

Oxford in Watercolours

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Preface

There are few places in the world better known than Oxford. As one of the most interesting cities in Europe and with one of its oldest and greatest universities, it attracts visitors and students from across the globe. I have been fascinated by the city, its history and buildings since childhood, when I remember my parents showing me a picture of the High Street from outside The Queen's College – perhaps one of the most celebrated viewpoints with the tree on the right breaking the visual journey towards the spire of St Mary's. Later, whilst on holiday near Henley-on-Thames, I cycled with two friends to Oxford and found it my idea of an architectural heaven. We only saw a few colleges that day, including Magdalen with its beautiful grounds and Christ Church and its hall, but it was a truly magical experience.

Whilst studying fine art at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art I got to know Oxford more intimately, including its suburbs, riverside and nearby countryside, and not forgetting its wonderful libraries and the Ashmolean Museum. Over the years I have seen changes; new shops, modern college extensions, and buildings in the forefront of architectural innovation, as well as the pedestrianisation of Cornmarket Street. I love Oxford and I hope this selection of pictures conveys something of my enthusiasm for its buildings and gardens, as well as a little of the life of 'town and gown' as people go about their work and play. I have tried to select original angles – very hard in this most painted of cities – and hope I will be forgiven if there are buildings and viewpoints left out which you feel ought to have a place.

For Dorothea, Charlotte & Christian who each know and love Oxford.

Oxford from South Hinksey

Throughout the world Oxford is known as the ‘city of dreaming spires’, and there is no better angle to appreciate this than from the hillside above the western by-pass at South Hinksey. The view is perhaps best on a winter’s day with the trees retaining that tinge of brownish orange in the late afternoon sunlight. It was a mile or so to the north on Boar’s Hill that Matthew Arnold was inspired in 1853 to write *The Scholar Gypsy*. Arnold subsequently wrote in 1884, ‘I cannot describe the effect which this landscape always has upon me – the hillside with its valley, and Oxford in the great Thames valley below’. Muirhead Bone painted this view in 1946, when the gasholder in St Ebbes, softened with smoke from the Great Western Railway, broke the skyline beyond the flooded meadows. Although Oxford has grown, its development has perhaps been forestalled to the west of the railway by the waterlogged ground. Long may it remain so!



Introduction

Why another book on Oxford? This is a personal impression of one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, where there is the almost perfect marriage of landscape with buildings. Oxford is a city which has come through the centuries without major destruction by fire or war and yet does not turn its back on the 21st century. It has the most modern of academic buildings as well as the oldest, as a walk along Merton Street or South Parks Road will demonstrate. Some colleges contain buildings ranging all the way through from the medieval Gothic, through the classical, to the late 20th century. Most are in honey-coloured stone from Taynton, near Burford in the Cotswolds, or creamy white stone from nearby Headington; but one college, 19th-century Keble, is in red brick and took almost a century to subdue its critics. Oxford is also a city with suburbs of great character. Take a walk down Beaumont Street or up St John’s Street and you might think you are in Bath with stone terraces sporting balconies and verandas, or walk up the Banbury or Woodstock road and you will pass numerous Victorian red-brick Gothic villas built to accommodate dons and their families. Go east up Headington Hill to the expansion of the 1930s with roads of neat houses set well back behind mature gardens, or along the Cowley and Iffley roads towards the estates laid out to accommodate the growing work-force and their families of the Morris Motor Works. Out to the west beyond is Cumnor Hill with its detached villas which may be described as the Hampstead or Highgate of Oxford.

Oxford has been so photographed and painted that it is almost impossible to find original viewpoints so I hope I will be forgiven for including some familiar views. Using the double-page spread of my sketch book I have tried to create wide-angle views, often from pavement level. Many were painted wholly on-site from a stool on a busy pavement, or standing with my paints and water jar resting on a doorstep or window-ledge. Sometimes I had to bend down to my material on the pavement or even a traffic island which was good for exercise, if not comfort. All have been made between 2002 and 2010. The emphasis is architectural, which is, after all, the first appeal of the city, followed by the gardens and trees. Although an artist can choose what he or she wishes to include or leave out, I have tried to convey a truthful impression, and so have included cars and buses, lamp posts, bus stops, shop signs, scaffolding and other items of street furniture. Oxford, after all, is not trapped in a time-warp, and every so often sprouts a new ‘dreaming spire’, such as the ziggurat of the Said Business School. I hope this book will serve as a record of the city as it was in the first decade of the new millennium. From the artist’s point of view there is no better way to study the features and colours of the buildings than to draw them on the spot. How easy is it to spot the real from

the false windows in Peckwater Quadrangle at Christ Church? How many visitors, or even undergraduates, notice the row of lion heads on the St Giles façade of St John's College?

I have tried to capture Oxford in all seasons. Whilst a blue sky is almost imperative to promote a college to prospective applicants, or to project the image of the city in guide books and post cards, I have tried to depict Oxford in winter as well as summer, in autumn as well as spring. It is in autumn when we often have strong sunlight, but sufficiently low to create dramatic silhouettes of battlemented parapets and pinnacles against opposite quadrangle walls. It is then that the front quadrangle of Lincoln burns bright red and orange with its creeper-clad walls set off against the most famous lawn in Oxford. It is dramatic indeed to see the huge bulk of the drum and dome of the Radcliffe Camera projected against the south wall of the Bodleian Library on the north side of Radcliffe Square. To see the effect of the low sun catching the curve of the north side of the High Street on an early Sunday morning, when there is little traffic, is unforgettable, as also is the autumn sun setting directly behind St Martin's church tower at Carfax, so throwing the buildings on either side of the High Street into stark silhouette. It is a magical atmosphere in a college garden as the sounds of madrigals drift out as the summer evening light falls on a stone classical façade framed in the trees.

No longer can dons saunter down the middle of the High Street as they did in the days of J.M.W. Turner, his namesake and contemporary, Willam Turner, and his fellow Oxford artist, James Malchair. Even in Broad Street where through traffic has been banned, pedestrians have to watch for cyclists and tourist buses. The one place in Oxford which has regained its 18th-century calm is Radcliffe Square which is pedestrianized, and where the railings round the Camera, torn down in the War, have been replaced to keep the grass in immaculate condition. Even the cobblestones have been re-laid on either side of the Camera. Now the peace is only shattered by the chimes or bells of St Mary's, the sound of a game of croquet in Exeter Fellows' Garden, or students chatting on their mobile phones.

This book then is a portrait of the architecture and natural beauty of the city and its university. It attempts to show the ordinary as well as the world famous, ancient as well as modern; streets seen by everyday shoppers, students and visitors alike. It will also show a few corners, perhaps only known to those who have been fortunate enough to study here, or indeed who live here. Oxford's waterways have not been forgotten with the Thames or Isis, and Cherwell providing leafy and secluded walks with distant views of the skyline, most memorably across Port Meadow. It does not pretend to be a complete picture; it has to be selective so some colleges do not appear, such as Corpus Christi and Pembroke among the ancient foundations, or Green Templeton among modern ones. This is not to say they are architecturally undistinguished, Green Templeton has actually incorporated James Wyatt's neo-classical Radcliffe Observatory as its dining hall and senior common room. The book includes events which make up the Oxford calendar for town and gown; Degree Day at the Sheldonian, the Oxford Market at Christmas, and the Encaenia Procession. Most pictures were completed on the spot. If lucky, I found a seat in a college quadrangle or garden, or stood discretely in a corner with my paint box on a window sill and my water, in a jam jar on a doorstep or pavement. To paint the view of Oxford from South Hinksey it involved walking across a very muddy field in February, and braving a biting wind for several hours. Those who know

Oxford well will notice that the 'uniform' of the buses has changed slightly and some shop fronts as well. Trees have grown and creeper has spread.

It is natural that comparisons are often made with Cambridge. In spite of their similarity as collegiate university cities, it is impossible to claim that one is the more beautiful, or the more academic. To the visitor the period of year, the weather, or even the light can sway one's view. Many will claim that the Backs at Cambridge give a unique beauty, and certainly Oxford does not have a procession of grand buildings lining the banks of the Thames and Cherwell. The latter is more intimate with its numerous tree-lined bends and islands, a joy to punt parties as they make their way past Christ Church Meadow and under Magdalen Bridge to the upper reaches beyond Addison's Walk. The sight of the buildings of Magdalen College in the golden afternoon sunlight is magnificent. A major difference of course is that Oxford is a city of stone whereas Cambridge is largely of mellow brick; Queens', Trinity Hall, and Jesus have a very special warmth created by their red brick. Cambridge colleges are more irregular in plan, such as Pembroke and Jesus, whereas Oxford's seem to have created a 'collegiate style' with battlemented gatehouses and enclosed quadrangles as we see in Turl Street, and to be subsequently imitated in late 19th-century colleges such as Mansfield and Manchester, as well as at universities elsewhere in Britain and abroad. Apart from King's Parade, Cambridge does not have any grand streets. There is nothing to approach Oxford's High Street or St Giles, or indeed Broad Street. Some may also claim that Oxford's streets have more trees, as for example in Parks Road, and the remarkably preserved Victorian suburb of North Oxford. Many rank the interior of King's College chapel to be more magnificent than anything in Oxford. In size yes, but the visual intricacy of the fan and pendant vault of the nearly contemporary Divinity School is a worthy competitor.

And then there is the monumental grandeur of Radcliffe Square, now cut off from through traffic and dominated by the circular drum of James Gibbs's Camera. It has a special magic and not least at night under a full moon. Around it is an assortment of buildings from the university church of St Mary on the south, the Gothic cloister and towers of All Souls on the east, the Bodleian on the north, and Brasenose with its curious 17th-century transitional architecture on the west. In the end the choice has to be personal, but nobody will deny that Oxford is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe with a skyline now protected, like Florence, against unsympathetic encroachment, and with treasures stored within its colleges, libraries and museums which can rival those of Rome and Florence.

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Any book which is about architecture and styles involves key facts such as dates and architects or craftsmen. These can sometimes be a source of contention. I am therefore grateful for Geoffrey Tyack's comments, suggestions and minor corrections.

Naturally I owe a debt of gratitude to all at Spire Books for expressing such enthusiasm for my watercolours and supporting the publication of what started off as a personal visual diary or sketchbook, in particular Geoff Brandwood, John Elliott and Linda Hone.

***A View from the Tower of
St Mary the Virgin***



It is appropriate to survey the city from this point as, not only is the tower in the centre, but it is also at the heart of the medieval university. Much of the church was rebuilt in the late 15th century although the tower may be late 13th century and the spire, with its lavish decoration, was completed in about 1325.

In the immediate foreground is All Souls College, founded in 1438 by Henry Chichele, archbishop of Canterbury, with the original front quadrangle and gatehouse surviving. Beyond is The Queen's College, rebuilt in the early 18th century. Immediately to the right of the flag, on the south side of the High Street

is University College, founded in 1249 by William of Durham, but only settled on this site in the 1330s, and rebuilt in the latent academic Gothic style from 1634. Beyond is the Examination School by Thomas Jackson, 1876–82 and tower of Magdalen College, completed in 1509.

On the right we have the Tudor Gothic New Building of University College by Sir Charles Barry with projecting bay windows, and 17th-century houses, now incorporated into the college. Behind is the library from 1861.



Looking directly south, the view is dominated by Merton College chapel, whose choir was started in 1290, and tower built in 1448-51. In the right foreground are the buildings of Oriel College, founded in 1326 by Adam de Brome, rector of St Mary the Virgin, but rebuilt in the 1620s. To the right is Oriel Square with the classical Canterbury Gate to Christ Church. The 13th-century tower and spire is Oxford Cathedral which serves as the chapel of the college. The colourful façades on the west side of Oriel Street are 18th century, hiding the skeletons of earlier houses.



Looking south and on the left side we have the classical library of Christ Church with Wren's Tom Tower, 1681. To its right in the foreground are late 19th-century buildings in the High Street. The tower and spire belongs to the Victorian rebuilding of St Aldate's church. To the right the tall pitched roof is the hall of Thomas Jackson's Town Hall, opened in 1897. The castellated gatehouse in the foreground, 1886-89, also by Jackson, belongs to Brasenose College, built with the intention of providing an entrance

from the High Street. However, the main entrance has remained, through the original gatehouse in Radcliffe Square. The classical church of All Saints replaced a medieval one and is attributed to Henry Aldrich, dean of Christ Church. The body was rebuilt between 1706-08; the tower with its Wrenian features is a modification of a design by Nicholas Hawksmoor. The church is now the library of Lincoln College. Just to the right is the tower of St Martin, Carfax, the rest of which was demolished in 1896.



Looking north over Radcliffe Square we have Brasenose College in the left foreground with the frontage and quadrangle behind remaining as built in 1508-19. Beyond is the tall chapel of Exeter College, of 1856-59, with the trees of the Fellows' Garden to the right. The lantern of the Sheldonian Theatre by Wren peeps out between the trees and the Radcliffe Camera is seen on the right. The Camera

was completed in 1748 to a design by Hawksmoor but modified by James Gibbs. It was built with funds from the will of Dr John Radcliffe to house his library and scientific instruments. In 1862 it was leased to the university to become a reading room for the Bodleian Library. The ground stage, originally an open undercroft, was filled in to make a lower reading room in 1863.



To the north-east the foreground is dominated by the 18th-century Codrington Quadrangle of All Souls College, begun in 1716. It is by Hawksmoor and adopts a loose version of the Gothic style. The interior of the library to the north side (left) of the quadrangle has a fine classical interior. In the middle bay is a sundial, said to have been designed by Wren in 1658, and originally in the front quadrangle. The

twin towers on the north side of the quadrangle remind us of the frontage of a medieval cathedral. In the centre foreground is the chapel, part of the original college, built in 1438-43. It is joined on the right by the east range containing the Old Library. Beyond the trees are the classical buildings of The Queen's College with the majestic range of its library built in 1692-95.