

Christ Church, Oxford

*Discovering
Medieval Oxford
beneath the quads*

ABOVE Brooding spires: Christ Church, Oxford, is a unique blend of academic college and cathedral. This is the 12th-century priory church of St Frideswide, which later found a new role as the diocesan cathedral.

What was Oxford like before dreaming spires dominated its skyline? Dave Gilbert, John Moore, and Gwyl Williams have delved beneath Christ Church's quads to discover some remarkable relics of the Medieval city's emergence as a centre of learning.

Christ Church, Oxford, is perhaps most recognisable today for its starring role in the first two Harry Potter films. Yet there is far more to this 16th-century foundation than a backdrop to blockbuster movies.

Christ Church is a unique hybrid of academic college and the Diocese of Oxford cathedral. Owing more to chance than design, this college and cathedral chimera was brought about by the thwarted ambition of one of Tudor England's most powerful, and controversial, figures. Cardinal Wolsey had grandiose plans for a new and purely academic foundation called 'Cardinal College', but fell from grace before they could be fully realised. Re-endowed by Henry VIII, the modern institution's dual personality stems in part from the corpulent king's penchant for penny-pinching.

Excavations over the last decade have unearthed traces of Wolsey's bold original vision for the site, as well as the remarkable detritus of scholarship that accumulated as dreaming spires proliferated across Oxford. Dating back to the early days of scientific enquiry, some of these artefacts might well strike a chord with a certain boy wizard.

Secret history

Lying a short distance from Carfax Tower, the traditional heart of Oxford, Christ Church occupies a sizable plot close to the site of the city wall's south gate. Much of this ground had previously been occupied by the former Late Saxon minster and later Augustinian priory dedicated to Frideswide, Oxford's patron saint. The priory was dissolved by Wolsey in 1525 as part of a shameless land-grab to secure space for his new college.

The recent series of excavations began in 2005 when a member of Christ Church peered into a freshly dug service trench and noticed an exposed wall foundation. The Oxford City Archaeologist was alerted, and John Moore Heritage Services (JMHS) were called in to carry out a watching

BELOW Excavations in Tom Quad uncovered at least five burials in the vicinity of the old Saxon minster and Augustinian priory. This east-west aligned skeleton, found in a trench along the east side of the quad, was left *in situ*. A single sherd of mid 13th- to 14th-century pottery was found in the grave fill.



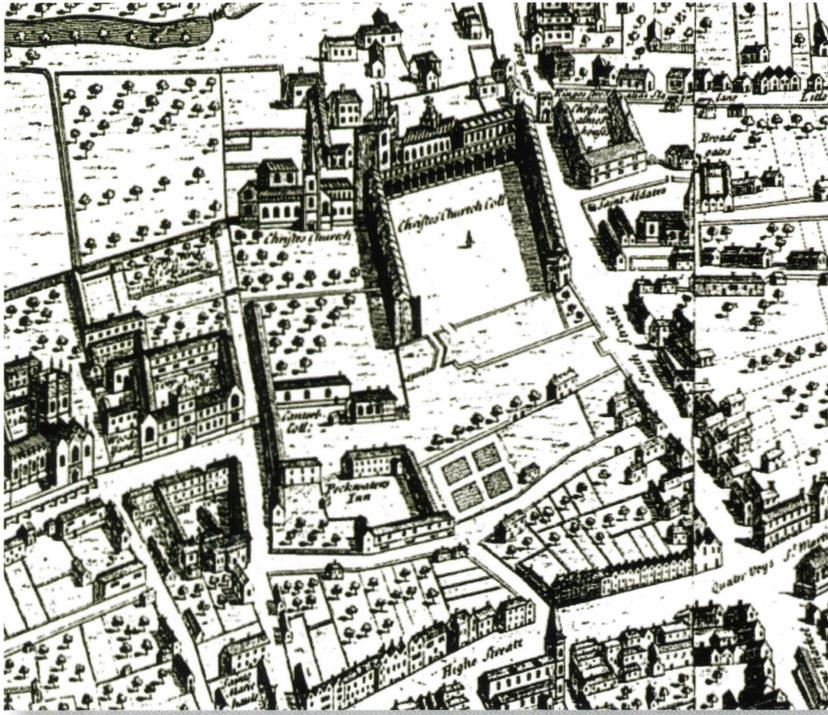
brief. The first visit by JMHS saw the mystery masonry identified as part of the St Frideswide's Priory precinct wall. Burials were also discovered just beyond the precinct wall. Lying outside the priory limits, these skeletons were the remains of individuals interred within the former churchyard of St Peter at the South Gate.

Plans for further services to be installed provided an opportunity to explore Oxford before Christ Church. The service trenches were approximately 1.25m wide, and although their depth did not extend down to the very earliest levels of Oxford, an unexpected quantity of Medieval remains was revealed beneath the college quads. In one trench, 14th-century walls still stood almost a metre high, only 35cm beneath the present ground surface. Elsewhere four Medieval roads and the properties fronting onto one of them were also discovered.

House proud

The two components that make up the modern institution are formally known as 'Christ Church Cathedral of the Diocese of Oxford' and 'The Dean, Chapter and Students of the Cathedral Church of





ABOVE The outline or footings of Wolsey's chapel, which would have completed the fourth side of Tom Quad, can be seen in this detail from Ralph Agas' 1578 panorama of Oxford.

Christ in Oxford of the Foundation of King Henry the Eighth'. The all-encompassing popular name of Christ Church neatly sidesteps this mouthful, as does the nickname by which it is affectionately known to its members: 'the house'. This owes its origin to a playful take on *aedes Christi*, the house of God.

The unique combination of college and cathedral has brought its fair share of anomalies. The cathedral pews, for example, do not face the altar and *cathedra* – or bishop's chair – but are instead laid out to reflect the building's parallel role as a college chapel. Indeed, the Bishop of Oxford is the only English bishop who is not the Visitor at his own cathedral. The cathedral itself was never

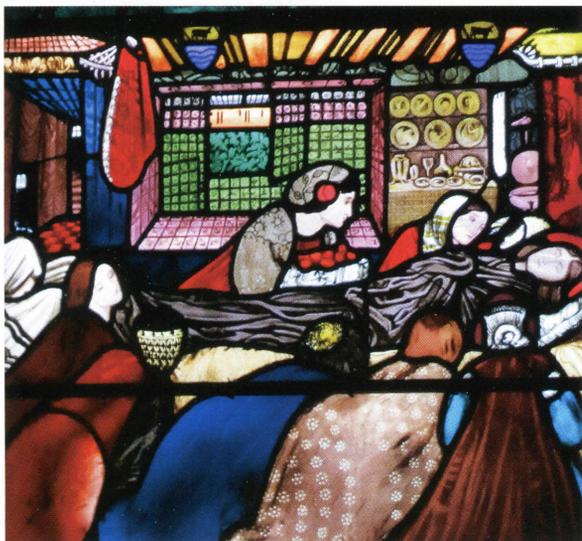
intended as such, and started life in the 12th century as the priory church of St Frideswide's.

The priory church's west end was demolished in the 1520s to make way for the monumental Gothic edifice, now known as Tom Quad, at the heart of Wolsey's planned Cardinal College. The remainder of the church would have shared its fate once work on the new institution's chapel was complete. Instead, Wolsey's fall in 1529 saw construction of his college cease. When it was refounded by Henry VIII, rather than staying true to Wolsey's masterplan, the king sensed a cost-cutting opportunity. Instead of completing the planned college chapel, Henry retained the priory church – and even elevated it to the status of a cathedral in 1546, when upkeep of his original choice, Osney Abbey, proved prohibitively expensive. Traces of Wolsey's original intent do survive, however, both in contemporary plans and buried beneath the quads. There are also fascinating remains of the world his college swept away.

Priory enquiry

The minster church of St Frideswide is first mentioned in three Late Saxon charters of AD 1002. Radiocarbon dates from skeletons excavated in 1985 by Chris Scull indicate, however, that a cemetery may have existed on the site as early as the 9th century AD. This evidence for early activity was recently pushed back further still, when the

BELOW The eastern window of Christ Church Cathedral's Lady Chapel, designed by the Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones in 1859, depicts the life of Oxford's patron saint, Frideswide. This panel, depicting the saint on her deathbed, includes an unusual anachronistic detail: a flushing toilet. Such concerns were equally important to Medieval pilgrims, as attested by the discovery of a garderobe near the priory church.





ABOVE Excavations under way in Tom Quad. The former priory church (its spire is visible) was originally truncated to make way for the monumental quad (foreground) at the heart of Wolsey's new college. Lowering the level of the quad in the 17th century must have destroyed much archaeology, but pockets survived under the terraced walkway.

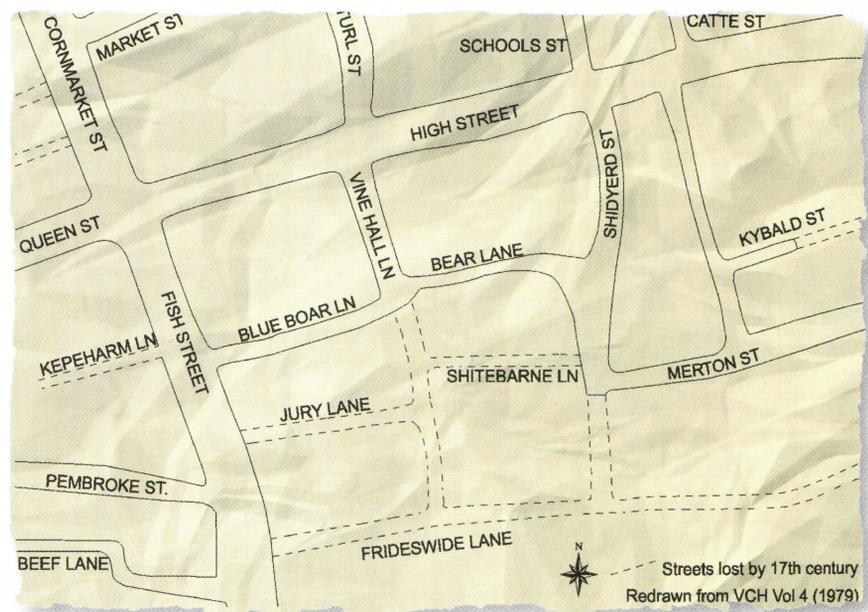
burial of an adult woman produced a relatively secure 7th-century date. All of this points to a Christian centre in the area somewhat earlier than is usually accepted.

Tentative support for such early occupation can be found in the legend of St Frideswide. Accounts of her life are known from several much later hagiographic sources written after the refoundation of the Abbey in the AD 1120s. While details vary, all versions involve the Saxon princess fleeing to Oxford to escape the unwanted attention of King Algar of Mercia. Her death is traditionally believed to have occurred in AD 727. While such stories can hardly be taken as reliable historical sources, they would nevertheless fit with the idea of an Early Medieval centre located around a minster church, when Oxford may have formed part of a sub-kingdom of the Gewisse.

By the early 11th century, St Frideswide's appears to have been in decline. It was officially refounded under royal patronage as a priory of Augustinian canons in AD 1120-1122. This prompted a spate of major mid 12th-century works, including the construction of the priory church and cloister. In AD 1180 the Archbishop of Canterbury placed the relics of St Frideswide in a new shrine in the priory church in the presence of Henry II. Further additions and alterations were made to the church during the 13th and 14th centuries, before it began its new life as a supposedly temporary college chapel, and then cathedral, in the 16th century.

BELOW Roads to nowhere: this street plan shows a network of Medieval lanes that had partly vanished from the Oxford landscape by the 17th century. Recent excavations have brought some of these to light once more, however.

Despite the spiritual draw of this sacred place, worshippers also had more profane concerns to attend to. Excavations revealed a garderobe – or latrine – near the original west end of the priory church. Physically detached from the church, and therefore a 'stand-alone' structure, it was located within the priory cemetery and built on the same orientation as the church. Given its location, the most likely explanation is that the garderobe served as a convenience for visiting worshippers. Although it was filled-in during the 15th century, it contained stone architectural fragments dating from the 12th and 13th centuries, suggesting ➔





LEFT Road resurfacing: the Medieval cobbled surface of St Frideswide's Lane, sloping in the centre to create a narrow gutter.

that early priory buildings were being demolished or refurbished at this time.

The priory's precinct wall was also traced on two sides. To the west it was founded on distinctive arched foundations, a style which has been encountered elsewhere in Oxford. A 5m-wide building had butted up against the precinct wall, and may have provided lodgings for visitors to the priory. The northern precinct wall was found running alongside St Frideswide's Lane, one of several thoroughfares to be lost as Christ Church expanded.

Streetwise

Maps produced by H.E. Salter show how St Frideswide's Lane slotted into a network of streets that has been partly swallowed up by the northern portion of Christ Church. Fish Street – currently known as St Aldate's – formed the main thoroughfare running north from the city's south gate. Three streets led off this to the east: St Frideswide's Lane, Jury Lane, and Blue Boar Lane. Only the latter still survives (now as a Street). All three joined Vine Hall Lane – currently Alfred Street. A further two roads ran east of Vine Hall Lane: Shitebarne Lane and Bear Lane, while St Frideswide's Lane appears to have continued, creating a southern border to this slightly irregular street grid.

The trenches only revealed parts of these roads but confirmed the location of the junction of Vine Hall Lane with Jury Lane and Shitebarne Lane. Repairs had been carried out

on the road-surfaces, in particular where it had seen heavy use at the junction of Vine Hall Lane and Jury Lane. Previously St Frideswide's Lane was believed to have been in place by the early to mid 12th century, but the earliest surface revealed in these investigations belonged to the 13th or 14th century.

The road surfaces consisted of roughly shaped limestone cobbles. They sloped down slightly in the centre to create a narrow central channel or 'kennel' formed by cobbles laid lengthways. This does not appear to have been maintained for long, as it was soon choked with stones and waste. A feature of many Medieval streets, such gutters were the subject of numerous complaints about the filth flowing along them, including human and animal urine and faeces, as well as food and butchery waste.

Among those running the gauntlet of streets that could be little more than open sewers would have been the occupants of a number of Medieval academic halls located in this part of the city. In the earliest period of the university, students usually lived in private houses, but by the middle of the 13th century they were beginning to congregate in academic halls, often town houses owned by the local monasteries. These halls would either be rented directly by students themselves or let from a Master of Arts who would take on the overall rent as a 'Principal' for the Hall, making a profit from letting rooms and providing meals.



RIGHT Academic foundations: as well as religious structures, the investigation uncovered traces of buildings that served as halls of residence for Oxford's Medieval students.

Such halls were primarily a place of residence, although some academic instruction was often included. Eventually all halls were licensed by the University, and housed the vast majority of students, both graduate and undergraduate. The first colleges, by contrast, were initially reserved for fellows. A typical hall took the form of two ranges laid out in an L-shape, with the shorter line fronting the street.

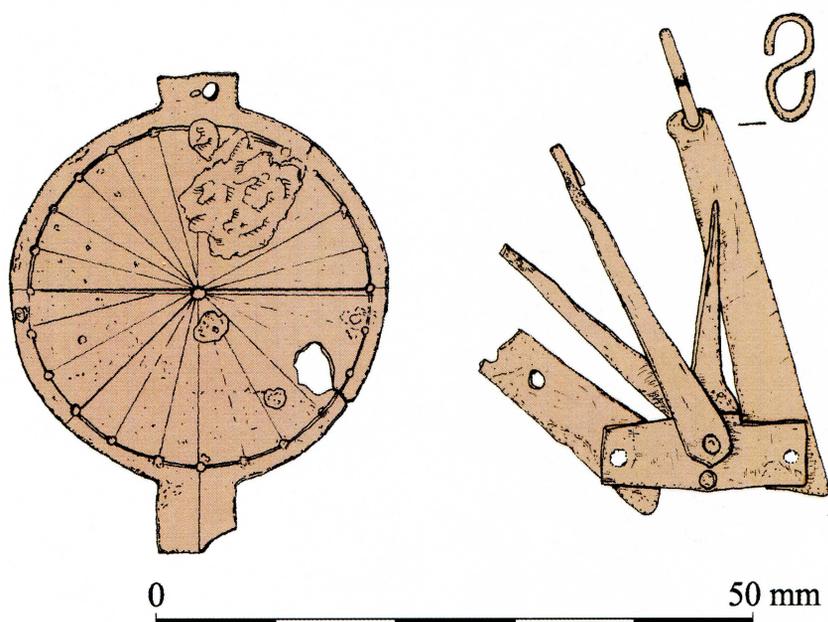
The excavations crossed the original plots of at least 12 such halls. Two of these establishments were Glasen Hall and Vine Hall. These well-preserved buildings lay north of Shitebarne Lane and were entered from Vine Hall Lane. Built at right angles to the street frontage, they were probably originally two rooms wide. From pottery found both within the walls and elsewhere it seems probable that these buildings were occupied from the 14th century, with 15th- to mid 16th-century pottery recovered from later alterations to the fabric.

Documentary sources suggest that both these plots were once a single property or 'great house' belonging to the Kepeharm family. One of Oxford's wealthiest merchant families, they owned an enviable property portfolio boasting holdings west of St Aldate's and elsewhere in the city. Excavation showed that there was a 12m space between the two halls, perhaps forming a garden or courtyard.

One room within Glasen Hall had traces of a clay and mortar floor surface, with a cobbled hearth area immediately in front of the fireplace. Later alterations to the building saw the insertion of a new wall and the creation of an extra internal room. This subdivision contained traces of a wooden floor. Vine Hall was equally well preserved, and similar in layout to Glasen Hall. The demolition of these buildings might have slightly pre-dated, or been directly associated with, large-scale reconstruction of the nearby Peckwater Inn during the 17th century.

Pure alchemy

Oxford's emergence as an academic centre was not just reflected in its building stock. A range of objects associated with both literacy and more specialised learning were also discovered. Five bone and one metal Medieval writing styli were recovered, alongside six copper-alloy book fastenings, mounts, clasps, and page holders. Some small blades were identified as penknives for sharpening writing quills. Four Medieval ceramic



lamps, dating from the 13th to 15th centuries, reveal that burning the midnight oil is not a staple just of modern undergraduate life. Numerous other examples of lamps have been recovered from excavations at other college and hall sites, showing a strong link with academic study.

A mysterious and incomplete scientific or surveying instrument was found in the north-east corner of Tom Quad. It is similar to an astrolabe – a device with numerous applications, including predicting the positions of celestial bodies, establishing the time and surveying. Experts at the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford, were unable to provide a definitive identification. The object was a flat copper-alloy disc with an irregular oval hole at its centre. The 'face' is divided into 24 narrow triangular sectors, dividing the disc up into 15° sectors. This suggests that it was either a compass or some other surveying instrument, with the central hole containing a needle or dial.

Modern backfill from an earlier service trench yielded another unidentified instrument. Its central arm is similar to some Medieval and post-Medieval toiletry and châtelaine sets, but the other components do not match toiletry instruments. An S-shaped loop at the end of one arm suggests that it was designed to hang

ABOVE Among the more enigmatic finds from the Christ Church excavation was this as-yet unidentified scientific instrument, perhaps used for surveying, and a folding tool that may have been part of a set of scales.

“Four Medieval lamps, dating from the 13th to 15th centuries, reveal that burning the midnight oil is not a staple just of modern undergraduate life.”



off another object, or perhaps that objects were suspended off it. This may indicate scales or balances, and the object shares many features with late Medieval or early post-Medieval copper-alloy folding balances found in Norwich and York.

By far the most exciting discovery was a unique set of pottery and glass objects used for distilling and possibly also alchemy. Dumped in the backfill of a garderobe during the mid 14th century, this is the earliest, and also the second largest, set of such objects to be found in Britain. Comparable assemblages of glass distilling vessels are known from St John's Priory, Pontefract (which has the largest assemblage), St Leonard's Priory in Stamford, and Selborne Priory in Hampshire. Finds from secular sites have generally not been as significant.

The pottery and glass vessels were carefully studied in an attempt to deduce what they were used for. An early suggestion was that the ceramic vessels and even the glass distillation apparatus were domestic and associated with ecclesiastical or higher-status cooking activities, as well as the distillation of medicine or even alcoholic liqueurs and '*aqua vitae*'. Yet it was clear that some of the vessels had been subject to heat so intense that it had vitrified their base. The internal glaze on a number of bowls and skillets was also found to have been partly corroded by their former contents, suggesting that they held strongly acidic or caustic substances. This indicated something other than everyday use.

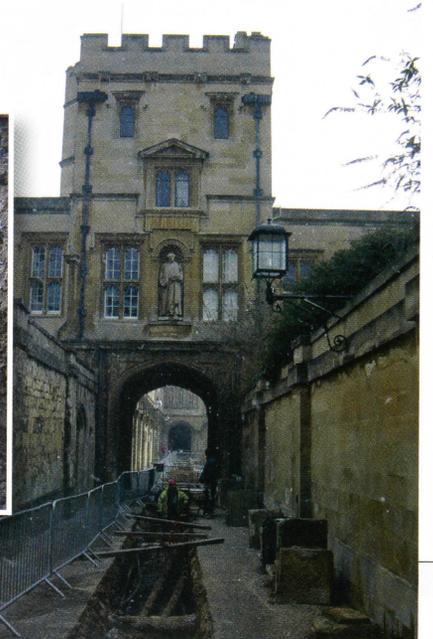
Could the evidence for exposure to extraordinary temperatures be the consequence of an accidental laboratory fire? This was also ruled out, as many of the other ceramic vessels did not display signs of such extreme heating, including most of the bowls and skillets. Equally,

ABOVE Was the unique assemblage of pottery and glass objects recovered from the Christ Church garderobe used for domestic distilling, or do these vessels point towards more arcane practices?

any accidental fire capable of vitrifying ceramics would also have melted or deformed the glass vessels. That deliberate heating was involved is suggested by the recovery of fragments of fired clay from a portable hearth or furnace dumped in the garderobe fill. Taken together, the objects make most sense as distilling apparatus, but what were they distilling?

Distillation was used for a range of purposes. These included the straightforward preparation of medicinal remedies such as oil of Benedict and flower oils, as well as testing the purity of ore, not to mention the preparation of gunpowder from ammonium carbonate in urine. The practice of alchemy was part of all these activities. Practitioners included monastic communities and apothecaries, as well as freelance alchemists, such as Roger Bacon. John Hexham, a 15th-century apothecary, listed a still as well as 100 bottles containing 'various waters' in his inventory. On a smaller scale, such practices were sometimes undertaken within individual households. Bishop Richard Mitford's household, for example, purchased a glass still 'to distil the medicine' in 1416-1417. Monastic houses would have distilled colours

BELOW Archaeological work beneath Fell Tower revealed possible traces of Wolsey's unfinished chapel, including (INSET) these substantial arched foundations.



such as vermilion and ‘water of silver’ with which ‘you shall write gold as fast as with ink’.

Without doubt, though, the most famous application of alchemy was in the search to transform base metals into gold or silver using a cocktail of chemicals dubbed the ‘philosopher’s stone’. While it is impossible to prove that the Christ Church assemblage was used in this way, it is entirely conceivable that the quest for this mythical elixir was under way here long before cameras rolled on the first Harry Potter film.

Wolsey’s whimsy

The 1525 foundation of Wolsey’s abortive Cardinal College required the clearance of numerous Medieval buildings. When the Cardinal fell from power four years later, three sides of the Gothic quadrangle – known as Tom Quad – had almost been completed, but only the foundations of the proposed chapel on the north side were in place. It was not until 1668 that Tom Quad also had a north range. The centre of the quad was lowered at the same time to create a terraced walkway, doubtless destroying much archaeology in the process.

Agas’ panorama of 1578 shows the general outline or the footings of Wolsey’s uncompleted chapel, while the antiquary John Aubrey noted that the surviving foundations of the chapel were torn down during the construction of the north side of Tom Quad. But was the destruction complete? Digging drains in the gardens to the north of Tom Quad during the early 1890s exposed ‘massive foundations’, possibly forming the north wall of the Great Chapel. Substantial

FURTHER READING

A. M. Chadwick, D. R. Gilbert and J. Moore (eds) (2012) *‘...Quadrangles Where Wisdom Honours Herself’: archaeological investigations at Tom Quad, Peckwater Quad and Blue Boar Quad, Christ Church, Oxford* (JMHS Monograph 1). See the John Moore Heritage Services website www.jmheritageservices.co.uk for further details.

rubble wall foundations were again recorded during limited excavations in 1964 just beyond the walls of Christ Church in St Aldate’s, and were interpreted as the western end wall.

It is likely that a wall and semi-circular curving footings discovered in a trench leading under Fell Tower in the north-eastern corner of Tom Quad represented part of Wolsey’s uncompleted building. What has been interpreted as the south side of the chapel was a massive 2.6m-wide wall; 13.5m north of this lay a curved foundation at least 4.5m wide. Precisely what this supported is unclear, but it could have been the central pier for a massive fan-vaulted roof, a central pillar for a chevet or radiating chapel outside the main aisle of the chapel, a turret, or simply a large staircase.

Seat of learning

The recent excavations tell us about far more than just the evolution of a single college and cathedral. The 14th-century academic halls and the finds discovered during the work vividly portray Medieval Oxford’s increasing specialisation in the field of learning. The unexpected and important assemblage of early (al)chemical apparatus particularly highlights this. Such a find would be out of place in a market or county town, but fits the international contacts and learning that drew such experts and students to Oxford. The assemblage includes the first evidence from Britain for the portable furnaces used by (al)chemical practitioners. Its presence, alongside more humdrum academic objects such as styli and book-clasps, places Medieval Oxford right at the heart of a burgeoning European ‘knowledge economy’. @

BELOW *Dominus illuminato mea*: Medieval Oxford saw the dawning of a new specialism in the field of learning.

