Binsey: Oxford's Holy Place

Its saint, village, and people

Edited by

Lydia Carr, Russell Dewhurst,
and Martin Henig

Archaeopress

Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 905739 84 4

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Cover illustrations: *At Binsey, near Oxford 1862*, watercolour and ink by George Price Boyce (Cecil Higgins Art Gallery) (front cover and background); St Margaret's, Binsey (Simon Carr) (back cover)

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Printed in England by Oxuniprint, Oxford

In memory of Shay Gee, former churchwarden, and his faithful companion Millie



Binsey church and village in relation to Godstow (N) and Botley (S), Port Meadow (E) and the county boundary on the Seacourt Stream (W).

Extract from the 1919 Ordnance Survey Town Map of Oxford (6 inches to 1 mile).

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The parishes of Binsey and St Thomas in relation to the Liberty of Oxford, the parishes and extra-parochial areas.

Source: Crossley, VCH Oxon iv, 267; Courtesy of the Victoria History of Oxfordshire Trust and the University of London.

Forewords

Binsey's charm depends on its history but also on its current character. It is, of course, related to its voraciously academic and vastly more populous neighbour and yet it is 'of itself' and continues to be happily rural.

Christ Church loves its tie, for since the 12th century at least, Binsey was owned by St Frideswide's monastery and the current college/cathedral is the monastery's successor. To which add the link of Alice, whose Wonderland included both Christ Church and Binsey's holy healing/treacle well, without which no Mad Hatter's Tea Party would be complete.

Then there was the present: the brand new tradition of the fete, with its roast pig and its chicken-beauty competition, the second prize for which was won a year or two ago by a chicken who sent her apologies: too shy to come. There is the serious business of farming with pick-your-own alongside Longhorn and Aberdeen Angus cattle. There are houses to renovate, streams to clear and houses to renovate.

Best of all, the saying 'Church then Perch': two glorious focal points of Binsey, summing up the essentials of life, namely relatedness to God and to community, both of which Binsey does with aplomb.

This is a splendid book which Binsey deserves.

The Very Reverend Christopher Lewis, Dean of Christ Church

For many hundreds of years the Church of St. Margaret of Antioch, within the hamlet of Binsey, has been a place of pilgrimage and sanctuary. Set within sight of the dreaming spires and with the sound of the ring-road close at hand, Binsey is a rural idyll that calms the nerves and soothes the souls of those who visit. As we journey through life, we need places where earth and heaven meet, where we can find ourselves again and commune with God and seek healing through his divine grace. Binsey has been that place for both ancient and modern pilgrims and I pray it will continue to provide that unique gift to the people and visitors of Oxford.

Clare Sykes, Rector of Osney Benefice
March 2013



Extract showing Binsey church from field map of Binsey by Richard Davis of Lewknor, 1792
Courtesy of the Archivist and Governing Body of Christ Church (MS maps Binsey 2)

Introduction and Acknowledgements

Binsey is a village to the west of Oxford, on the south bank of the main channel of the River Thames, opposite Port Meadow, which has been an open space belonging to the burgesses of Oxford since late Saxon times. Although now within the ring-road, the village is essentially rural and unspoilt. The hub of Binsey is a row of cottages and the Perch Inn on one side of the village green. At one time when the river was wider there was a ferry here taking travelers across to Oxford. The church, its present building no earlier than the 12th century though on an older site, lies a third of a mile distant. Its association with Oxford's patron saint St Frideswide alone makes this an evocative place for anyone with an interest in the origins of this great University city. Its holy well, dedicated to St Margaret like the church itself, was a place of resort for those with eye problems or desirous of a child: Katharine of Aragon's lack of success in conceiving a male heir after resort to the well in a sense precipitated the English Reformation! Later associations, which include Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell as well as Gerard Manley Hopkins and C. S. Lewis, render Binsey a place for the literary as well as the religious pilgrim.[1]

This book is a collection of essays on aspects of Binsey and its environs. It is not a guidebook so much as an evocation of the place, dwelling on specific aspects from the busy river to the tranquil and silent churchyard; from the poplars, great-grandparents of the present trees along the river and Hopkins' great poem on them, to the personalities who served the village community; from the Binsey of St Frideswide's time to the community of the present day.

Apart from the authors of the various contributions we would like to thank Christ Church and its Dean the Very Revd Christopher Lewis, the PCC of St Frideswide's with Binsey, which will receive the royalties of the volume, Father Anthony Rustell, the former Rector of Osney Benefice, and his successor the Revd Clare Sykes, the present Rector. Julian Munby, currently churchwarden has been helpful in many ways, especially in helping to check the Latin texts of the early life of St Frideswide. We would also like to thank those who provided photographs, especially Karl Wallendszus, Edward Wakeling, John Lee, Julian Munby, Sue Dewhurst and Katie Seal; and the painter Simon Carr, of New York City, who generously provided a beautiful sketch of the church. The editors and the Parochial Church Council of the parish of St Frideswide with St Margaret's are most grateful to Dr David Davison and to Archaeopress for taking on the publication of this book.

Our grateful thanks go out to you all!

[1] Many visitors make a pilgrimage to the church, drawn by a haunting episode in the tragic autobiographical love story by Lewis's pupil and friend Sheldon Vanauken, A Severe Mercy (London 1977), 122 and 224.

Contributors

John Blair has been a Fellow in History at The Queen's College, Oxford, since 1981. His academic interests centre on the history, archaeology, architecture and landscape of medieval England. Oxfordshire has been the focus of much of his research, and he is a former editor of *Oxoniensia.*
john.blair@queens.ox.ac.uk

Carl Boardman was Hulme exhibitioner in Modern History at Brasenose College Oxford, and did postgraduate work in Archive Studies at University College London. After working at the Harrowby MSS Trust and setting up the King Edward VI Foundation Archive in Birmingham, he returned to Oxford where he became County Archivist in 1988. With the bringing together of Oxfordshire Record Office and Oxfordshire Studies in 2008 he became overall History Services Manager, and ran the joint Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley. His books include *Oxfordshire Sinners & Villains* and *Foul Deeds & Suspicious Deaths,* though he secretly prefers moonlighting as a crime novelist.
c.boardman@bnc.oxon.org

Lydia Carr came to Binsey as a teenager and returned years later as an Oxford graduate student reading history and archaeology. Her first solo book, the eponymous biography *Tessa Verney Wheeler*, was published by the Oxford University Press early in 2012. She is a writer and editor based in New York City.
carr.lydia@gmail.com

Mark Davies is an Oxford local historian, pubic speaker, and guide with a particular interest in the history and literature of the city's waterways. He has lived on a narrowboat on the Oxford Canal since 1992, and is the author of: *Our Canal in Oxford* (1999), *A Towpath Walk in Oxford* (2001/2012), *The Abingdon Waterturnpike Murder* (2003/2008), *Stories of Oxford Castle* (2005/2006), *Alice in Waterland* (2010/2012) and *Alice's Oxford on Foot* (2014). The second and latter two of these publications contain sections on Binsey. His historical and literary tours generally explore less-visited parts of Oxford, away from the crowded city centre and University colleges. www.oxfordwaterwalks.co.uk.
mark.oxford1@btinternet.com

Russell Dewhurst first visited the treacle well as an undergraduate in 1996. He was Priest-in-Charge of St Frideswide's, Oxford and St Margaret's, Binsey between 2005 and 2009, and is now Vicar of Ewell in the Diocese of Guildford.
rdewhurst@mac.com

Peter Groves is parish priest of St Mary Magdalen, Oxford, and Lecturer in Theology at Worcester College, Oxford. Having served his curacy in Essex, he returned to Oxford in 1999 and worked at Pusey House and then Keble College before serving as Chaplain and Fellow of Brasenose College. He is a member of Theology Faculty in the University of Oxford, where he teaches doctrine. He has published articles on systematic and doctrinal theology, as well as on the Oxford Movement and the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a number of books and journals.
peter.groves@theology.ox.ac.uk

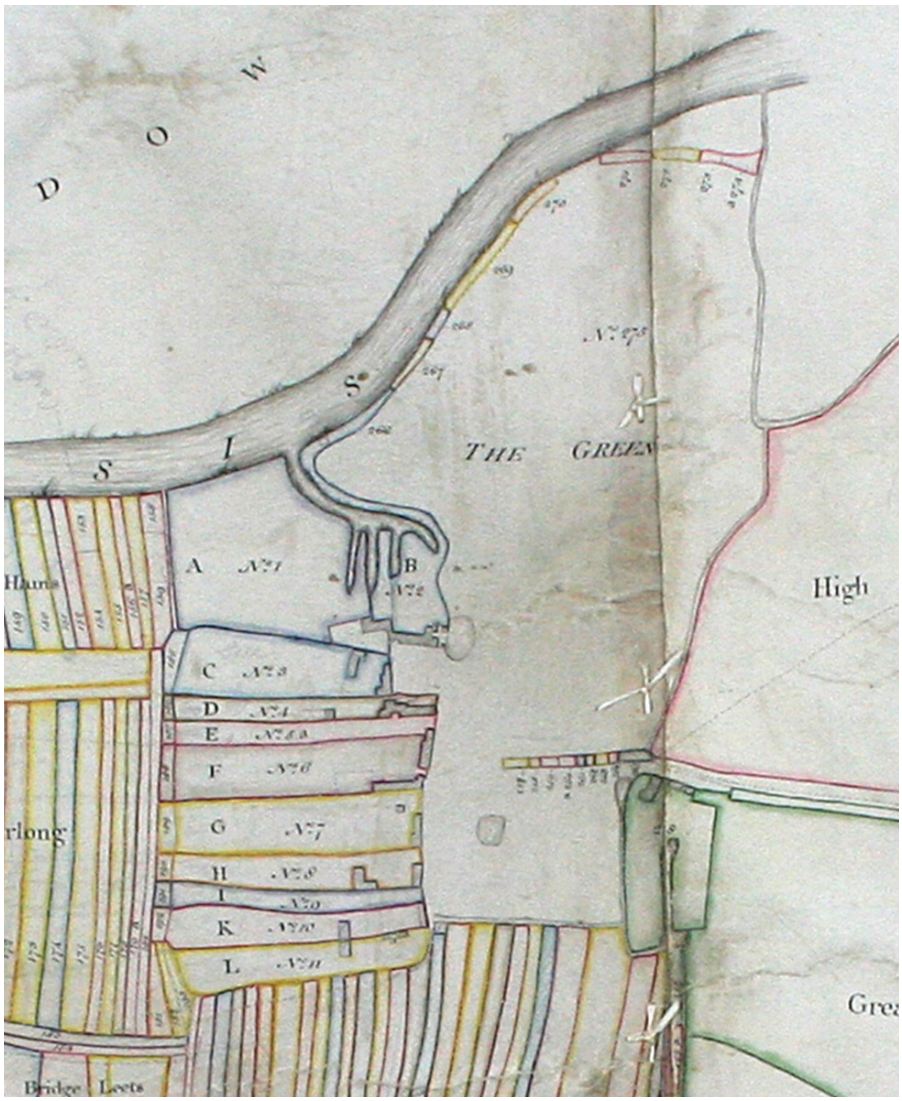
Beatrice Groves is a lecturer in Renaissance literature at Trinity College, Oxford. She is the author of *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare, 1592–1604* (OUP, 2007) and numerous articles on early modern literature.
beatrice.groves@ell.ox.ac.uk

Martin Henig has lived in west Oxford for many years, teaching archaeology in Oxford University and writing widely on Roman religion and art, and is currently engaged in research on Roman sculpture from London. The second edition of his book *The Heirs of King Verica* (2002) appeared in 2010, in the same year in which he was ordained. He now serves as Assistant Priest in the Osney Benefice. The parish includes St Margaret's, Binsey, which has been a special place for him ever since he came to Oxford over forty years ago. He writes: 'Believing as I do that all parts of our lives are interconnected, I feel privileged to be allowed to bring together my love of historic monuments and beautiful landscape with the strong feelings for sacred space and spiritual exploration which are so central to my Christian faith'.
martin.henig@arch.ox.ac.uk

Julian Munby is head of Buildings Archaeology at Oxford Archaeology and is a churchwarden at St Margaret's.
jtmunby@gmail.com

Nigel Speight has lived in Oxford teaching and writing since coming up to St Johns to read English in 1967. His student pilgimages to Binsey were more to The Perch than the church, but some bits of the poem included here fell into place soon after his first visit to St Margaret's. His first love in poetry was Hopkins, so the sense of how Binsey inspired him has always amplified the joy of a walk across Port Meadow to revisit the experience. Try it very early, amidst the birdsong, on a translucent summer morning.
nigespeight@gmail.com

Edward Wakeling is a long-standing member of the Lewis Carroll Society. He has written widely on Carroll over the last three decades, and among his publications is the first unabridged edition of *Lewis Carroll's Diaries* in ten volumes. He has written on Carroll's photography, letters, mathematics, puzzles and games, and logic. As a recognised Carrollian scholar and collector, he is frequently called upon to contribute to conferences, exhibitions, and television programmes around the world.
edward@wakeling.demon.co.uk



Extract showing Binsey village and green from field map of Binsey by Richard Davis of Lewknor, 1792

Courtesy of the Archivist and Governing Body of Christ Church (MS maps Binsey 2)

A Poet's View: St Margaret's Church at Binsey

NIGEL SPEIGHT

Cathedrals insist that God is
Where They are, not everywhere. Up-
Right, and highly strung, they point,

Dogmatically, at nothing, bringing
Down to earth a Deity for whom great
Heights can be no Revelation.

Great Abbeys are worse – imperialist
War museums, all cluttered and stuck up with
Statesmen & soldiers, prelates & poets,
Kings, flags, Britannias and latinate lies.

A plaque in the Abbey?
You know what to do...
Just kill foreign jonnies
Until they kill you.

****

But push here and the door is always open.
For this is a wholly simple church, teaching
Humility with humility. It leaves you
Alone with your reasons for stepping

Inside. Near cattle, sheep and goats, it's like
A stable. But once it has you face to face
Or looking through its eyes, it's a living
Skull that cups a silence strewn with prayer,

The life-time offerings too, from regular souls,
Standing to sing amidst their families,
With ancestors at peace beneath their feet.
Now pilgrims come, not for Magnificence,

But since a miracle, it's said, has happened here.
There's many kinds of sight can be restored.
Some leave believing they are rinsed within,
With holy water from the wishing well

Closing over the head of all their sin.
They feel the phoenix in these ashen greys.
No moral doubts assault the victories
Still celebrated in this ancient place.

For they've been won in private wars by ones
Surprised to feel here irretrievably
Found – caught by this elemental Christian hold
That intimates the infinite space around.