

# Bartlemas – a rare and precious survival of national importance

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## THE BIG IDEA

### What makes this place special

Bartlemas is a rare and precious survival. It preserves the outline of a familiar sight on the outskirts of medieval towns – a hospital, with its chapel, wards (Bartlemas House), and warden or chaplain's house (Bartlemas Farm).

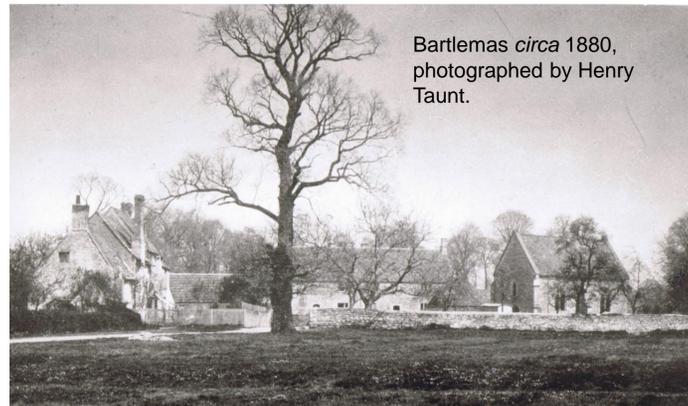
There were at least 1,000 hospitals in medieval England, but few survived the Reformation and even fewer survive today. Bartlemas is almost alone as a rural hospital whose layout today may be very similar to what it was in about 1330, if not when it was founded *circa* 1125.

Moreover, its little estate remains intact – though most is taken up by Oriel College's sports ground – and down its western side is the stream-course which has its source at a spring which was thought sacred.

We hope to find evidence of how the inmates and staff lived their lives, what they grew and eat and wore, something of the layout of the hospital, and perhaps some remains of the original chapel.

## BRIEF HISTORY

### From hospital to farmhouse

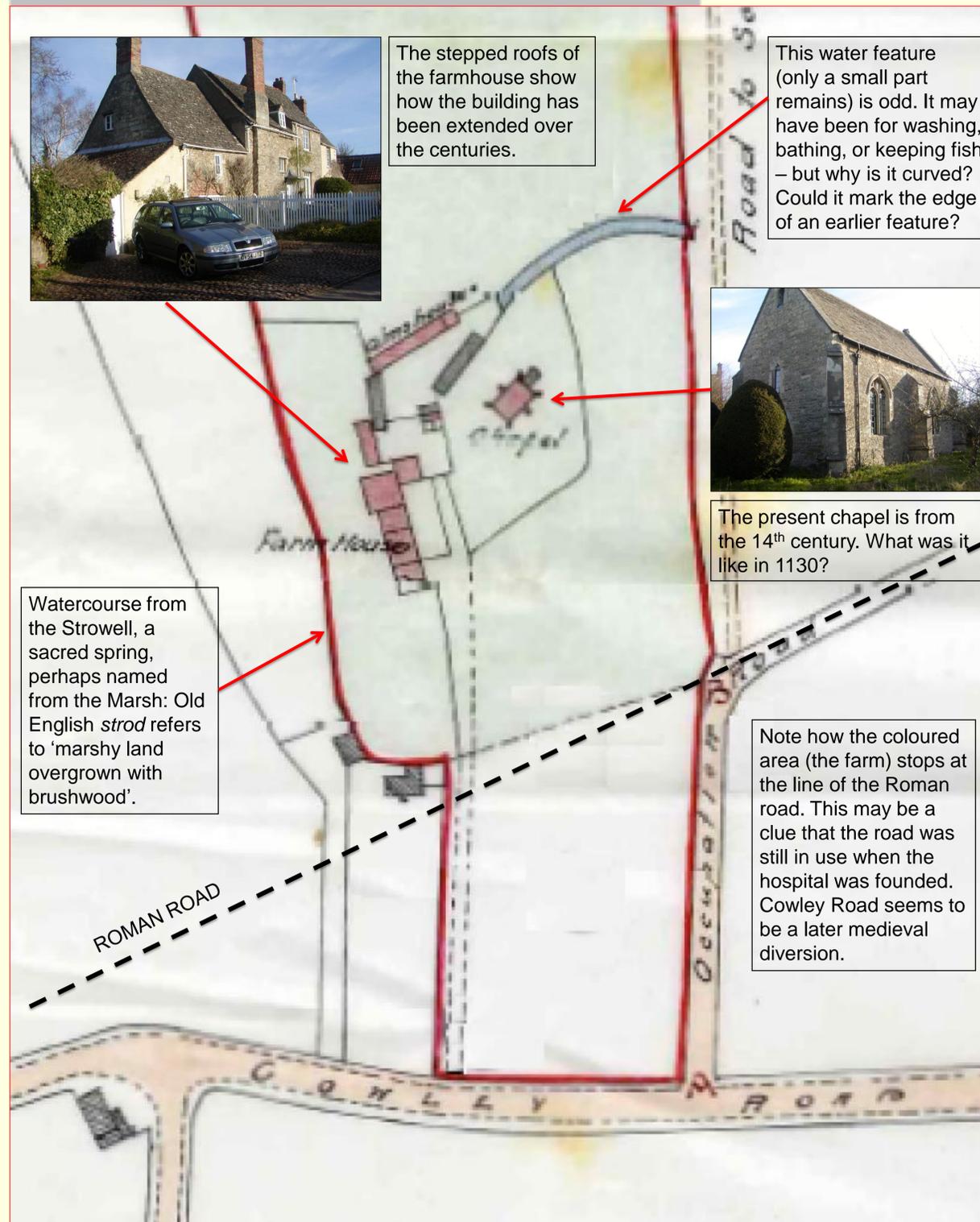


Bartlemas *circa* 1880, photographed by Henry Taunt.

Bartlemas was founded by Henry I in the 1120s as a leper hospital for 12 sick persons and a chaplain, each paid a penny a day and 5s a year for clothing. The number of inmates was reduced in 1316 from the apostolic 12 to eight, two of whom were to be healthy enough to farm the surrounding six acres. The hospital was granted to Oriel College in 1328, and increasingly became used as a rest house where sick members of the college could retire for a change of air. The existing chapel was built soon after Oriel's acquisition. The main hospital range north of the chapel was destroyed in the Civil War, but rebuilt soon afterwards as a row of four almshouses by the college in 1649, and is now Bartlemas House. Bartlemas Farm, to the west, incorporates further sixteenth-century hospital buildings.

Bartlemas was not the only hospital in and around Oxford. There were also St Giles Hospital near St Giles' church, St John the Baptist's outside the East Gate where Magdalen College is now; St Peter's on part of the site of New College, and even a hospital of St Clement, though we don't know exactly where it stood.

## THE SITE – on a map of 1837



The stepped roofs of the farmhouse show how the building has been extended over the centuries.

This water feature (only a small part remains) is odd. It may have been for washing, bathing, or keeping fish – but why is it curved? Could it mark the edge of an earlier feature?



The present chapel is from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. What was it like in 1130?

Watercourse from the Strowell, a sacred spring, perhaps named from the Marsh: Old English *strod* refers to 'marshy land overgrown with brushwood'.

Note how the coloured area (the farm) stops at the line of the Roman road. This may be a clue that the road was still in use when the hospital was founded. Cowley Road seems to be a later medieval diversion.

To find out more about the East Oxford Community Archaeology Project, VISIT <https://www.archeox.net>

## WHY HERE?

### The sound of bells

The national importance of the Bartlemas Conservation Area is that its plan, standing archaeology, and rural seclusion allow us to understand how this category of pre-modern health and welfare facility worked in practice.



The point of its siting was to provide light, air, and outlook, and access to water from a sacred spring, land for growing fruit and vegetables, grazing, and fuel and other commodities from the part-wooded hillside above it. To the west stretched the open fields of Headington and St Clements, and in better view than today the spires of Oxford: in the Middle Ages a city built on prayer. That open aspect was therefore critical, and also allowed the prevailing west winds to carry the sound of bells, which many medieval people believed was supernaturally cleansing.

### Relics – and the hope of a cure

Few religious communities were without relic(s) – bodily and other remains of saints, holy men and women who were believed to speak for their devotees before God and so protect and cure them. Here the relics were a supposed piece of the apostle Bartholomew's skin, a comb of Edward the Confessor, and crosses attributed to St Andrew and St Philip. The apostle's skin was particularly important, because tradition held that Bartholomew was martyred by being flayed. He was seen as a powerful advocate, therefore, for those suffering from skin conditions like leprosy.



Another suburban hospital chapel of the same period, St Leonard's outside Stamford in Lincolnshire.

## MAY MORNING

The antiquarian historian of Oxford, Antony Wood, wrote in the 1660s that processions of students from Magdalen and New Colleges took place on May Day and Ascension Day each year to Bartlemas and the Strowell spring, which was 'garlanded'. This well-dressing (of the sort still carried out in some Derbyshire villages) may have preserved features of a pre-Reformation procession. Doubtless there was 'cakes and ale' and games and frolics afterwards – a precursor, in fact, of the Cowley Road Carnival! as well as the May Morning celebrations outside Magdalen College.

## THANKS

The Bartlemas investigation is part of the East Oxford Community Archaeology project, supported by the Heritage Lottery and John Fell Funds and conducted by Oxford University Department for Continuing Education.

The Diocese of Oxford has made it possible to excavate in the chapel grounds and thanks are also due to the residents of Bartlemas House and Bartlemas Farm for allowing work to take place on their property.