



In 1864 Merton University bought 71 acres of land by the River Cherwell, and laid out University Parks, open to the public. Several bathing places were established, and later Port Meadow became a popular recreational area, with sailing when flooded and raised pathways for walking, in addition to horse race meetings.

The firm of Salters Steamers, based at Folly Bridge, played a large part in the commercialisation of leisure up and down the Thames, which really took off around 1870. They offered trips by passenger steamer, and went into partnership with the GWR to do round trips e.g. to Abingdon. They also provided rowing boats and punts for messing about on the river. This firm still exists to this day.

The Beesley family had made their living as watermen since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Abel Beesley, harvested reeds and willow osiers, also making fish and eel traps. He was renowned for being the champion punter of England - he once won a race sitting, rather than standing, in his punt, and using a billiard cue as a pole. On another occasion he won a race against a steam launch which was carrying five passengers. Over the course of a mile Beasley still managed to come in 110 yards ahead in just over 4 minutes.

A complex of baths, racquet courts and billiard rooms was set up in Pembroke Street in 1852, including baths for swimming & washing. These were very popular, since many Oxford families were without proper washing facilities. At the opening ceremony of the baths disaster struck - an explosion in a steam boiler killed the stoker and injured seven others. However they were rebuilt and reopened the following year, and were very well supported. There were also Turkish baths.

Apart from physical activities, there were intellectual benefits. This was a period of increasing literacy, with more office and shop jobs, people needed to be literate and numerate. So Oxford's first public library was opened in 1854. Initially it was only a reference library, but in 1857 a lending section was added. Magazines and newspapers were provided by public subscription. Compulsory schooling was brought in by 1870. A children's reading room was added in the basement in 1899. Popular literacy and a growing emphasis on self-improvement through education and the printed word were also promoted by a variety of institutions including Temperance clubs, mechanics' institutes, working men's clubs, co-operatives and other political organisations.

The Oxford Institute was a club for working men and boys established by the city and university in 1884, with premises on St Aldates, which offered facilities for both education and sport, with weekly evening classes, lectures, bible classes, a debating society, a lending library, a reading room and a gymnasium. Other places that provided similar facilities were Working Men's Clubs, and the YMCA promoted intellectual and physical recreation of the rational kind.

Temperance Clubs and hotels were of course more concerned with the ill effects of alcohol. It was noted in 1868 that in Oxford 30% more money was spent on drink than on food. Temperance buildings often had shops on the ground floor for rental income.

There always were a lot of pubs in Oxford, amounting to about one for every 100 inhabitants. They were not just for drinking, but held boxing matches, and dog and cock fighting, all of which led to a good deal of gambling. A few were associated with brothels or prostitution. By 1850 it was said that no respectable urban Englishman would enter a public house.

In 1907 Frank Stewart took over the Empire Theatre in Cowley Road, and renamed it the East Oxford Theatre and held variety shows there. Just opposite in 1911 Frank built the Oxford Picture Palace. This is Oxford's oldest surviving cinema, and celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2011. Several other cinemas were built in the next few years, the Electra Palace on Queen Street, and the North Oxford Kinema, Walton Street, now the Phoenix Picturehouse, which will celebrate its centenary in 2013. There was a New Theatre on George Street from 1886 until 1933.

Other attractions were Charles Peel's Big Game Museum, displaying his collection of stuffed big game hunting trophies.

St. Giles' Fair highlighted Collins' Helter Skelter, and at various times featured freak shows, boxers, female wrestlers, and a flying trapeze. In 1905 Mr Taylor's 'Royal Electric Coliseum' created a stir when it brought with it a Parisian organ illuminated by 1,000 miniature coloured electric lights. There was Day's travelling Menagerie with over 500 wild animals including a pack of wolves. St. Clements Fair was originally a hiring fair, but in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century it became a localised miniature of St Giles's Fair, with a steam roundabout, amusement stalls and donkey-racing on the Iffley Road. However, the popularity of traditional places of entertainment - the pub and St Giles' Fair - was undiminished, and the working people of Oxford continued to enjoy themselves in any number of ways, some "rational" and others perhaps less so.

#### **4. Forthcoming meetings and events**

Oct. 30<sup>th</sup> A.G.M. and "From Gough to Google", the development of printed maps of Oxfordshire  
John Leighfield

Please let Peter or Rupert know if you would like to add any item to the AGM agenda.