust in 1972. Although this low-lying land is too flood-prone to build on, this acquisition by the Trust will ensure that that always remains the case, as we saw earlier with the Trust's land by the Corpus Christi barge.



The Colin and Olive Walker Field
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Across the field and beyond the railway line is the settlement of Kennington. The second two syllables of the name reveal its Saxon origins so it is a very ancient village. If you look at the map you will see that the village is very elongated along one main road. We call this a ribbon settlement. The reasons for this shape is the available land. On rising ground to the west is extensive woodland; on lower ground to the east is the river flood plain. Just as we saw with the University's buildings in the city, so too has this village positioned itself on slightly higher ground to be sufficiently elevated from the unpredictable surges of the river's flooding episodes. This elevated ground is actually a river gravel terrace – a large deposit of material dumped on the river banks after the last Ice Age when the amount of water in the river was much greater.

Directions 17

Continue along the riverside path through the field with the river on your left and the pylons on your right. At the next footbridge turn left over the bridge following signs for Sandford Lock. Follow the path which lies between the two river channels. Stop on the next footbridge.

Note: After wet weather this section from Kennington Railway Bridge to Sandford Lock may be waterlogged and boots are recommended. Alternatively you can use the surfaced cycle path beside the railway.

18. Swept down the lasher

Sandford lasher

Opposite is another of the former college barges. This one belonged to St John's and was built in 1891. It is moored in the grounds of a hotel.

From here you will hear the roar of falling water. This is a sluice linking the two branches of the Thames and designed to channel excess water away from the lock that we are about to visit. In Oxfordshire such sluices or weirs are known as lashers. The probable origin of that word is the French 'lasher', which means to release or unleash.



Sandford lasher, site of drownings both real and fictional
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

This lasher has a solemn past and drownings have unfortunately been frequent. There is a memorial to five Christ Church scholars who drowned there. You can't access it but one of them was Michael Llewellyn Davis for whom Peter Pan was invented.

Another literary link with this location is the fictional character Tom Brown who nearly came to grief when his boat was swept down the lasher here on his very first outing on the river.

Directions 18

Continue along the riverside path a short way. Stop by the lock.

19. A water turnpike

Sandford Lock

With a fall of more than eight feet this lock is the deepest on the non-tidal Thames. This is where another of the three seventeenth-century pound locks was situated, as mentioned by John Taylor. His report of 1632 alludes to the two we have encountered:

*From Oxford two miles Ifley distant is,
And there a new turnpike doth stand amisse,
Another stands at Stanford, below that,
Weeds, shelves, and shoals all waterlesse and flat.*

Did you notice that Taylor referred to the lock as a 'turnpike'. You will have heard of turnpike roads but there were also turnpike locks. Users were charged a toll to pay for upkeep and maintenance. But despite the toll money the river was in a neglected state until the wholesale improvements of the 1780s and 1790s, which brings us back to Daniel Harris. In a report of 1794 he listed the creation, improvement, or repair of an enormous number of bridges, weirs, gates, channels, towpaths, banks, and locks along a full 30 miles of the river. One of the locks he repaired – or rather, that his convicts repaired – is the one here at Sandford.



Sandford Lock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

These waterways projects weren't the only thing he was doing. During the same period he was supervising the wholesale rebuilding of the prison along with many other building, artistic, and archaeological projects. At Oxford Castle you might like to take the Oxford Unlocked tour to learn more about Harris – you may even find yourself shown around by him!

Directions 19

Remain at Sandford Lock for Stop 20.

20. A final ford

Sandford Lock

This is the end of the walk. You have walked from the city centre to this point just a few miles south but it feels as though you have been nowhere near a city at all. Anyone visiting the University quarter might see no hint of a river in Oxford but you have seen that Oxford is in essence an island city and surrounded by water.

You've seen the two main rivers – the Thames and the Cherwell – that flow either side of the city. You've discovered how these rivers divide into multiple streams which then rejoin in a process called braiding.



Approaching Osney Lock
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

You've found out how some of these streams were diverted for industrial use. You've explored the flat flood plain. You've seen how man has shaped the aquatic landscape – with a canal, locks, weirs, sluices and bridges. And you've discovered how many of the manmade features were designed by the multi-talented prison governor, Daniel Harris, and constructed by his convicts.



Gas Works Bridge
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

One interesting recurring theme throughout the walk has been how names give evidence of geographical features. The name of the city itself refers to a river crossing. The name of a neighbourhood indicated an island in the river. Names of streets, bridges and pubs all give clues to the city's waterways and their historical uses.

The story of the waterways has also highlighted the clear Town and Gown distinction in Oxford. You saw how the colleges chose higher ground safe from flooding, while residential neighbourhoods of the townspeople were in lower lying areas.

You discovered that Oxford's waterways were a place of industry and work for the people of Oxford but a place of leisure and sport for the scholars of Oxford. You have seen the contrasts of the pubs of the bargemen and the boathouses of the students.



College rowers
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Although Oxford's waterways are crucial to its physical layout, its economic history and its identity, they are peripheral and easily missed by a casual visitor to the city. I hope that through this walk you have come to appreciate more the physical and social importance of Oxford's natural and manmade waterways.



Riverside resident
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 20

There are two means of getting back to Oxford by public transport from Sandford. You can walk across the lock and up Church Road to the village of Sandford where a limited local bus service operates.

Alternatively follow Sandford Lane to the right just below the lock. This will lead to the main road through Kennington where buses run between Oxford and Abingdon. There is a stop near the Redbridge Park and Ride if you have parked your car there.

Either way you will probably want to rest awhile at The King's Arms, a pub which is rare in having retained the same name for all its known history. It features in numerous works of fiction.

Credits

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

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Further information

Find out more about the walk story and places of interest along the route:

The Abingdon Waterturnpike Murder: A True-life Tale of Crime and Punishment

by Mark Davies, Oxford Towpath Press, 2003

Alice in Waterland: Lewis Carroll & the River Thames in Oxford

by Mark Davies, Signal Books, 2010

The Boat Race

www.theboatrace.org

Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen & Canal Boatmen in Oxford 1500 - 1900

by Mary Prior, Clarendon Press, 1982

Friends of Aston's Eyot

friendsofastonseeyot.org.uk

Osney Island Community website

www.osneyisland.org.uk

The Oxford Canal

oxford-canal.co.uk

The Oxford College Barges: Their History, Architecture and Use

by Claire Sherriff, Unicorn Press, 2003

Oxford Flood Alliance

www.oxfordfloodalliance.org.uk

Oxford Preservation Trust

www.oxfordpreservation.org.uk

Stories of Oxford Castle: From Dungeon to Dunghill

by Mark Davies, Oxford Towpath Press, 2005

A Towpath Walk In Oxford: The Canal and River Thames between Wolvercote and the City

by Mark Davies and Catherine Robinson, Oxford Towpath Press, 2001





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