

So Why Did The Oxen Need A Ford?

As we all know, Oxford's name derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'Oxnaforda', a ford for oxen. Or does it? The first literary appearance of the name is in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year A.D. 912. The prefix 'Oxna' appeared in many different forms on coins of that period minted in Oxford. The Middle English version, 'Oxenford', has been shortened to Oxford, though the longer form is still in use other than as the city's name. The latinized form of the name is 'Oxonia'. Oxon, an abbreviation of this, has been in use continuously since the twelfth century as a short form of the county's name.

Obviously this is all to do with oxen. Yet there are queries. Where exactly was this ford? Why in Anglo-Saxon times did oxen need a ford across a major river? Why should such a ford be so important that a city was named after it?

It is agreed that the ford came first. The seventeenth-century antiquary **Leonard Hutten**, relying on a work published in the reign of Edward III, wrote of 'The Saxons, from a certaine Ford neare unto the Towne, named Oxenford'. **Anthony Wood** says the Anglo-Saxons styled it 'after the same signification as the Graecians did their Bosphoros and the Germans Ochenfurt on the river Oder'. In his history of Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire, **John Blair** says the ford was of recognised importance before the settlement attained any size (perhaps even before it came into existence). **Margaret Gelling**'s investigation of Oxfordshire place-names tells us that most of the county's fords gave rise to settlements at their sites. She believes, however, that in the case of Oxford the existence of the ford was a secondary consideration, the main reason for choice of site being defence. That a settlement should arise at the site of a major ford is natural. Settlements often arose at crossroads; which, in a sense, a ford is, the river being a highway too. In the Anglo-Saxon period, the river Thames was more important as a highway than many roads.

Like most commentators Blair locates the ford in what seems the obvious place: the highway, or rather causeway, which gives its name to the district of Grandpont. This is where Folly Bridge now crosses the Thames or Isis, which towards the end of the eighth century A.D. formed part of the boundary between Mercia and Wessex. The north-south road was a main trading route between central Mercia and the Channel ports. It ran, says Blair, 'from Offa's citadel at Tamworth, through Coventry and Banbury, and then down the Banbury Road to the broad Thames crossing, which may already in Offa's time have been known as the "oxenford"'.

Recent archaeological evidence points to the construction of an artificial embankment in St. Aldate's during Offa's reign. This would have formed part of a river crossing consisting of connected islands, embankments or causeways, and fords. By this means the trade route crossed the difficult Thames floodplain.

What are the other possible sites? Hutten located the ford downstream from Grandpont, where, near the Domesday village of Kennington, the bridge carrying the former railway line to Thame crosses the Abingdon Road. **H. E. Salter** argued for a position on the line of the present footpath from Osney Mead to Hinksey, at the point where it crosses the Bullstake stream. The 1988 *Encyclopedia of Oxford* suggests that Magdalen Bridge 'may be [the crossing] of the original "ox ford"'. Binsey and Parson's Pleasure have also been suggested, but in his *Early History of Oxford* **James Parker** insists that Folly Bridge 'occupies the site very nearly, if not exactly, of the older fords over the shallow streams which intersected [the water meadows]'. He adds: 'Possibly, indeed it may be said probably, this was the original

ford from which the town derived its name'. R. H. C. Davis, in a detailed refutation of Salter's suggestion published in *Oxoniensia*, gives what may be thought the definitive answer:

' . . . the original oxen's ford was indeed on the line of St. Aldate's and the Abingdon Road, but . . . did not consist of one particular ford, but of a whole series of fords which could be negotiated by heavy ox-carts . . . it would have been by far the most serious obstacle for traffic on the route from Northampton to Southampton, and it is not in the least surprising to find that it was eventually converted into an elaborate causeway.'

The word 'oxen' was a synonym for cattle; they were used for hauling carts and wagons, and for ploughing in teams of eight. The amount of work which such a team could do in an average year was converted into a unit of land measurement, an oxgang being the holding of a man who could contribute one ox to a co-operative eight-ox team.

In primitive societies cattle were a form of wealth akin to money. They were so valuable that rustling was widely prevalent. Around 973 King Edgar issued a set of regulations intended to suppress traffic in stolen cattle. So might the oxen have been driven over the ford in a form of currency movement? The only ordinary money in use in later Saxon and early medieval times was the silver penny, but, as Henry Loyn points out in a history of Anglo-Saxon money, its value was so high that it was impractical for most people to carry it around in their pockets or purses, so fines, tributes or amercements were sometimes levied in oxen rather than money.

Drove ways or drove roads, along which cattle were driven for long distances, are a feature existing from prehistoric days. One such way, starting near Shaftesbury in Dorset, is known as the Ox Drove. Blair creates an image of Mercian herdsmen:

'Tramping down the Banbury road to the place where the Martyrs' Memorial now stands, the herdsman of 950 would see a rampart of coursed rubble walling, topped by a parapet and fronted by a ditch. Once through the low central North Gate, he would find ahead of him a broad roadway of compacted limestone cobbles and gravel, running on over the central crossroads at Carfax and dipping down towards the river . . . As he drove his herd through the South Gate and down onto the cobbled ford, the church and houses of the priests of St. Frideswide's [now Christ Church], over on his left, would seem to dwarf all other buildings in their scale and density.'

We are left with this question. Why did the fact that this was an 'oxen-ford' become a matter of notoriety hardly replicated elsewhere in England? Why was the village or town named after the 'oxen-ford' rather than, for example, the already existing convent of St. Frideswide? Blair suggests it is because this was a deep ford, and that only the valuable oxen had legs long and strong enough for a footing to be retained when waters were high.

If we examine the names of the early fords in Oxfordshire it is not really surprising to find one named after oxen. Of 31 fords in the county, eight were named after the owner, three after the goods carried across (barley, hay and salt), twelve after geographical features, four after the animals crossing (geese, oxen, sheep and swine) and four for other reasons.

We find also that at least two other English Oxfords, admittedly of insignificant importance, have existed. An A.D. 937 grant of land at Brydancumbe in Wiltshire included a location named 'Oxnaford.' Richard de Aquila, who died in 1176, gave the manor of Oxenford in Surrey to the monks of Waverley.

There is an 'Oxford' in Germany, as Wood pointed out in the passage cited above, in Bavaria on the river Main (not, as Wood suggested, the Oder) and the modern spelling is Ochsenfurt. Wood also mentioned the 'Bosphoros', more usually spelt Bosphorus or Bosphorus. This comes from the Greek word β—ροθοφ meaning ox ford. It denotes the strait of eighteen miles which separates the Black Sea from the Sea of Marmora, traditionally regarded as the frontier between Europe and Asia. It is curious that an ox ford should have traversed this ancient boundary, and confirms the economic importance of such crossings in former times.

However, let us pause. It is entirely possible that, though Oxford was indeed named after a ford located at what is now Folly Bridge, it was not after all a ford specifically reserved for oxen. Parker advances the theory that the prefix *Ox* may derive not from the animal but from the Celtic word for a river, often found in the form 'Ouse'. This name was once applied to the Thames where it flows past Oxford, and survives in the form Oseney or Osney ('osen eye' or island in the Ouse).

The prefix 'Tam' was often but not invariably added to this root, leading to the form 'Tam-esis'. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle it is spelt 'Tem-ese' in about twenty places. Parker plausibly writes: 'That a ford over [the Thames] should be called from the river, is more likely to have been the case than from certain cattle which may have crossed the river . . . the Osen eye, close by the ford, has retained its softer sound, while a tributary stream [the Ock at Abingdon] has acquired a hard sound very similar to that which was acquired in Oxford.'

It follows also that the name 'Isis', as applied to the Thames around Oxford, has its origin in the second element of 'Tem-ese', that is in the form often found as 'Ouse'. Parker writes: 'Though the whole river in all historical documents has borne the name Tam-ese and never that of the Ouse or Ise . . . a part of the river probably once bore the name of Ouse; possibly of Ese or Ise'.

Perhaps the most convincing possibility regarding the origin of Oxford's name is that when the ford began to be crossed by the Anglo-Saxons the Celtic name for that part of the river was still in use, developing along the lines 'Ouse-ford', 'Osna-ford', 'Ock-ford'. The Anglo-Saxons, in a linguistic move of a type commonly found, came to regard the element sounding like 'Ox', the corruption of a Celtic word for a river, as denoting a useful animal well known to them.

Thereafter it seemed more natural to speak of 'Oxenford', until the liking for abbreviation took over and 'Oxford' won the day.

ADDENDA

Much interest was aroused among Oxford graduates by the suggestion in the above article that the name Oxford might derive not from the ford but from the fact that the Anglo-Saxons came to regard the element sounding like *Ox*, the corruption of a Celtic word for a river, as denoting what it seemed to: a useful animal well known to them. James O'Fee of County Down favoured this explanation. He said that the River Isar, on which Munich stands, has this same Celtic origin, as do the various French rivers Isère. On the other hand Andrew Breeze wrote from the University of Navarra to dispute it, citing his Oxford lessons in Celtic philology from Sir Idris Foster. Jeremy Godwin, of Drover's Lane Penrith, shared these doubts in a learned letter but Dr R. H. Findlay, writing by private bag from Port Moresby, endorsed the riverine explanation. He explained that the word "Ok" means a river even in Papua New Guinea! Dr Cath Filmer-Davies, Lecturer in Celtic at the University of Queensland, Australia, suggested a connection with the Welsh (Brythonic) word for river or water, which is 'og' as in Ogmore (Og-mere).

Mr Grayburn wrote from Leominster to say he studied place names largely through late Anglo-Saxon coins. He added: 'I find your argument compelling for the early meaning of Oxford's name, much more compelling than some of Veronica Smart's work in my field'. Mr Alan J. Barron of Ilfracombe suggested that the first syllable of Uxbridge might derive from an Ouse variant such as ochs or uchs.

Lt Cdr Brian Ashmore favoured the conventional explanation. He said: "This Oxford ford was considered the safe crossing for really heavy loads drawn by teams of up to eight oxen, and as such it gave Oxford its name". He believes Osney was named from the osiers that grew round the island. Their thin but strong growth was important for fencing and basket-making, and for the construction of weirs.

Professor **Joseph McKnight** of the Southern Methodist University, Texas, made the point that the availability of many fords around the Oxford rivers may have led to that becoming widely known as a fordable area. He went on: ‘As you suggest, these sorts of surmises seem to be less likely in origin than an association with the name of the river’.

Graham Hayward wrote a learned letter from Michigan saying that the article conveyed a number of plausible ideas. However he mentioned several points which needed further consideration. He continued with some fascinating suggestions based on his own book *Stanford's River Thames*-

‘Firstly, regarding the site of the ford, I do not think you establish the Grandpont. As you say yourself, the town is much later than the ford (which is very ancient), and was constructed where it is primarily for military reasons. The ford at Binsey is much more likely . . . The engineer who built what is now Oxford clearly preferred the crotch of Thames/Cherwell as a defensive position, but was then stuck with finding a Thames crossing . . . the ford at Binsey was in place until the late nineteen thirties.’

Colin A. Volk usefully pointed out that one should use geographical as well as historical texts, mentioning the 1954 collection *The Oxford Region*, edited by A. F. Martin and R. W. Steel. This includes an essay by the former Oxford Professor of Geography E.W. Gilbert entitled ‘The Growth of the City of Oxford’. Mr Volk says that this demonstrates the importance of clues ‘such as the geological distribution of clays (difficult to traverse) and gravels (much easier)’.

W. B. Matthews wrote from Sandford-on-Thames to point out that there is yet another Oxford in England: a hamlet on the line of the Roman road just south of Berwick-upon-Tweed. Finally Professor **Ralf Norrman**, of the University of Tampere in Finland wrote-

‘My own interest in the issue stems from the fact that where I come from (Ostrobothnia, Finland) there are a number of names beginning in *Svin-*, and the automatic assumption had been that these must refer to swine. In 1988 I instead suggested that *svin* is cognate with such words as Dutch *swin*, *zwin* “shallow water”, a much more natural explanation in my opinion. Elis Wadstein, Arthur Nordén and others have argued that this word is also the origin of the name Sweden.

‘If there have been no special fords for swine, why should there have been fords for oxen? Professor Theo Vennemann from Munich asks the same question in an article *Der Name der Landeshauptstadt (Literatur In Bayern, Heft 37 September 1994, pp. 2-8)*. “Have there been separate fords for oxen, swine, hares (and Franks)?” (p. 3). Considering that there are two Frankfurts in Germany, one on the Main (in Bavaria) and another, several hundred miles away, on the Oder, how is one to react to that?

‘Finally, I would like to suggest that if we want to assume a connection between the name Oxford and oxen, then it should be sought in a partly overlapping etymology between the first element of the name Oxford and the word ox. The humidity or wateriness connotations (which can be assumed to be the basis of the hydronym) correspond to the “moisture” connotations of the etymology for the word ox (which originally meant “bull”), cf. Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 1118, for a number of words meaning “Stier, Tiermänschen”, and in general words meaning “male”.’

This interesting suggestion is countered by the fact, mentioned above, that in Oxfordshire we do have a riverside village called *Swinford*. But it may be wrong to assume that this denotes a crossing place for pigs. Perhaps it merely denotes instead that the ford in question was shallow!