

Bartlemas: Introduction and location

St Bartholomew's Chapel, commonly known as Bartlemas Chapel, lies to the east of the Cowley Road in East Oxford at SP 5337 0553. The Chapel is now part of the Diocese of Oxford and stands on a rood of land (equal to 0.25 acre, or 0.10 hectare) surrounded by allotments to the south and east and Oriel College's playing fields to the north. The documented history of the site begins with the founding of a leper hospital in c 1126 with grants of land by Henry I from the Manor of Headington.

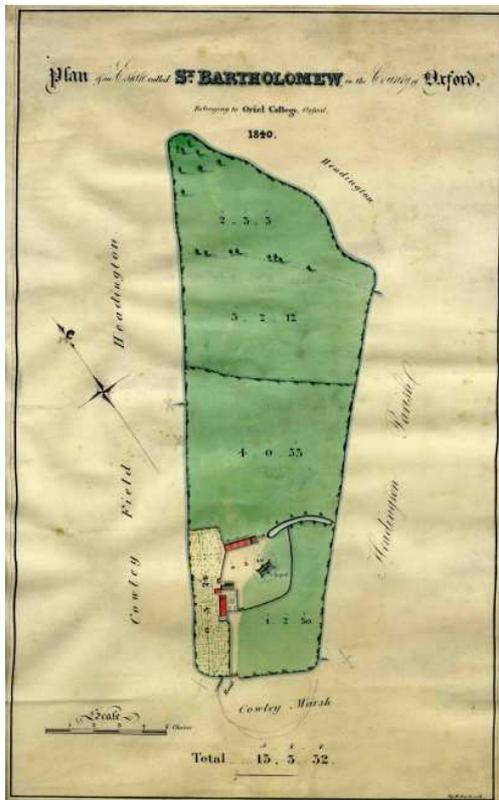
Private houses lie to the north (Bartlemas House) and west, across the rough access lane to the playing fields from Cowley Road, (Bartlemas Farmhouse). Three other houses line the west side of the track with the oldest nearest to Bartlemas Farmhouse. During the excavation we were permitted by the vicar to use the beautiful Chapel as an office and exhibition space for posters, photographs, drawings and displays of recent finds. Oriel College kindly allowed us to use their sports' pavilion for tea breaks and the finds washing team enjoyed using the pavilion veranda for their work.



The excavation site: the red box surrounds the Chapel (centre), Bartlemas House to the North and Bartlemas farmhouse to the north

The Chapel site (see map above) lies at the foot of the ridge running NW-SE towards Church Cowley, the ground rising north-east towards Headington. The geology of the site is Oxford Clay of Upper Jurassic date but changes to the underlying fine-grained sandstones and siltstones of the Temple Cowley Member just over 300m to the NE of the Chapel site. This junction from permeable to impermeable geology creates a natural spring-line within the plantation at the top of the slope in the playing fields. A spring rise is visible in the northwest of these trees and feeds the ditch marking the western

boundary of the Bartlemas site. This water-course seems to follow the same channel marked on the 1840 map and may have been one way in which water was provided to the site. However a curved water feature marked on that map to the east of Bartlemas House suggests there was a second spring feeding the site. It is probably that same spring, disrupted and diverted by later drainage work, which caused the damp problems in the north-east corner of the Chapel (see Christopher Franks note below).



The Chapel is surrounded to the west, south and east with rough turf, with thicker vegetation and orchard trees encroaching to the south. Two large Yew bushes stand to the left and right of the west door and the landscaped garden of Bartlemas House to the north. A ruinous but once substantial limestone wall curves around the Chapel site to the south and east. This wall is marked on the 1840 map and includes stones of nearly a metre in length. The shape of the enclosure associated with the leper-hospital and almshouse can still be traced in modern maps.

1840 Plan © Oriol College Archive

Oriel College were granted care of the institution in 1329 and the oldest building on the site is the Chapel built around 1336 by Oriol, to replace an existing chapel in poor repair. Bartlemas House to the north was built in 1649 after damage to the almshouses during the English Civil War of the 17th century; the core of Bartlemas Farmhouse dates from the 15th and even 14th centuries, the medieval survival of the chaplain's dwelling, with later additions dating from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

Drainage work around the perimeter of St. Bartholomew's Chapel 2011 **Christopher Franks, Bartlemas Chapel Trust**

For some years the chapel has suffered increasingly from damp penetration to the floor and walls, particularly to the north and east. In July 2005 pluvial flooding threatened to lap over the north door threshold as the single gully to the east of the north door was overwhelmed. This was due to the changing climate and new building development in the area and further to the north interfering with the natural underground age-old watercourses in the area and exacerbated by the hard garden landscaping directly to the north. The increasing undergrowth creep on all sides of the chapel was not helping the situation.

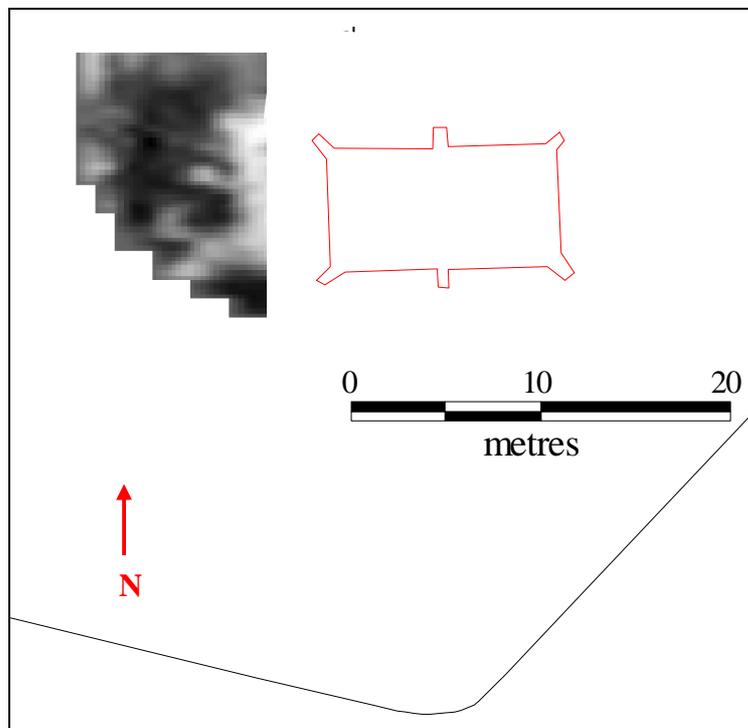
The church architect recommended that a pebbled filled trench round the perimeter of the chapel was formed, with edging to keep the undergrowth back from the walls. He

also recommended laying drainage pipes along the north and east side of the chapel running into a large soakaway positioned down slope to the south east of the chapel.

East Oxford Archaeology Project asked and gained permission to hand dig in the machine dug trenches to investigate for earlier foundation and possible burials, before backfilling. This partnership of drainage works and community archaeology excavations has proved extremely successful for both parties and provided new and exciting insight into the long and varied history of this extraordinarily historic place (See Excavation Reports)

Why did the excavation happen?

The immediate stimulus for the excavations was the need for remedial drainage work around the Chapel (see above) offering an opportunity to dig deeper by hand in small sections of the drainage trench excavated around the building. The Diocese of Oxford also granted permission for the Project to excavate over an area to the west of the Chapel investigated using geophysics (resistivity). Underlying this is the wider need for research into the medieval history of East Oxford.



Bartlemas Chapel Resistivity: carried out by William Wintle and students of the Department for Continuing Education 2009

The need for research: extract from the letter to the Diocese

The eastern quadrant of the City of Oxford, despite considerable archaeological potential (for the prehistoric, Romano-British, Anglo-Saxon medieval and Civil War periods), has seen almost no concerted research. The earlier medieval period, during which St Bartholomew's was founded (in 1126), is especially significant in the area's history and particularly poorly covered. The religious landscape for that period is most interesting with twelfth century churches known in Iffley and Church Cowley (St James'), the Knights Templar holding a sizeable Preceptory at Temple Cowley - granted to them in 1139 and the Priory of St Nicholas at Littlemore (*excavated by Archeox in 2012*). The

East Oxford Project will be using a number of archaeological techniques to explore the wider context of the twelfth century landscape within which St Bartholomew's is a crucial and poorly understood component.

St Bartholomew's itself is one of very few remaining leper hospital sites in the United Kingdom and the only one surviving in such a relatively undisturbed setting. Yet almost nothing is known about the physical development of this important site: the location of the earliest Chapel is unknown; the site of the lepers' quarters is not certain, nor that of ancillary contemporary buildings. However, as the area has abundant green space surrounding it there is considerable potential for discovering more, using a range of archaeological techniques, and being able to chart the development of a unique site. The limited excavation is only one element of the Project's research which embraces geophysical and topographical survey, documentary research and standing building analysis.

The East Oxford Community Archaeology Project and St Bartholomew's: previous work

The Project has already carried investigation around the site. Geophysics detected the buried remains of eighteenth century landscaping in the grounds of Bartlemas Farmhouse, the foundations of possible 19th century agricultural buildings around Bartlemas House and – just to the west of the Chapel – a stretch of structural foundations which might plausibly belong to an earlier configuration of the Chapel building or to ancillary buildings of the leper hospital, almshouse or later farmyard (see figure above). Other more recent work has included recording the standing remains of the old boundary wall, work towards detailing the finds from the adjacent allotments and excavating test-pits in the gardens of Bartlemas Farmhouse and the allotments to the east and south. Those test-pits confirmed that archaeological deposits are surviving well and discovered the foundations of a substantial, at latest 18th century wall, on an alignment not recorded in any of the old maps, and good collections of medieval pottery. The test pits also revealed that the soil had been built up to the east of the boundary ditch and in particular at the front of the house. Details of the test pits can be found at www.archeox.net – test pit numbers EOXP TP 4, 17, 18, 19 and test pits EOXP TP 30 and 31 in the allotments.



Test Pit in the gardens of Bartlemas Farmhouse