Oxford City Walls Walk

Discover Oxford’s Medieval city walls with this walk guide

Oxford’s City Walls

This is a self-guided walk around the city walls of Oxford. Most places are publicly accessible, although college interiors and gardens can only be seen when open, and may have entry charges. There are sections of the city walls that survive in surprising locations and you can learn something of the history of the history of the town along the way, and places where excavations have provided further insights.

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Oxford’s origins as a defended place were as a late Anglo-Saxon borough (Old English ) built to defend an important Thames crossing against Viking incursions, most likely in the late ninth century in the reign of King Alfred (AD 871-899). It was built on the Mercian side of a Roman fort, with a rectangular plan and the central ‘Shire Lake’, a stream that still runs across the middle of Oxford. The walls fell into disrepair in the late medieval period and there was an external ditch at least on the north side. The four principal gates must have existed from earliest times, and the north gate still has its Saxon tower that was later to become part of the church of St Michael.

There was a major rebuilding of the stone wall in the early 13th century, partly paid for by royal ‘murage’ grants, from a tax raised on goods brought into the town. The new walls (as seen today in New College) were a very impressive set of defences (especially with the addition of the unusual outer wall), but would have served more to control access to the town and local disturbances rather than having a serious military role. The walls fell into disrepair in the late medieval period (apart from the sector in New College), the moat was let out as a fishpond, and the towers used for habitation. By the time of the Civil War in the 1640s disturbances rather than having a serious military role.

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If you like maps, see also An Historical Map of Oxford (2016) and find out about the forthcoming Oxford volume of the Historic Towns Atlas at http://www.historictownsatlas.org.uk/atlas/volume-vii/oxford

Christ Church Meadows

The wall continued south from the east gate, and from Rose Lane the south-east corner can be reached in Christ Church Meadows. The wall survives along the south side of Merton College and Corpus Christi College with garden terraces built on the inside and ‘clair-voie’ railings to give views out from the college gardens. The (blocked) postern gates granted to Merton College by royal favour can be seen near the rebuilt section of wall. The Meadows have always flooded, and a ditch was not necessary. The corner bastion has been lost, but one bastion survives in Merton College garden, and at the west end by the Cathedral is a corner bastion in the Corpus Christi garden, possibly on the site of the former gate, and recently restored with a roof terrace.

The course of the wall along this stretch is unknown. It was probably always diverted around St Frideswide’s Priory (now Christ Church Cathedral), and then turned back towards the south gate. To the east side there was a little church of St Michael at the Southgate, removed by Cardinal Wolsey in 1525.

1. Folly Bridge
2. South Gate
3. Brewer Street
4. Little gate
5. Paradise Street
6. Bulwarks lane
7. New Inn Hall Street
8. St. Michael at the Northgate
9. Broad Street
10. Turl Street
11. Sheldonian Theatre
12. Clarendon Quad
13. St Mary's Chapel
14. Turf Tavern
15. New College
16. Eastgate Hotel
17. Christ Church Meadows
18. Unknown
Littlegate
Brewer Street
Little gate
Paradise Street
Eastgate Hotel
New College
Turf Tavern
St Mary’s Chapel
Clarendon Quad
Sheldonian Theatre
Turl Street
Bulwarks lane
St. Michael in the Northgate
New Inn Hall Street
St Giles
Broad Street
Cornmarket Street
St Ebbe’s Street
High Street
Queen’s Lane
Schools St.
Market St.
Pembroke St.
College Chapel, built across the road when the college expanded its medieval site over the wall and across the ditch.

Turl Street
Turl Street is named after the turnstile or ‘Twirlgate’ that was used as a small postern gate. Ship Street or Someron’s Lane continued through the site of Exeter College Chapel, built across the road when the college expanded its medieval site over the wall and across the ditch.

St. Michael in the Northgate
The Saxon tower of St Michael’s church, with another tower across the road formed the north gate and was the main entrance to the city. Above the gate was the city prison (called the Bocardo after an inescapable logical problem). Here Archbishop Cranmer was held before entering the city. Above the gate was the city prison (called the Bocardo after an inescapable logical problem). Here Archbishop Cranmer was held before entering the city.

New Inn Hall Street
The first bastion (tower) in the wall is visible from New Inn Hall Street at the History Faculty building. This was later occupied as a house after the defences fell out of use. Two more bastions stood behind the houses in St Michael’s Street, and when Mallams was built remains of the earth and timber rampart of the Anglo-Saxon wall was found.

St. Michael’s Church
The Saxon tower of St Michael’s church, with another tower across the road formed the north gate and was the main entrance to the city. Above the gate was the city prison (called the Bocardo after an inescapable logical problem). Here Archbishop Cranmer was held before entering the city.

Bulwarks lane
From St George’s Mews, Bulwarks Lane rises up to meet the west end of the north walls where they once continued down into the castle ditch. At this point Bulwarks Lane turns east to follow round the outside of the castle ditch.

New College
William of Wykeham bought the city wall and the road inside it from the town in 1379 on condition that the wall was kept in repair. While the corporation allowed the rest of its walls to fall into disrepair, the frequent inspections of the New College sector resulted in the survival of the very impressive remains of an early 13th century town wall, with its crenellated parapets, bastions and arrow loops. The arrow loops provided continuous coverage between the towers and round the north-east corner, but were perhaps rather difficult to use with a longbow.

Turf Tavern
The city wall can be seen outside the Turf Tavern (which was built in the city ditch after it was filled in the 17th century). One occupied bastion can be seen in Hell Passage on the approach to the Tavern, while the New College bell tower replaces another bastion. Excavations in Hell Passage found the remains of an outer wall that extended from here to east gate, and included low outer bastions. This was the show front of the medieval town, seen by travellers (and royal visitors) passing along Longwall and Holywell Street, and was reminiscent of the famous double walls of Constantinople.

St Mary’s Chapel
The Chapel of St Mary at the Smith gate, now part of Hertford College, was restored by TG Jackson, but the medieval door with its carving of the annunciation scene (the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary) has somehow survived the iconoclasts of the Reformation period. Rioting medieval students would sometimes lift the gate off its hinges and throw it into the town ditch.

Clarendon Quad
The first town wall may have turned southwards at this point, but from the bastion the later wall turned northwards towards the Smith gate, and the line of the wall found in 1899 is marked as tramlines in the main east-west path in the Clarendon Quad.

Sheldonian Theatre
The line of the wall continued along the south side of the Sheldonian Theatre, built on the wall in the 1660s. Someron’s Lane turned south into Schools Street (where the Divinity School stands), and there was a bastion at the north-west corner of the Bodleian Library, excavated in 1899.

Folly Bridge
The ‘Folly’ was the late-13th cent. gate tower on the South Bridge (Grandpont), with a drawbridge on the Berkshire side. It was later known (erroneously) as Friar Bacon’s study and survived until 1799, when it was removed by the Hinksey Turnpike trustees.

South Gate
The south gate, at the lower corner of Christ Church, was partly removed by Cardinal Wolsey in 1525, and finally demolished in 1617.

Eastgate Hotel
Eastgate Hotel marks the point where the walls cross the road. The east gate, consisting of a gate between two towers, was removed in the 1770s for road improvements (when the road outside the walls was widened and rebuilt on the south side).

David Loggan’s detailed bird’s-eye view map of Oxford was published in 1675 (with north at the bottom)