

Oxford's four centuries of pure water

Four hundred years ago, on 15 May 1617, a solemn ceremony beside the new Carfax Conduit launched Oxford's first public supply of fresh water. Springs above North Hinksey had provided water to Osney Abbey and to the Blackfriars from the 13th century, and, after 1246, St John's Hospital, on the site of Magdalen College, took water from a spring called Crowell at the north end of what is now Longwall Street. Most Oxford people had to obtain their water from rivers and streams, or from springs and shallow wells in the gravel terrace.

Jacobean Oxford owed its new water supply to a wealthy London lawyer, Otho Nicholson (d. 1622) who spent at least £2,500 on the project between 1615 and 1617. Nicholson had no obvious links with Oxford, but he had lucrative posts under James I and needed to retain the king's favour. Awareness of the king's support for Sir Thomas Bodley's recent restoration of the university library at Oxford may have encouraged him to fund repairs to Christ Church Library in 1612. Nicholson was also involved in the New River scheme (1608-13) which brought fresh water into London from Hertfordshire, another project which had interested the king. Christ Church was at the time proposing to bring water from Osney to the college, and this may have prompted Nicholson's grander scheme.

Hugh Justyce, the London plumber selected by Nicholson, devised a gravity fed system by which water was channelled from springs above North Hinksey into a conduit house and then conveyed by underground lead pipes for a mile and a half to Carfax. The pipes were encased in hollowed elm trunks where they crossed several branches of the Thames, and were then laid along Littlegate Street, Beef Lane, Pembroke Street and St Aldate's to reach the Carfax Conduit.

In April 1616, the City granted to the University the site of the former bullring at Carfax, and Nicholson employed John Clark, a Yorkshire carver working in Oxford, to build there 'a very fayer conduytt or fowntayne...' The conduit, built of Headington stone, was a Renaissance version of a medieval market cross with four arches rising from the corners of the square base to support a central octagonal structure topped by two statues back to back. Above a base incised to resemble waves, the conduit was richly decorated with carved animals, figures representing the Cardinal Virtues and the liberal sciences, and statues of seven ancient worthies to which an eighth, James I, was diplomatically added. Finely carved open work panels above the base commemorated Nicholson's generosity by means of the capital letters O and N interspersed by radiant suns and mermaids holding combs and looking glasses. This confection of stonework was initially painted and gilded to form an exciting piece of street theatre.

Behind its remarkable façade, Carfax Conduit was a practical structure, comprising two great cisterns, the upper one being for the University and the lower one, fed by overflow, for the City. The upper cistern was in the form of a huge carved ox, and it may have been a humorous touch that the city was 'supply'd with good and wholesome water, issuing from his pizzle, which continually pisses into the cistern beneath.' From the upper cistern, pipes were laid to two smaller cisterns, one by All Saints' Church and the other at Christ Church, which supplied colleges and a few private houses with water. Citizens could go along with their buckets to collect water from the lower cistern.

Nicholson's great work soon ran into trouble. Both City and University initially controlled the waterworks, but the University soon had to take on most of the burden. By 1627, demand was exceeding supply, and many colleges proved reluctant to pay the service charges which covered repairs and maintenance. When the flow of water ceased altogether during the Civil War in 1644, the system was urgently repaired, but it ultimately proved unable to supply Oxford with sufficient

water. In 1694, the City leased a site at Folly Bridge to private individuals who built a pumping station to take water direct from the Thames and supply it to a cistern in what is now Cornmarket Street. The City ran these waterworks itself from 1808, and continued to supply untreated river water from premises at Folly Bridge until 1856 when new waterworks were opened at New Hinksey.

Carfax Conduit was already viewed as an obstruction in 1637, but talk of removing it to a more convenient place came to nothing. The custom of putting wine in the lower cistern to celebrate festive occasions such as the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and royal visits to Oxford probably helped to endear the structure to local people. The University restored the decaying conduit in 1686, replacing the base and a statue of Empress Maud astride the carved ox; during this work, the last three letters of the date MDCXVII were lost, confusingly re-dating the conduit to 1610 rather than 1617! Carfax Conduit remained in place until Paving Commissioners appointed to clear the city centre of obstructions finally decided in 1786 that it must be removed. The argument that the conduit 'gave a noble termination to the High Street' was over-ruled, but the University offered the ornate structure to Lord Harcourt. He had the original superstructure re-erected on a new base as an eyecatcher in his landscaped park at Nuneham Courtenay in 1787.

This did not mark the end of Nicholson's waterworks. A new cistern was built into a house at the north-east corner of Carfax, and supplied water to Christ Church and a few other central Oxford properties until 1868. The City acquired the conduit house and adjoining land at North Hinksey in 1869, and this later became part of the Harcourt estate. The plain ashlar stone conduit house was envisaged as a centre-piece when this estate was developed, but it later became ruinous. It was taken into state guardianship in the 1970s, and the restored structure off Harcourt Hill is now open to the public.

The University of Oxford acquired the Nuneham estate after wartime military requisition in 1948, and with it the decaying Carfax Conduit. The return of the conduit to Oxford had been suggested after the First World War as part of a war memorial, and, in 1948, Oxford's planning consultant, Thomas Sharp, wanted it re-erected at his New Carfax, today's Bonn Square. Other sites were proposed, most famously in Broad Street where a full-scale model with painted canvas panels supplied by Oxford Playhouse was wheeled around in 1972 to assess the effect on the townscape. None of these schemes found favour, and the restored monument remains a notable feature in its landscape setting at Nuneham. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that a 21st century benefactor will fund a replica of the original conduit to adorn central Oxford once more.

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Image captions:

D210537 Sunday School children picnic beside the Carfax Conduit at Nuneham, July 1902

D252189 Carfax Conduit model in Broad Street, September 1972

D294529 Carfax Conduit and St Aldate's, 1755

CC54/00375 Conduit House at North Hinksey in about 1910

Carfax-01 Plan of Oxford's water supply in the 17th century

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