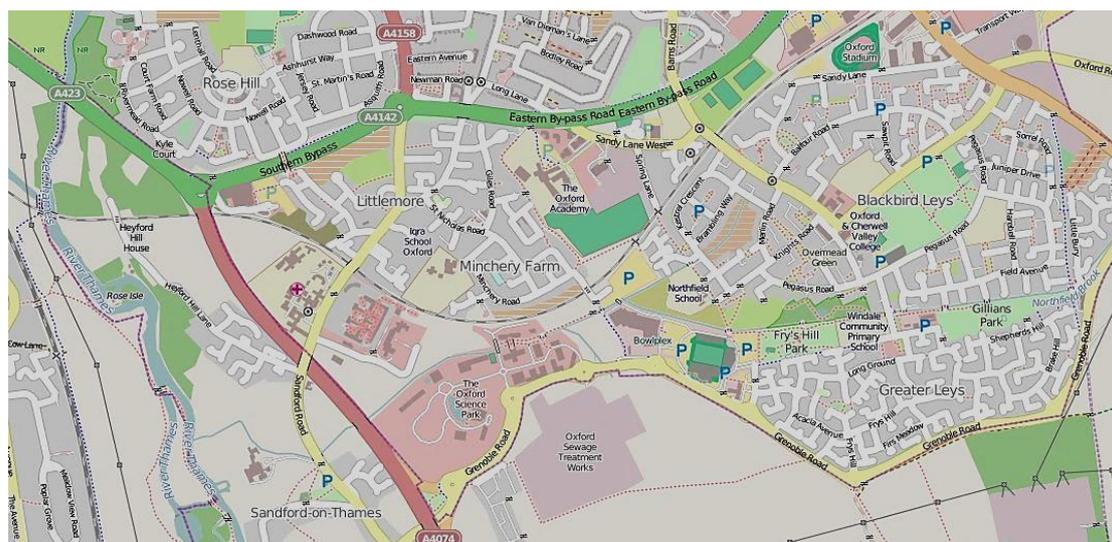


Littlemore and Blackbird Leys - place names and field names

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Littlemore and Blackbird Leys – introduction and origins

Littlemore, located approximately three miles from Oxford City centre, was formerly a township divided between two ancient parishes. The larger part is thought to have been connected with the parish of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, from pre-Norman times,¹ with the lesser part belonging to Iffley.² This study considers Littlemore as it was at the time of the 1819 Enclosure Award, including a large part of what is now Blackbird Leys. This area was bounded on the north by the Iffley and Cowley parishes, on its eastern edge by the old Roman road and Garsington Parish, to the south divided from Sandford Parish by a stream now known as Northfield Brook, and by the River Thames to the west. Littlemore remained a rural township with agriculture at the heart of its economy until the 1920s, when expansion of the Littlemore hospital and motor works at Cowley led to much housing development. Additional acreage was transferred from Iffley to Littlemore in 1885 and 1928. The modern parish is 1,038 acres.³



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The early farmstead of Littlemore was clustered half way down a slope leading southwards between Rose Hill and the Northfield Brook, and an even more gentle slope south east towards Blackbird Leys.⁴ The geology is formed of the Upper Jurassic Corallian Formation, with pockets of calcareous sandstone and marl limestone.⁵ Land beside the Northfield Brook has superficial alluvial deposits as do the terraces along the bank of the River Thames, where the alluvium is laid over river gravels.⁶

Littlemore is recorded c.1130 as Luthlemoria, while the 1191 Pipe Rolls record a variety of spellings, Littlemor, Litlemor(e) and Litimore. The name is derived from the Old English *lytel-mor*, meaning 'small marsh'.⁷

1. "Parishes: Littlemore," in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 5: Bullingdon hundred*, ed. Mary D. Lobel (London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Historical Research, 1957), 212.
2. "Parishes: Iffley," in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 5: Bullingdon hundred*, ed. Mary D. Lobel (London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Historical Research, 1957), 197.
3. "Parishes: Littlemore," 206.
4. Ordnance Survey, *Oxford, Witney & Woodstock: OS explorer map 180* (Southampton: Ordnance Survey, 2009).
5. P. Powell, *The Geology of Oxfordshire* (Stanbridge: The Dovecote Press Ltd, 2005), 45.
6. British Geological Survey, *Geological Sheet 237 (Thame)* (Southampton: Ordnance Survey, c1989).
7. Margaret Gelling, *The place-names of Oxfordshire: Pt. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 180.

Littlemore and Blackbird Leys – later developments, roads and streets

It is difficult to trace old names, fields and lanes in these areas as they have been subject to so much development in the last two centuries. After Enclosure which took place in 1819 there was the railway, the eastern bypass, Sandford Link Road, the building of Blackbird Leys in the 1950s, as well as municipal or other official developments such as the Littlemore hospital built in the 1840s ('County Lunatic Asylum' in maps of the 1880s), and the sewage works built in the 1870s, near the (later) Heyford Hill roundabout.

The Enclosure map of 1819 shows many roads that still exist today.¹ Sandford Road was called the Turnpike road in the Enclosure documents; Oxford Road remains today, and Cowley Road was called 'Littlemore and Cowley Road'. The most prominent east-west road was called Littlemore and Garsington road: this is now discontinuous but parts survive as Long Lane, Sandy Lane West, and Sandy Lane. The latter runs into Watlington Road, then called Garsington Way. Spring Lane follows the line of an old lane. Railway Lane exists on old maps but is not named at the enclosure map. A railway station on the old Oxford Wycombe line was opened in 1864. Off Railway Lane is the road now called Chapel St, after the Baptist chapel. Other names commemorate former features but are not necessarily in the right place. For example there is a Choswell Spring in Greater Leys, but old maps show this as being north of Northfield brook, roughly where Northfield school is. The close called Little Field occupies part of the site of the old field of this name, and nearby, Costar Close is presumably named after Richard Costar who was allocated parcels of land in this area following Enclosure. Ladenham Road and Close are in the territory of the old Loddenham or Ladnum field. Lakefield Road off Minchery Road is in the area occupied by old Lake Field. Allin Close is on land allocated to a man of this name. But Pipleys Furlong in Littlemore is not where Pipleys Furlong appears on the 1605 Corpus Christi College map.²

1. Littlemore Inclosure Award, 1819, Oxfordshire History Centre.
2. H. Simmons, "Cowley" in *The Landscape of Oxford's green belt* (Oxford: University of Oxford, Department for External Studies, c1981), 28-29.

Valleys and watery features

Choswell Spring¹ is derived from the Old English *wella*, the root meaning 'to boil or bubble up'; in many place names translates as 'a spring of water' or 'stream'.² The sense 'stream, especially a stream fed by a spring' is well evidenced in place names and river names like the River Cherwell, Oxon.³ The Littlemore Enclosure map (1819)⁴ marks the Choswell Spring at the point where Chowleswell Lane (now Spring Lane) crosses the Northfield Brook, near Chose-well furlong,⁵ while the Corpus Christi map (1604) refers to Chowleswell Lane,⁶ after the Chawdell Spring (1512).⁷ The first element is likely to be linked to Old English *ceald*, which was followed by Middle English *chald*, *cheld*, or *chold*, with an Anglian form introduced into Saxon dialects as Middle English *cald* or *cold*, translating as 'cold'.⁸ The six virgates of arable and 4 acres of pasture known as 'chaldewelle'⁹ endowed to Sandford Parish, are likely to have been situated close to the Chawdell Spring. The Victoria County History cites a William de Chalderwelle in Littlemore in 1316 and 1327,¹⁰ who may have taken his name from this area of land. Local folklore reputed the spring to have curative powers for bathing the eyes, until the building of the nearby sewage works in the twentieth century.

Lakefield refers to an area of land south of Long Lane, east of the modern Spring Lane and west of the path from St Nicholas Road to just downstream of the bend in the Northfield Brook. 'Lake' derives from the Old English *lacu*, meaning 'small, slow-moving stream, side-channel'.¹¹ Lack of gradient and surface geology suggests this was a poorly drained area, the lower part probably liable to flooding in the winter months.

1. Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference SP 547026.
2. John Field, *English Field Names: a dictionary* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles (Publishers) Ltd., 1972), 274.
3. A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements, Pt. 2*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 250.
4. Littlemore Inclosure Award, 1819, Oxfordshire History Centre.
5. Littlemore terrier, 1765, Z/ IFL 8, Oxford, Lincoln College.
6. Thomas Langdon, Littlemore map, 1605, Oxford, Corpus Christi College Muniments.
7. Bodleian Manuscript, CCC. C.320,ff, 2, 4-5.
8. E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 81-2.
9. "Parishes: Sandford," in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 5: Bullingdon hundred*, ed. Mary D. Lobel (London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Historical Research, 1957).
10. "Parishes: Littlemore," in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 5: Bullingdon hundred*, ed. Mary D. Lobel (London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Historical Research, 1957), 207.
11. Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The landscape of place-names* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, c2000), 19.