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A History of Oxford city

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Oxford is a city in the South East region of England and the county town of Oxfordshire. With an estimated 2015 population of 168,270, it is the 52nd largest city in the United Kingdom, and one of the fastest growing and most ethnically diverse. The city is situated 57 miles (92 km) from London, 69 miles (111 km) from Bristol, 65 miles (105 km) from both Southampton and Birmingham and 25 miles (40 km) from Reading.

The city is known worldwide as the home of the University of Oxford, the oldest university in the English-speaking world. Buildings in Oxford demonstrate notable examples of every English architectural period since the late Saxon period. Oxford is known as the "city of dreaming spires", a term coined by poet Matthew Arnold. Oxford has a broad economic base. Its industries include motor manufacturing, education, publishing and a large number of information technology and science-based businesses, some being academic offshoots.

Oxford was founded in the 9th century when Alfred the Great created a network of fortified towns called burhs across his kingdom. One of these was at Oxford. There may have been a village already existing there or Alfred may have created a new town. The streets of Oxford were in a regular pattern suggesting a new town but we are not certain. Oxford is first mentioned in 911 when the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a sort of national diary, said: «King Edward recieved the burhs of

London and Oxford and London with all the lands belonging to them»¹.

Oxford probably had a market from the time it was made a burgh and it soon became a flourishing town. In the 10th century Oxford had a mint with 4 moneyers (coin makers). But Oxford was a fortress as well as a town. In the event of war with the Danes all the men from the area were to gather inside the burh. However this strategy was not entirely successful. In 1009 the Danes burned Oxford. (An easy task since all the buildings were of wood with thatched roofs). However Oxford was soon rebuilt. In 1013 the Danish king claimed the throne of England. He invaded England and went to Oxford where «the people soon bowed to him and gave hostages»².

By the time of the Norman Conquest there were said to be about 1,000 houses in Oxford, which meant it probably had a population of around 5,000. By the standards of the time it was a large and important town (even London only had about 18,000 inhabitants). It was said at the time that Oxford was the 6th largest town in England. Oxford probably reached its zenith at that time. About 1072 the Normans built a castle at Oxford. The castle has never been used for military purposes and its remains survive to this day.

Though Oxford was heavily damaged during the Norman Invasion, it soon recovered from this disaster and began to flourish once again.

Oxford's prestige was enhanced by its charter granted by King Henry II, granting its citizens the same privileges and exemptions as those enjoyed by the capital of the kingdom; and various important religious houses were founded in or near the city. Parliaments were often held in the city during the 13th century. The Provisions of Oxford were instigated by a group of barons led by Simon de Montfort; these documents are often regarded as England's first written constitution.

During the First World War, the population of Oxford changed. The number of University members was significantly reduced. Some of their places in college accommodation were taken by soldiers in training. Wounded and disabled soldiers were treated in new hospitals housed in University buildings including the Examination School, Town Hall and Somerville College.

By the early 20th century, Oxford was experiencing rapid industrial and population growth, with the printing and publishing industries becoming well established by the 1920s.

Also during the 1920s, the economy and society of Oxford underwent a huge transformation as William Morris established Morris Motors Limited to mass-produce cars in Cowley, on the south-eastern edge of the city. By the early 1970s over 20,000 people worked in Cowley at the huge Morris Motors and Pressed Steel Fisher plants. By this time, Oxford was a city of two halves: the University City to the west of Magdalen Bridge and the car town to the east. This led to the witticism that «Oxford is the left bank of Cowley».

During the Second World War, Oxford was largely ignored by the German air raids during the Blitz, perhaps due to the lack of heavy industry such as steelworks or shipbuilding that would have made it a target. Oxford's second university, Oxford Brookes University, formerly the Oxford School of Art, then Oxford Polytechnic, based at Headington Hill, was given its charter in 1991 and for the last ten years has been voted the best new university in the UK. It was named to honour the school's founding principal, John Henry Brookes.

The influx of migrant labour to the car plants and hospitals, recent immigration from south Asia, and a large student population, have given Oxford a notably cosmopolitan character, especially in the Headington and Cowley Road areas with their many bars, cafes, restaurants, clubs, ethnic shops and fast food outlets and the annual Cowley Road Carnival. Oxford

is one of the most diverse small cities in Britain: the most recent population estimates for 2005 showed that 27% of the population were from ethnic minority groups, including 16.2% from non-white ethnic minority ethnic groups. These figures do not take into account more recent international migration into the city.

Today the main industries are still car manufacturing and making vehicle parts as well as publishing. There is now a biotech industry in Oxford. At the present time a science park is being built. Today the population of Oxford is 121,000.

References:

1. [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access: <http://www.localhistories.org/oxford.html>. – Date of access: 05.04.2017.
2. Insight Guides. – Great Breaks Oxford (Insight Great Breaks).