

This historic city centre of Oxford walking tour introduces you to the oldest parts of this Anglo-Saxon town and the world famous Oxford University. You'll learn more about the various colleges and the famous alumni, and explore on foot the centuries old buildings of Oxford.

We begin the tour at the Oxford train station. If you need to know how to get to Oxford from London, be sure to read about it on our blog post here: <https://freetoursbyfoot.com/london-to-oxford/>

The tour will end at the renowned Ashmolean Museum.

Welcome to Oxford! On our tour of the historic Oxford we'll explore the history of both the town and the famed University. Oxford was settled by the Anglo-Saxons in the 10th century, with teaching at the university starting as early as the late 11th century.

When you come out of the station, cross the street and you should be facing a statue of an Ox.

This is the symbol of Oxford, and it is where we get the name from. Oxenorforda was an old Saxon name for a low crossing point for ox between the river Thames and Chernwell. Evidence of oxen fording here dates back to 900s.

Turn right to get to Park End Street and then turn left without crossing the road. When you get to the large Royal Oxford Hotel, keep to the left onto Hythe Bridge Street until you reach the bridge. You'll see a pathway along the river on your right, turn here and walk along the water until you reach the next road. Turn left to walk over the bridge. When the road splits, keep right to stay on New Road which will take you to our next stop, Oxford Castle. In all this is about a 10 minute walk.

Oxford Castle was built after the Normans invaded in 1066 making the castle almost 1,000 years old. During its lifetime it has doubled as both a

home and a prison, and has since 1996 found new life as a hotel. It has never served a military purpose.

The original castle was damaged severely in the English Civil War of 1642-1649 but still operated as a prison until 1996 before being transformed into a historic place to stay.

The ruins of the original tower, such as the base of St George's Tower, still stands and the crypt is preserved and may be visited. The grassy motte outside of the Castle dates from the 11th century, as does the crypt, and both are worth a visit

The Castle and Prison are open daily with admission. You can find out more at this link - <https://www.oxfordcastleandprison.co.uk/>

Come out of the Castle grounds onto New Road. Turn right and follow that road along, which will turn into Queen street. In just a few minutes you should be by a crossroads and right by Carfax Tower.

Carfax Tower marks the official centre of Oxford. This is the last remaining part of the 12th century St. Martin's Church. Standing at 74 feet (23m), no building in Oxford may be built higher than this tower.

It's a good idea to go inside and climb up the 99 steps to the top which gives you an unparalleled view of the city you're about to explore.

For those traveling on a budget, don't worry, as entry is under £5.00 for both children and adults!

With Carfax tower on your left, continue on Queen Street across the intersection though the road you're on becomes High Street on the other side.

The central market of Oxford officially opened on 1st November 1774. The Covered Market began when it was decided to clear the “untidy, messy and unsavory stalls” from the main streets of Oxford.

Architect John Gwynn designed the covered market which today is home to dozens of trading stalls, including greengrocers, butchers (who sell famous Oxford sausages), flower shops, sandwich stalls, bakeries and great small eateries.

Notably, it is also home to the original Ben’s Cookies stall, located here since 1984 guests can still buy delicious, fresh baked world-famous cookies.

Return back to the intersection by Carfax Tower and turn left on to St Aldgate’s. You’ll find the Museum of Oxford not far down the block on your left.

The Museum of Oxford displays original treasures and artifacts found in the area from prehistoric times.

A relatively recent organization, the Museum of Oxford was founded in 1975 (although the building here dates back to 1897) and the exhibitions here contain items donated by Oxford Colleges and contains a medieval crypt.

Entrance to the museum is free.

Carry on along Aldate’s street, and turn left at the gates onto Broad walk, past the Christ Church memorial gardens, and you should now be facing the majestic entrance of Christ Church college.

Christ Church is the first of many colleges within Oxford University we will see. The university is made up of 39 individual colleges. Each have their own admission procedures and activities. Making Oxford a true university

town, there is no main campus of the university. Rather its academic buildings are scattered around the city.

Christ Church College was founded in 1522 and soon taken over by King Henry VIII. It counts Albert Einstein, philosopher John Locke, and writer and founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn as alumni.

Author Lewis Carroll (real name Charles Dodgson) was also a Mathematics tutor at the college. It was during this time that he became good friends with the dean and his family, mainly the oldest daughter called Alice. It was this friendship that led to him coming up with Alice in Wonderland. Many of the other characters are based on people around him, for example, the Mad Hatter was a furniture dealer, and the rabbit based on the dean who was always running around.

It's also worth noting that The Great Hall at the college was used for filming scenes in Harry Potter!

It is also home to one very curious tradition. The big bell of the cathedral (called Big Tom) rings 101 times every night at 21.05, for the original 101 members of the college.

Carry on along Broad walk, and turn left on Merton Grove. You should now have the Cathedral on your left, and Merton field on your right. Across the field, diagonally to your right you should see the top of Merton College chapel.

Merton College was founded in 1264. Well known alumni are writers J. R. R. Tolkien, T. S. Eliot, Emperor of Japan Naruhito, and actor Kris Kristofferson. The college library here is the oldest functioning student and faculty library in the world, founded in 1373.

Carry on along Merton Grove, through the very original gates (only one person at a time!!) and turn left onto Merton Street. Follow that street along and turn right onto Oriel Square. You should now be facing the gates of

Oriel College, and on your right, in the corner of Merton street you have Corpus Christi college.

Founded in 1517, Corpus Christi College is home to another very curious Oxford tradition. The tortoise race!

Most colleges take part in the yearly event, where tortoises from different colleges race each other. Humans are allowed to participate but they have to eat a whole lettuce head before they race.

Oriel College.

This is one of the smallest colleges, with only about 250 undergraduates and 90 graduate students. In 1598 the president of the college suggested and assisted with the King James English translation of the Bible.

Carry on along Oriel Square, which turns into King Edward Street, until you reach the High Street. Cross the street and turn right, follow it along for a few metres and then turn left on St Mary's passage until you reach Radcliffe square.

University Church of St. Mary the Virgin is the big church on your right. Built in the 13th century, but with foundations going back to 1086, St. Mary the Virgin is said to be the first church of Oxford University.

The Tower can be climbed by the public and the 124 steps to the top reward guests with fine views around Oxford, including a stunning panorama including the famous view of Radcliffe Camera.

On your left you have what is one of the most recognizable buildings in Oxford - Radcliffe Camera. The circular dome and round structure of Radcliffe Camera is world-famous.

Built in 1749 to house the Radcliffe Science Library, the structure is now a reading room for the Bodleian Library. Funding from the structure was

provided by the estate of Dr. John Radcliffe who left a fortune to Oxford University in his will.

Although not open to the public (unless taking a guided tour) the Radcliffe Camera has a place in popular culture. J. R. R. Tolkien claimed that the building resembled Sauron's Tower.

It is mentioned in *His Dark Materials*. It has been seen in *Inspector Morse* and is also the location of important scenes in *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy Sayers and *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova.

With the church to your right and Radcliffe camera to your left, follow Radcliffe square along and turn left on Catte street. On your right you have the beautifully ornate metal gates of All Souls college.

Founded in 1438, All Souls College counts Christopher Wren, T. E. Lawrence (otherwise known as Lawrence of Arabia), and George Nathaniel Curzon as alumni. In the courtyard you can see a sundial which was Wren's first commissioned piece.

All Souls College deals with postgraduates only and has what students have called the "world's hardest exam". About 80 students sit the exam every year, but generally only 1 or 2 are accepted. It has very abstract questions so therefore there aren't right or wrong answers. If you are accepted you get a 7 year fellowship at Oxford University.

Some examples of questions are:

- Should intellectuals tweet?
- What are universities for?
- How can words be beautiful?
- Water. Elaborate

Carry on along Catte street, turn left right after Radcliffe camera and right through the small gates of the Bodleian library.

Bodleian is the main library of the university, and the second biggest in the UK. It was originally built over the Divinity school in the middle of the 15th century to house thousands of manuscripts and books owned by the University. However the collection kept growing and by the end of the 16th century, commissioned by Thomas Bodlein, it was upgraded.

It is a consultation only library, which means that you can not take books out. It is also one of the 6 libraries of legal deposit in the UK, meaning it gets a copy of every work that is published in the country, plus a copy of every book published in the Republic of Ireland. They have over 11million books and manuscripts, stored on over 153 miles of shelving, which are divided between different sites, including an abandoned salt mine outside of town.

In the square, the main entrance is known as the Tower of the 5 orders, as it presents columns of each of the 5 orders of classical architecture. From bottom to top: Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite.

At the top you have King James I of England and Ireland, VI of Scotland, who is responsible for the “James Bible”.

Come out of the library square back onto Catte street and immediately right on New College lane. In front of you have the Bridge of Sighs.

Technically named Hertford Bridge, the Bridge of Sighs gained this nickname due to its similarity to the famous Bridge of Sighs in Venice.

Far more recently constructed than much of Oxford, the Bridge of Sighs was completed in 1914 and designed by architect Sir Thomas Jackson in order to connect two sections of Hertford College.

Just after the Bridge of Sighs, take the first left onto the small ST. HELEN'S PASSAGE. Follow the path along as it curves and it will lead you to The Turf Tavern.

Known mostly as “The Turf”, The Turf Tavern is a popular historic haunt in Oxford with the very fitting motto of “An education in intoxication”

With a building foundation going back to the 13th century and the bar area from the 17th, the pub is bordered on one side by the remaining section of the old city wall, as the pub was strategically built just outside the city wall in order to host illegal activities such as gambling!

The Turf has also hosted two events in popular culture. It was here that Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke set a Guinness World Record for consuming a yard-long glass of ale in 11 seconds.

Also, rumour has it that it was at The Turf that American President Bill Clinton (who was attending Oxford) infamously smoked marijuana but “did not inhale.”

Come out the same way you came in, back to New College Lane. Turn right and climb the small steps through the metal gates into the courtyard. On your right you have the Clarendon building.

Designed by Christopher Wren’s pupil, Nicholas Hawksmoor, The Clarendon Building was completed in 1715 and was funded by Edward Hyde, the 1st Earl of Clarendon. Today it is part of the Bodleian library.

It was originally the home of Oxford University Press, where the Oxford University dictionary was printed. The dictionary’s first edition was a huge project. Work on it started in 1857 but it wasn’t concluded until 1928, 71 years later. It was all done by volunteers and you can count Tolkien amongst its contributors. It was made out of 10 volumes, a total of 15,490 pages which if arranged side by side would be over 260 kms!

It was also here that the first edition’s “Alice in Wonderland” books were pressed.

(If you go up the steps of the Clarendon building, on your right you will find a stone of the wall with some of the benefactors of Oxford University)

In the courtyard, with the Clarendon building to your right, go straight to the Sheldonian Theatre.

Designed by noted architect Christopher Wren, the Sheldonian Theatre was built in between 1664-1668 with the sole intention of hosting graduation ceremonies. These used to be held at St. Mary's Church, but were becoming increasingly "unorthodox", so the church requested they move these celebrations somewhere else.

Today, the theatre is also used for music recitals, conferences, ceremonies, and performances.

The top of the building houses a viewing gallery set into an eight-sided cupola, which is open to visitors.

Come out of the courtyard onto Broad street. Directly in front of you there should be Blackwells bookshop and to your left the Museum of the History of Science.

Blackwell's boasts the largest single room devoted to book sales in Europe: the Norrington Room, with 10,000 sq. ft. and over 3 miles of shelving.

Blackwell's is an Oxford institution and has been selling books to Oxford students and literati such as J. R. R. Tolkien since its opening on New Year's Day in 1879. It was founded by Benjamin Henry Blackwell, whose father was the first city librarian. The publishing house started Tolkien's career and published his first poem in 1915 entitled "Goblin's Feet."

The History of Science Museum was built in 1613 as the original site of the Ashmole Museum which we will see later on the tour. This is the world's oldest purpose built museum building when it was built to hold the collection of Elias Ashmole.

Today it is a free museum that hosts a collection of some of the earliest and finest scientific objects, as well as a blackboard with calculations done by Albert Einstein when he was visiting the college in 1913.

With Blackwell's in front of you, turn left on Broad street and follow the street along, going past Trinity college until you reach Balliol college.

Trinity College, founded in 1555, counts three prime ministers, a King of Belgium, numerous politicians and explorer Sir Richard Francis Burton as alumni.

Balliol College is one of the oldest, founded in 1263, counts four prime ministers, five Noel laureates and two Indian cricket captains as alumni.

Roughly in front of Balliol College gates, you should see a patch on the road that hasn't been tarmacked. This goes unnoticed by many people, but the black cross that you can see in the middle of the road marks the point where burnings used to take place in Oxford, more famously of the Martyrs of Oxford (more on this subject in a couple of stops).

Carry on walking along Broad street, past the small Green on your right and turn left on Cornmarket street.

St Michael at the North Gate is the oldest building in all of Oxford, dating back to the 11th century. It was situated at the north gate of Oxford when the city was surrounded by a city wall. The tower here dates from 1040 and is part of the original church, which can still be visited today.

Inside, the cell where the Oxford Martyrs were held is still available to see.

On Cornmarket street and with St Michael behind you, turn right and follow the street along, past the crossroads into Magdalen street. The Green should be on your right. Follow that street along, past the church, until you reach the Martyrs Memorial.

The Memorial here is a Victorian creation, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, commemorating the Oxford Martyrs who were put to death nearby in the 16th century.

Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer and the then Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cramner were at the time some of the most important religious figures in the country. They were arrested by Mary I (Bloody Mary, daughter of Henry VIII) who was a catholic and wanted their help to convince the people to reconvert back to Catholicism. They all refused and were therefore burned at the stake. Ridley and Latimer went first on 16th October 1555. As Cramner was the Archbishop he was given more time to consider, but was also eventually executed on the 21st of March 1556. This memorial is dedicated to their memory.

Cross the street, turn left on Beaumont Street, and the Ashmolean museum is on your right.

The world's first University museum, the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology was established in 1683 and has been thrilling visitors ever since.

There is much to see inside and highlights include drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, paintings by Turner, a Stradivari violin, and works by Picasso and van Dyk.

You can also see Oliver Cromwell's death mask, the lantern Guy Fawkes carried during the Gunpowder Plot, the ring or rings that inspired the ring of "Lord of the Rings" and works of art and architecture dating back literally thousands of years!

We end our tour here. The Museum is free to visit but it can take a good chunk of time to see everything, so it's up to you to decide whether a visit to the museum will fit into your schedule.

If you'd like to continue on for a quick stop at a nearby historic pub, go to The Eagle and Child

The pub was the meeting point of The Inklings (a writing group that included Hugo Dyson, Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien).

The Inklings originally held their meetings on Thursday evenings at Lewis's college dormitories but then changed to meeting at lunchtime on Mondays and Tuesdays at The Eagle and Child. You can see attached to the wall a document signed by all the members.

It is one of the best-loved pubs in Oxford because of its history and literary connections.

The Eagle and Child is located on 49 St Giles. If you come out of the Ashmolean Museum onto St Giles and follow that road along, it will be on your left.

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