OXTON IN HISTORY
a compilation outlining the events of two millennia

by
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Oxa tûn
'farm or enclosure where oxen are kept'
an Anglo-Saxon settlement, whose name implies the conduct of a specialised form of husbandry at the site. [1]

To the 18th Century

Pre-history [2]
A polished stone axe of the neolithic period was found in the grounds of Westridge, Ingestre Road in 1951 while in 1930 a stone pounder or hammer-head was dug up in the garden of Elmhurst, Glenmore Road, presumably destroyed with this house when bombed in 1941. No.2 now stands on the site. A bronze age metal axe was recovered from the sports field of Townfield Primary School, Noctorum Way.

A hoard of Roman coins was found in 1834 by workmen in the Arno quarry. Most disintegrated on touch, but a few were identified as of Antoninus (AD138-161), Marius (AD 268), and Victorianus (268-270). It has been suggested that the third century dates are a likely time for the burial, since this was a period of political turmoil in the Empire and that the identification of a further coin to the time of Honorius (AD395-423) was probably incorrect, being more than a century removed.

Oxton Manor
Hugo de Mara, known also as Hugo Fitz Norman, was the Norman grantee of the Cheshire possessions of the barons of Montalt. These, together with the office of Dapifer or Seneschal of the Earldom, were united in the next generation in the person of Robert de Montalt, who is believed to be the son of Ralf, brother of Hugh Fitz Norman, and who assumed the name of his castle of Montalt, or Mold. [3]

The manor of Oxton does not appear in the Domesday Survey and is believed to have been included in that of Eastham, originally held by de Mara. [4] By the thirteenth century it appears vested in what was probably a younger line of the

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[1] Dodgson Vol. XLVII p.269-271, Robinson p.3
[2] MSMR
[3] Ormerod p.53
[4] Beazley p.1, Brownbill pp. 21-25

barons of Montalt, under whom they held their lands and whose arms and crest they adopted, with slight variation - the Domville family, who also held the manor of Brimstage, their original settlement, described as "this bleak and moorish tract". [5] It subsequently passed through the marriage of female heirs to the Holes (or Hulses) of Raby, then to the the Troutbecks of Dunham and so to Sir John Talbot of Albrighton, who in 1521 conveyed it with several other Cheshire manors to his first cousin, George Talbot, the 4th. Earl of Shrewsbury. [6]

John Talbot had a further role to play, that of ancestor to future earls. His great-grandson through his elder son, John, entered the line in 1619 as the 9th Earl, while the ninth generation descendent through his younger son, by a second wife, also named John, provided the 18th Earl on the death of his predecessor without issue in 1856. [7]

There is a curious feudal flavour about an incident which occurred in 1832, when the 16th Earl summoned his Oxton tenants to Court Leet at Raby (both Brimstage and Oxton were within its jurisdiction) to enumerate their commitments in the plashing of hedgerows, the scouring of ditches, the disposal of such scourings and the cutting of hedges, under a penalty of 2s.6d. per rod for every hedge or ditch unplashed or unscoured. The inadequate ringing of pigs found wandering on public roads and anyone trespassing for the purpose of getting mushrooms incurred a forfeit of 1/- per offence. [8]

In rural areas, the civil parish, in general, coincided with the ecclesiastical parish …. and generally had the same boundaries as the manor. This was certainly so in Oxton, where the boundaries, except for a small area on the Claughton border, enclosed the area depicted by Bainbridge in 1795 as the extent of the Shrewsbury Oxton Estate. The boundaries of Oxton Township were coterminous with those of the manor. [9] …. and the snippet of land described as 'so much of the Township of Oxton not belonging to the Earl of Shrewsbury or his lessees' bounded by Palm Grove, Grosvenor Road and the Oxton-Claughton boundary. [10]

The Earls of Shrewsbury remained manorial proprietors until 1990, when in the time of the 22nd. Earl the title was up for sale by auction. [11] The Shrewsbury connection is commemorated in a sequence of road names derived from subsidiary titles, viz. Alton, Chetwynd, Ingestre, Shrewsbury, Talbot, Waterford and Wexford.

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[5] Ormerod p.431

[6] Ormerod pp. 432-433, 527
[7] The Complete Peerage Vol.7, Part 1, p.731
[8] Varley p.20
[9] ibid. pp. 8, 20
[10] ibid. p.21
[11] Liverpool Daily Post 12 Oct 1990

Late Medieval

In a charter made in the twelfth century, Hugh Domville granted Birkenhead Priory a dwelling house and land (unam mensoram et unam cultram) called Knavenebrec (The Young Man's Hill) in Oxton "for the safety of his soul and the souls of his ancestors". This is known through an inspeximus (a confirmatory document) of his descendent, Roger.

There appears to have been some litigation in 1282 between the Prior and Isabel, the lady of Oxton, and her son, Roger, over their respective boundaries, lying between "Portstreet" and "Oxtoneway", extending between the town fields of Oxton and Claughton. The issue was settled by a charter between the Prior and Roger Domville, determining the bounds between Oxton and Claughton to be from "Bottislowe" (Bott's Hill) to "Swalewelowe " (Swallow Hill) and thence by stones placed there in "Lyngedale" (Heather Vale) to "Raggedestoan". Lingdale is the sole survivor of these topographical features. [12]

In the course of research, Margaret Robinson came across an entry in the Cheshire County Court Rolls (p77) recording the theft of an ox from Oxton on 21st June 1286.

Since the 1847 Tithe Map shows the Oxton-Claughton boundary following roughly the plan of Palm Hill, Claughton Hill to the junction of Ashburton and Shrewsbury Roads, it is widely believed that this must have been quite near to the original. Although there is a Lingdale Road in Claughton Village, it is certain that the "Lyngedale" mentioned in the boundaries was an area within the rectangle now formed by Kingsmead Road South, Shrewsbury Road, Ashburton Road and Bidston Road. The OS map of 1872 includes within this rectangle a Lingdale, together with a villa, a lodge, a house and a lane with the same name. Eight boundary stones are also shown as being within the area, although, sadly, none appear to have survived. [13]

A document dating from the reign of Edward III, dealing with an enquiry into the question of encroachments into the Forest of Wirral, treats with the occasion when Richard de Oxton was called to account for having in his possession a quarter of a rood of land in Oxton, near Arnehowe. At the period of this document, the use of the words erne, earn or arne, for eagle was quite common. How is well-known as

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[12] The Talbot Deeds date the inspeximus c1295 and the original charter c1160. Its source is given as Recognizance Rolls 3 & 4 James I (P.R.O. Chester, No. 273), m. Id. Robinson and Irene Kavanagh (in a Birkenhead News article of 18 April 1967 date it to the twelfth century. Robinson further notes "although Ormerod places this in the fourteenth century". However I have been unable to find this in Ormerod. Beezley places the charter sometime early in the reign of Henry III. Varley asserts that the dispute was finally settled by charter in 1282. Beazley dating the litigation to 1282, adds *"Nothing further was done until peace was established between England and Wales when the prior was to arrange for a formal settlement of the boundaries by perambulation. The prior gave Isabel and Roger twenty shillings in silver for this agreement which appears to have been finally carried out by a charter … "*

[13] Kavanagh p.6

a word for hill, so could it have been that the name for the Arno in medieval years was Eagle Hill? [14]

Seventeenth Century
The Talbot family had, by the early seventeenth century, collected twenty-seven manors, all in Cheshire. In 1620 Oxton was rated as eleventh richest, being worth £5. [15]
In a settlement on the marriage of George Talbot to Marie Herbert of Powis Castle in 1638, the manor of Ogston (sic) is recorded as containing 570 acres of enclosure and 300 acres of common – the first tangible mention of the area later surveyed by Thomas Bainbridge in 1795. [16]

Dr. Sherlock (1611-89) bequeathed £50 to purchase 15 cows for the use of the poor of this township, to be placed under similar management to those of Woodchurch. Sherlock, a native of Oxton, was a voluminous polemic writer, and persecuted royalist of the time of Charles I and II. [17]

From the 18th Century

The Rural Hamlet of Oxton
The hamlet was established on the sandstone ridge leading from Bidston and running towards Storeton, where the disintegration of the underlying sandstone has produced only a thin, light, friable, gravelly and sandy soil. Heathlands of furze, gorse and ling quickly developed, which were then left as common. In many places wet and bog-like, rushes abounded. [18] The ridge, with its occasional rocky outcrops, was generously supplied with springs and wells. [19]

By 1795 Bainbridge records a reduction in common and heath-land to about 192 acres, the larger part, 138 acres to the north-west of the area and 54 acres to the south of the track leading down from the village nucleus on the ridge to Woodside. (The Cheshire acre equalled two acres sixteen poles Statute measure). [20] The original village stood at the junction of the present Bidston Road, Gerald Road, Village Road and Townfield Lane. These, together with Holm (then Home) Lane, appear on the 1795 Shrewsbury Estate plan and would have been little better than tracks. [21]

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[14] Article "How the Arno was acquired". Newspaper cutting undated and unidentified
[15] Robinsdon p.4
[16] Varley p.9
[17] Ormerod p.528, Mortimer p.288
[18] Morrison p.8
[19] Varley p.9
[20] Varley p.10
[21] Robinson p.10, Varley p.15

The 1801 census returns record a population for Oxton of 137, against Birkenhead's 110. Out of the 27 households, 22 were in agriculture and only 5 in trade. [22]

The juxtaposition of this highly rural region within a rapidly expanding and industrialising area in nineteenth-century Britain gave the Cheshire farmer great advantages in the disposal of his produce, insuring him to a large extent against failure at times of agricultural depression elsewhere. [23]

Description circa 1820

Ormerod, writing in 1819, describes Oxton township as:

> *"a mean and small, composed of wretched straggling huts, amongst roads only not impassable…a scene of solitude, broken in only by the voice of the cowherd, or the cry of the plover. Bleak and barren moors stretch round it in every direction, and exhibit an unmixed scene of poverty and desolation." [24]*

William Williams Mortimer quotes an "Itinerary" of the county, published in 1821 in which Oxton is described

> *"as though situated on a bold eminence, commanding extensive views of the river Mersey, Liverpool and the highlands of Lancashire, the immediate locality is dreary and desolate, presenting a scene of extreme misery and destitution. [25]*

Mortimer goes on to write:

> *"The population in Oxton was in 1801 returned at 137, occupying 28 cottages, generally of the most inferior description, the inhabitants of which had acquired an unenviable celebrity in their own neighbourhood."*

Description - mid and late 19th. Century

Thomas Helsby, in his 1882 revised and enlarged edition of Ormerod's history, informs us that "All this is now changed. Within a comparatively short period Oxton has been transformed almost into a town, principally consisting of moderate-sized villas.
Building operations, however, being incomplete, the broken-up pastures scarcely add

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[22] Varley p.8, Robinson p.5
[23] Varley p.10
[24] Ormerod p. 528
[25] Mortimer p.287

more attractive features to the scenery of the date of the above-written description. [26]

Like Helsby, Mortimer in 1847 continues:

> *"it is now very different. The greater part of the township, then a barren waste, has since been enclosed, and it is studded with detached residences, to which every week witnesses the addition of others. This has been caused by the Earl of Shrewsbury, to whom the greater part of the township belongs, having in the last few years granted building leases for a fixed term; and numerous parties from Liverpool have availed themselves of the facility thus afforded of obtaining land at a small ground rental, whereby they have been able to apply their capital to the erection of homes according to their own inclination or circumstances."* [27]

Mortimer continues:

> *"The flourishing state of this township, which has already been referred to, still continues; and although the land has been greatly divided among small holders on building leases, the principal portion yet remains, subject to restrictions on the style and character of the houses, whereby a pleasing appearance will be preserved, and a guarantee afforded for the future well condition of the township. Few places, indeed possess greater advantages of situation than Oxton; its elevated position, its ready access to the ferries on the Mersey, through the well maintained roads of Birkenhead; its proximity to the charming park of that township, and the total absence of all manufactures, will ever command a preference with those who wish for a near country retreat. Large sums of money have recently been expended in the making and improving of the public roads; one of them – a street called the Shrewsbury Road – is hardly exceeded by any in this part of the kingdom, being about two thousand yards in length, and twenty yards in width, bounded on both sides by land belonging to William Potter, Esq."* [28]

In 1844 the Liverpool Standard published a *Handbook and Plan of Birkenhead*, which includes a paragraph devoted to the praise of Oxton:

> *'Oxton-hill which comparatively a few years ago almost wholly a barren heath is now, to a great extent, covered with fine houses and villas, with good gardens, fields, woods, and pleasure-grounds – a village, in fact, of itself. The air in this elevated locality is extremely salubrious,*

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[26] Ormerod p.528
[27] Mortimer p.287
[28] Mortimer p.413

and the prospect from almost any point, uninterrupted and delightful, embracing a vast extent of land, town and marine scenery. The first adventurers in building were thought to be somewhat fool-hardy in choosing a site so apparently exposed and unpromising; but the result has shown here, as in other parts of the neighbourhood, that they were wise in their generation. By force of cultivation thriving plantations, orchards and gardens are rising all around; the whole though high has assumed a pleasing and warm appearance, and we have not heard of any greater damage to buildings in gales of wind, than that to which we are occasionally subject in the lower parts of our own town, which are built little elevated above the level of the tide.' [29]

... Oxton, with its common, bright with heather and gorse, and pleasant mount rising from the marshes of Birkenhead. … is now a favourite place of residence, the houses being mostly of good class, though less pretentious than those of its wealthy neighbour, Claughton. [30]

By the boundary with Noctorum, a mere covering several acres is marked. The mere was drained for agricultural land in the nineteenth century and developed for building in the I960s. [31] Oxton had a bit of a moor, now the Wirral Ladies golf course. [32] The most noticeable difference in land-use between 1795 and 1846 would seem to be the reclamation of the barren heathland especially around Thurstons and the area formerly known as Heath Heys. [33]

Even at this time, in the 1850s and 1860s, Oxton was still very rural. Beazley tells us that "from the corner of Palm Hill it was pure country all the way to church. From the bottom of Lorne Road over Oxton Hill to Landican, there was, about 1860, a 'shooting'. From the corner of Palm Grove and Charlesville to the top of Devonshire Place were smiling fields." [34]

H.S. Brocklebank (1870-1946), head bell-ringer at St. Saviour's, recalled "In my youth Oxton was all gorse and bracken. There was a sandy lane where Gerald Road now stands. Blackberry bushes grew on each side. The village well was near. At the west entrance to the church, the road (Bidston Road) was barely wide enough for two carts to pass…Wellington Road could boast only two houses then and it was dirtier than the fields". [35]

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[29] Liverpool Standard p.5
[30] Sulley p.398
[31] St. Saviour's p.8
[32] Pratt p.33
[33] Varley p.11
[34] St. Saviour's p.15
[35] St. Saviour's p.15

Harry Neilson (born 1861) describes a summer's evening walk around Oxton, when "the crack of the [croquet] mallet was the most frequent sound to be heard." [36]

Building Leases

The sandy soil of the Oxton ridge was not profitable for cultivation, but could, when conveniently situated, be used as building sites, providing good drainage. [37] The policy of leasing building plots at a modest annual rental, rather than selling them outright, contributed to the area's rapid development, allowing the newcomers to be more extravagant in the construction of their houses. [38]

Between 1803 and 1854 many leases were granted under three successive earls (15th.-17th.), some for a lifetime, others for sixty or ninety-nine years, under the assumed powers of various Acts relating to the management of this part of the Shrewsbury estate, and large sums were expended in the erection of villas.

The 18th.Earl, on succeeding to the estates, disputed the validity of these leases. When the question was fully gone into it was found that by an Act of 1823 the earls were empowered to lease lands. In 1803, an Act was passes to enable them to sell, but the leasing powers were not renewed. In 1843, a further Act was passed for the leasing of any portion of the Shrewsbury estate. The result was that leases contracted between 1803 and 1843 were invalid, and very heavy sums had to be paid by the unfortunate lessees to obtain confirmation of their titles. [39]

In 1863, when the last major population expansion took place, the Earl sold off the bulk of the remaining land. [40] But all of this was small beer compared with the sale in 1963 of the Shrewsbury estates to a property company, reputedly forced on the (21st.) Earl by the cost of his divorce from his first Countess, causing a sensation in Oxton and leading to the formation of an Oxton Leaseholders Association. [41]

Population

The decennial census shows the growth during the 19th Century[42]

	1801	1811	1821	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Oxton	137	128	169	234	546	2,007	2,670	2,610	3,312	4,429	4,579
Birkenhead	110	105	200	2569	8223	24,285	35,929	42,997	51,610	58,287	110,915

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[36] Neilson p.103
[37] Morrison p.37
[38] Cheshire Life Nov 1989 p.100
[39] Sulley p.399
[40] Kavanagh p.6
[41] Pratt p.33
[42] MacIntyre p.86

An even better indication of growth of the Oxton township is the increase in the density of population per square mile: [43]

year	population per square mile
1801	17
1841	60
1851	248
1871	322

Oxton's transformation into a "populous village and township covered with elegant villa residences occupied by merchants and tradesmen of Liverpool" and with a resident population in 1851 of more than 2,000, was due in part to greatly improved communications across the Mersey. It was also due in part to changes in land use, to the enclosure of heathlands and the beneficial exploitation of the building-stone resources of the Township, and to changes in leasing policy which were indicated at the instance of the landowner, the Earl of Shrewsbury. [44]

 The 1795 plan shows little sign of building outside those clustered at the village nucleus apart from crofts and cottages on Oxton Common (near Thurstons). [45] Comparison between the 1795 Estate Plan, the 1847 Tithe Map and the OS six-inch map (first edition, Cheshire sheet XIII, 1850/51) shows most of the development and in-filling to be on the Heath Hays area, in the area around Shrewsbury Park, along Bidston Road and between there and Claughton. [46] Oxton, with its nuclear village was gradually being extended down the hill towards Birkenhead. [47]

Local Board
For most of its history Oxton's local government was in the hands of the Woodchurch Vestry, subordinate to the JPs in their Quarter Sessions and Petty Sessions, meeting at Easter and sometimes in September to enable rate-payers to compile lists from which JPs would choose overseers of the Poor. Other officers chosen would be Collector of Rates, Inspector of Nuisances, Surveyor of Highways and Inspector of Lighting. [48]

From 1859 to 1863 a group meeting in Oxton seemed to function as an informal local board.[44] From 1863 to 1877 Oxton had its own recognized Local Board of

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[43] Varley p.13
[44] ibid . p.8
[45] ibid. p.13
[46] ibid. p.13
[47] ibid. p.15
[48] Morrison p.23

Health, which at first met at grocer and tea merchant Jacob Jacobson's house, no. 1 Rose Mount. From August 1864 meetings were held in a Claughton Firs property belonging to Thomas Atkinson, licensee of the Shrewsbury Arms. Both these venues were described in the minutes as the Public Offices. A purpose-built office was erected in 1874 in Village Road, opposite Alton Road, Atkinson's property having an offensive sewage smell.[49] The Board's functions ceased with Oxton's incorporation into Birkenhead in 1877, despite the opposition of residents and the Board. The move, however, had the Earl's support on account of Oxtonians' free use of sewage, roads, streets and street lighting.[50]

The 'Suburb'

Jon Claudius Loudon in 1806 described the gentleman's preference for siting his villa "about 90 miles from town and a mile from the nearest road". The suburb is the result of bringing this ideal up to date and practicability – near *rus in urbe*. Present day Oxton is a middle-class ideal, in contrast with the hamlet described by Ormerod.[51] But in Birkenhead Oxton is not a true suburb, being older rather than younger than the great mass of the modern city of Birkenhead which surrounds it. It is a village which somehow has resisted the progress of urban sprawling.[52]

The growth of Liverpool commerce, coupled with the better ferry services, allowed the wealthy businessmen to commute from the Wirral, and as Oxton, at that time, gave such a good view of the river, ship-owners and merchants alike could see, often from their bedroom windows, the arrival or departure of the ships and cargoes.[53] This was a time when the middle-classes were becoming "self-conscious", wanting to move their residential quarters away from their places of business. Suburban life offered a retreat, privacy and seclusion, whilst yet making a show of outward appearances that was sure to be noticed by the neighbours.[54] The cult of suburban living was fostered also by the desire to escape the repulsiveness of some aspects of city centre living. The appalling conditions of Liverpool, whose inner city mortality rates were among the highest in the country, discouraged middle-class residents.[55] The newcomers brought not only their wealth and prestige, but also their families, so creating new service needs on a large scale. House-building requires a variety of tradesmen and market-gardening came into demand.[56]

The ambience of a leafy, spacious suburb has survived due to the determination of Oxton residents to have control for as long as possible of their own public affairs, and secondly, the environmental control exercised by leaseholders and their

[49] Morrison p.25 Robinson p.82
[50] Morrison p.159
[51] Hughes p.2
[52] ibid. p.3
[53] Robinson p.7
[54] Morrison p.34
[55] ibid. p.35
[56] Varley p.14

deliberate policy of restricting industrial developments. [57] The second main influence affecting Oxton's development was a combination of the major land-owner and the advent of building societies. The nineteenth century saw a trend in the distribution and ownership of land towards a multiplication of owners, especially by means of the building lease. Retaining the freehold interest in the land but to increase its rental was a preferred course of action, rather than to sell it outright. [58]

Between 1841 and 1877 the population of Oxton grew from 546 to 3,500. Its middle-class suburban characteristics have persisted to the present, the wealthy, here as elsewhere, having used their resources to create an environment especially suited to their needs, c.f. Cressington Park, Grassendale Park in Liverpool and Rock Park in Rock Ferry. New, mainly professional groups swamped the original villagers. [59]

In 1851 the largest group of immigrants came from the Wirral and the next largest were those who were born in Liverpool. Many of these were perhaps seeking an escape from the grim conditions of a Victorian city. Many Irish sought work on Merseyside following the Great Potato Famine of 1845-47, but more came from Wales (building for themselves the Congregational Church), from Scotland and all over England. [60]

With the advent of the Cheap Trains Act in1883, the working classes followed their "masters" over the water to live. The manual workers tended to settle in Birkenhead, while the white-collar workers moved into the smaller houses in Oxton, such as in the Fairview Road area. [61] Sulley, writing in 1889, says "It is now a favourite place of residence, the houses being mostly of good class, though less pretentious than those of its wealthy neighbour, Claughton." [62]

When the new Earl of Shrewsbury took possession in 1862, the ratepayers were informed that four roads in the township were being dedicated for the use of the public,
viz., Mount Pleasant, Poplar Road, Victoria Road and Rose Mount. [63]

The distinctive features of Oxton are found in its position on high ground, the haphazard, non-uniform arrangement of houses, uncontrolled tree growth, high random rubble walls with continuity of colour and texture and the several

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[57] Morrison p.23

[58] Ibid. p.26

[59] Morrison p.7

[60] St. Saviour's p.13

[61] Kavanagh p.6,   Robinson p.8. Some railway companies, such as the Great Eastern Railway, actively sought working class passengers. The Trains Act passed by the Board of Trade in 1883 encouraged railway companies to provide cheap early morning and evening workmens' fares, which also led to the establishment of new suburbs.

[62] Sulley p.389

[63] Varley p.16

unmetalled lanes. [64] The newcomers appreciation is reflected in the choice of some street names: Rich View, Fairview, Rose Mount and Mount Pleasant. [65]

Earlier houses were mostly in rendered stone or painted, whilst in the last decade or so of the century, most of Oxton's red brick houses were built. These tended to be much smaller, which is fortunate for us today, as while many of the larger houses have been demolished or turned into flats, these have survived to become pleasant family homes. [66] The Victorians experienced a reaction to Georgian architecture, finding it dully monotonous and uniform, lacking imagination and inventiveness. They liked 'imposing' buildings with 'pretentious' symbolism and exuberance. [67]

The oldest extant building is Oxton Old Hall which was built circa l660. [68] It was formerly known as Oxton Hall Cottage.

The oldest detailed map of Oxton appears to be the Tithe Map of 1847, which shows eighty buildings in the present Conservation Area. Surprisingly, only twenty-two of these have been totally lost, presumably replaces by more fashionable villas, as they fell into disrepair. [69]

Transport and Communications
Beazley writes that at the end of the 17th century coaches ran from Chester to Liverpool via Eastham and to Parkgate, but no coach ran to Birkenhead. [70] However, Varley claims that six-horse coaches ran regularly between Chester and Birkenhead on the eastern side of the Peninsula via the Old Chester Road which was turnpiked in 1787. [71]

The first steam ferry ran from Tranmere in 1817, prior to which time, anyone crossing the river by Woodside, Tranmere or Rock Ferries often had to wade ashore, or be carried on the back of the boatman. In 1820 Birkenhead Ferry started a steamboat service, which continued until 1870, operating from Abbey Street. Steamboats were introduced to the Woodside Ferry in 1822. Monks' Ferry operated from 1838 to 1878. [72]The passage from Woodside was, however, still uncomfortable, especially in winter, and rather hazardous, until floating landing stages on both sides of the river (Liverpool 1847, Birkenhead 1862) could accommodate the rise and fall of the Mersey tides. The first saloon passenger

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[64] Hughes p.5
[65] *Cheshire Life*, Nov 1989
[66] St. Saviour's p.16
[67] Morrison p.31
[68] Robinson p.6
[69] Robinson p.15
[70] Beazley p.5
[71] Varley p.15
[72] McIntyre p.91

steamer crossed the river in 1864, and must have seemed a luxury to early commuters. [73]

A vehicular – motorised or horse-drawn – ferry service operated from 1879 to 1941. The first vessel in this service was called the "Oxton" and the ferry boats were commonly referred to as the "luggage boats". [74] Neilson recalls "every morning streams of gigs, ralli cars and broughams might be seen on the roads leading to Woodside, hurrying to catch the early ferry boats." [75]

Rail travel became available in 1840 with the opening of the line from Chester to Birkenhead Town Station at Grange Lane, being equidistant from Woodside and Birkenhead Ferries and in 1854 the Great Western Railway started to operate a through route from Birkenhead to London. The extension of the line to Woodside was not constructed until 1878. [76]

In 1868 the Mersey Railway tunnel was completed for under-river, smoky and sooty steam train services between Hamilton Square and James Street, electrification following in 1903. [77]

Omnibus services – later the street railway – provided regular and frequent connections to the ferry, reducing the dependency on the private carriage, thus cutting the cost of coach hire, mews and male servants, their accommodation and other associated expenses. [78] Several horse-drawn omnibus operators served Oxton. In 1843 Booth ran a service five times daily. In 185l Gough provided a five times daily service and as also did Stacey. Bretherton ran a 12 times daily service from the Queen's Arms and from 1861 to 1864 Evans ran 24 times a day from the Talbot Hotel to coincide with half-hourly ferry sailings. [79]

For the first time in Europe, horse-drawn trams were introduced in 1860, this pioneer route running from Woodside via Hamilton Street, Conway Street, Park Road and Cannon Hill, to their terminus in Palm Grove. There were no marked stops, services were half-hourly until 2 p.m. and quarter-hourly after. The fare was 2d. and although this seems inexpensive to us it wasn't. Both bus and tram fares were kept deliberately high to suit the affluent middle-class residents. An American, William Starbuck, Europe's first tramcar manufacturer, set up his factory in Cleveland Street, he himself living variously in Devonshire, Kingsland and Balls Roads. [80]

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[73] Robinson p.7

[74] St, Saviour's p.17

[75] Neilson p.103

[76] McIntyre p.91

[77] Robinson p.7

[78] Morrison p.39

[79] Morrison p.39

[80] Morrison pp.40-41, Varley p.17, Birkenhead History Society Newsletter April 2004

An electric tram service operated between 1901 and 1937. Oxton was served by the circle route, passing along Shrewsbury Road in each direction and crossing at Kingsmead Road. On one evening run, a tram carried a mail box on its front to enable residents' servants to post the day's letters. [81] Motor buses came into service in 1919.[82]

Work on the first Mersey road tunnel, Queensway , commenced in 1925 and the tunnel opened in 1934. [83]

Schools
In 1853 a National Society School, affiliated to St Saviour's, was opened on a site given by the Earl of Shrewsbury on Storeton Road, now occupied by Storeton Close. This served the lower middle-class and working-class Church of England children. In 1967 the school was moved to its present position at the top of Holm Lane. [84]

A second primary school functioned at what is now numbered 75A Woodchurch Road, opposite the bottom of Bennetts Hill, run by the British and Foreign Schools Society [85] which was in 'competition' with the National Society.

Birkenhead Proprietary School, later Birkenhead School, was founded in 1860, initially with 13 pupils, at Royden House, Park Road North, altering its name in 1871, when it moved to the present Shrewsbury Road site. Fees of £14 -£18 half-yearly were about double the average for middle-class schools. [86]

For girls there was Lingdale convent, a boarding and day convent of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, with 63 pupils, apparently disappearing after 1861, probably moving to Upton. [87]

There was The Uplands on the Oxton-Noctorum border, and West Highfield, a Ladies boarding school from 1861-66 [88]

Birkenhead High School for girls was established in 1885 in the building previously occupied by the Oxton Local Board, 7 Village Road. It moved to its present building, Belgrano in Devonshire Place, Claughton, in 1905.

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[81] Robinson p.7, St. Saviour's p.78
[82] McIntyre p.93
[83] McIntyre p.93
[84] St. Saviour's pp.70-74, Morrison p.55
[85] St. Saviour's p.17
[86] Morrison p.54
[87] Morrison p.55
[88] Morrison p.55

Another girls school was Kensington House at Nos. 59-63 Bidston Road, on the corner with Howbeck Road. This accommodated borders in addition to day pupils and finally closed in 1937.

In all, there were twenty small, private seminaries active in Oxton between the 1840s and 1880s and a further ten in bordering Claughton. [89]

More recent establishments are Prenton Preparatory School at Wirral Lodge, Mount Pleasant (1935), Highfield School, which closed in 2007, its premises at 76 and 96 Bidston Road being subsequently demolished. Primary schools are located at Woodchurch Road (1901), St Joseph's, Woodchurch Road (1908) on its present site since 1985, Townfield, Townfield Lane (1965), Hillside, Ridgeway Road (1967) and St Peter's R.C., St Peter's Way (1968).

Churches
Christ Church and St. Michael
The parish church of Claughton, lies within Oxton ward and the Conservation Area. Designed by William Jearrad, it was erected at the expense of William Potter, a Liverpool businessman, between 1844 and 1849 from red sandstone taken from the adjacent quarry, straddling what is now Bessborough Road.

This initiative on Potter's part was speculative and the church was used briefly by an evangelistic group before being offered to the Church of England. It was not consecrated until 1854, due to legal difficulties following Potter's bancruptcy, and the death of James Ball, from whom the land had been purchased and to whom it had reverted. The site fell within the boundary of St. Oswalds, Bidston until 1876, when the new parish of Claughton was created from parts of four others. [90]

Trinity Presbyterian Church
On Alton and Beresford Roads, lying within Oxton Ward boundary, started as a hall (now attached to the church) built of Storeton stone at a cost of £2,000. It was opened for worship in 1863. The building of the church itself began in 1865 and it was open for worship the following year, serving the many Scottish businessmen of Wirral. [91]

All Saints' Church
*S*tood on Shrewsbury Road, was built as a chapel-of-ease to the parish church of St.Saviour and became the leading church in the Anglo-Catholic Revival in Birkenhead. It was dedicated on All Saints' Day 1879. In 1910 the parish of All Saints was formed out of parts of Oxton and Bidston parishes. In 1970 the church

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[89] ibid. p.55
[90] St. Saviour's p.14, Evans pp.1-2, Robinson p.78
[91] Robinson p.78

was deemed unsafe and was demolished in 1972, and worship transferred to St. Bedes' in Claughton Village. [92]

Palm Grove Methodist Church
Methodist services had been held in an office at John Newburn's wood yard, Newburn's Lane, but in 1871 the building of a new church was begun. [93]

St. Saviour's Church
The parish church of Oxton. Prior to 1851 Oxton township had been part of the parish of Woodchurch, together with Arrowe, Barnston, Landican, Pensby, Prenton, Noctorum, Thingwall., parts of Claughton and parts of Irby. [94]   Their parish church was far from easily access for Oxton residents at some three miles distance and approachable by Holm Lame or other field paths, often muddy and slippery. Hence their wish to have their own place of worship, set in motion at a township meeting held at the Carnarvon Castle in 1844. [95]

That year a barn was converted so that services could be held and in 1848 the Earl of Shrewsbury conveyed a plot of land for the erection of the first Church of St. Saviour, which was duly consecrated in 185l. [96]

Forty years later, in 1891 this building was pulled down and the present replacement church was built and consecrated, the tower being completed the following year. [97]

The first parish hall, "St. Saviour's Institute", was housed in Rose Mount, in the building presently numbered 2b and now occupied by the businesses of Brymark and Coyles. In 1910 a dedicated hall was erected in Storeton Road and enlarged in 1925. The south wing was licensed for worship the following year as St. Thomas' Chapel. The building was demolished in 2004 when a block of flats, Bishop's Court, took its place. [98]

A presence in the Noctorum area of St Saviour's parish was established in 1973 in what is now known as St. Andrew's Church in Moorfields Avenue. [99]

Holy Name of Jesus
This Roman Catholic church was built of brick in 1899 by the architect Edmund Kirby in the grounds of his house, Overdale, in Beresford Road. [100]

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[92] Robinson pp.79-80
[93] ibid. p.80
[94] St. Saviour's p.7
[95] ibid. p.21
[96] ibid. p.23, Robinson p.80
[97] ibid. pp.23, 25
[98] ibid. p.36
[99] ibid. pp.85-88
[100] Robinson p.82

First Church of Christ Scientist
This building, designed by Joseph Brattan, was purpose-built in 1874 to house the Oxton Local Board . On the township's incorporation into Birkenhead, the building became redundant and in 1886 it was purchased by The High School for Girls Ltd, and Birkenhead High School was founded with one hundred girls, moving in 1905 to Belgrano in Devonshire Place. [101]

In 1925 the building was bought by the first Church of Christ Scientist, but in 1975 so much structural damaged had developed that the church sought permission for demolition. This was granted and work had reached an advanced stage before it was realized that the building was listed. [102]

Maitland Mission
An undenominational mission hall, built of corrugated iron, was opened in Newburn's Lane behind the Queen's Arms. This was replaced in 1929 by the present brick-built hall in Storeton Road with money provided by Miss. Maitland Roy. The old hall became a garage and eyesore, but a pair of houses have now replaced it. [103]

Burial grounds
There being no provision for a cemetery in Oxton, most residents in the middle of the nineteenth century were still buried at Holy Cross, Woodchurch, a very few at St. Mary's (Priory), or after 1862 at Flaybrick Cemetery in Claughton. [104]

Pubs
The Caernarvon Castle
This had been a stone-built pre-1847 building which was destroyed by a land-mine on 12/13 March 194l, together with its landlord. Rebuilt in 1957 as the Carnarvon Castle (with a spelling change!), the hard rock foundation made a cellar impossible so that its function had to be diverted to ground floor level. [105]

The Talbot Hotel
In its original form was built between 1847 and 1875 in a curve sweeping round the bend between Rose Mount and Claughton Firs, incorporating four shops and forming the visual centre piece of the village. This building was demolished in 1967, its successor opening in 1969 and renamed *Oxton Arms* in 1993. In 2005 it became the *Oxton Bar and Terrace*. [106]

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[101] Robinson p.82
[102] ibid. p.82
[103] ibid. p.83
[104] St. Saviour's p.14, Morrison p.44
[105] Robinson p.84, Morrison p.156
[106] Robinson p.85, Morrison p.154

The Queen's Arms
Thomas Hughes, after whom Hughes Lane was named, was the publican as early as 1845. Formerly an agricultural labourer from Bidston, he leased much of the land around the Queen's Arms triangle and a cottage at the top of Birch Road. The Queen's Arms was much altered and enlarged in the period prior to 1875 and by 1874 Hughes' son, also named Thomas, became licensee, buying the lease from Amalgamated Breweries. The pub was often known as "Hughes Hotel". [107]

The Shrewsbury Arms
Occupies a building dating prior to 1847 which was divided into two before 1875. Sometime during the first decade of the nineteenth century the part bordering Claughton Firs became a public house, being enlarged in 1874, when the two parts were reunited. [108]

The Swan
The Electoral Roll shows that from 1864 to 1868 Hugh Swan was running a beerhouse in Holm Lane, his widow, Betsy being in charge in 1871 and into the 1880s. [109]

The Old House at Home
Located at 7-9 Price's Lane, was built between 1847 and 1875, nicknamed *The Hole in the Wall* and functioned as a pub until 1930. At one time incorporating a fish and chip shop, it was best known locally from an incident when a young woman was taken in to die from stab wounds. Eventually the building was demolished, being considered unsafe, its site being made, at the instigation of the Oxton Society, into a small car park and potential boules pitch. [110] The Society gave up its lease of the site (from Wirral Borough Council) in the early 1990s and it is currently a private car park and garden for residents in the Prices Lane area.

The York Tavern
A beerhouse, was set back from the road at the top of Townfield Lane and, although the building still appears on the 1875 map, it cannot be found on the 1874 Valuation list. [111]

The Chetwynd Arms
Number 86 Bidston Road. In 1861 the publican was Henry Much a stone-getter. By 1881 he appears with the title of 'builder and contractor in stone and quarry owner'. He probably rebuilt the original cottages and beerhouse. The establishment was popularly known as the Quarryman's Arms. [112]

The Arno Inn

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[107] Robinson p.85, Morison p.156
[108] Robinson p. 85, Morrison p.155
[109] Morrison p.158
[110] Morrison p.157, Robinson p.84
[111] Morrison p.157
[112] ibid. p.157

There was, in 1845, a beerhouse at the top of Williams Lane – now Birch Road – and by 1874 it appears to have become the Arno Inn, Storeton Road, the valuation remaining unchanged. [113]

Utilities
In 1841 the Birkenhead and Claughton Gas and Water Works were established to supply water from its bore-holes and gas from the Thomas Street gasometers. From 1843 water was supplied to Oxton from their well at Springhill Water Works, Balls Road. (The well still supplies water for its current owner - United Utilities). The Birkenhead Improvement Commissioners purchased the company in the 1860s and the Oxton Local Board then paid them for water supplied from the new Flaybrick reservoir. [114]

In 1896 an electricity generating stationed opened, on a site lying between Bentinck and Craven Streets. [115]

The telephone became available from 1904. [116]

The twentieth century briefly

The area reached its peak as a fashionable dwelling place at the end of the nineteenth century and its decline started shortly after World War One. Between the two wars many of the large elegant houses were made into exclusive flats and suites of rooms as their former owners sold up and moved out. [117]

World War Two air raids, on seven nights in 1940 and six in the following year, caused the recorded destruction, or later demolition, of 81 buildings and severe damage to a further 492 in Oxton (parish and ward). Very many more sustained damage to windows and roofs. [118] A summary of war damage in the Conservation Area has been published. [119]

It was only after World War Two, however, that the area really started to go down-hill. Many of the large, beautiful houses were allowed to decay by their new owners and eventually had to be demolished, with less desirable development taking their place, such as "mini" housing estates and flats. [120]

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[113] ibid. p.158
[114] Morrison p.42
[115] McIntyre p.92
[116] Reported by A. Reynolds late of British Telecom
[117] Kavanagh p.6
[118] Birkenhead Air Raid Rescue Corps, letters to Town Clerk. Wirral Archives
[119] Green
[120] Kavanagh p.6

Large gardens can become anachronistic when families grow up and leave home and when help is expensive and hard to get. [121]

The demand for suburban accommodation brings dangers: the development of traffic-generating flats quite out of sympathy with the local spirit (there is always the temptation for owners of large properties to sell the grounds in which their old houses stand to developers), the tasteless development of semi-detached and terraced houses in a crypto-modern style and the demands on accessibility and visibility by the motor car. [122]

Robinson cites an example where the demolition of four houses resulted in their replacement by nearly ninety houses or flats. [123] This situation prompted the foundation in 1979 of the Oxton Society to combat further decline and to preserve the remaining good
features. The Oxton Conservation Area was created in the same year. [124] To date there are 85 Grade 2 listed buildings in Oxton, 36 within the Conservation Area and 29 without.[125]

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[121] Pratt p.30
[122] ibid. p.33
[123] Robinson p.77
[124] Kavanagh p.6
[125] Robinson p.11

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