

A Short History of Faringdon by Gerald Taylor, formerly of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

*Faringdon is a smallish market town, set down between the Thames, two ancient hill forts and the A420. Mentioned in Domesday Book and granted its charter in 1218, it is dominated by a fine church, Norman to the nineties, and an Old Town Hall on pillars.

It has lost windmill, railway terminus and gas works, but retains a healthy variety of businesses. With supermarket and car parks, it is home to 6,000 inhabitants. *

*[Sometimes called Great, or Chipping, Faringdon to distinguish it from Little Faringdon the other side of the Thames, or from Lower Farringdon in Hampshire]

* The name 'Faringdon' has been derived from Far + ingdon [cf Abingdon etc or related names ending in -ington eg Kidlington, Headington, Kensington] A suggestion that the name means 'fern-covered hill' seems possible: the Old English 'fearn' included what in the north was called 'bracken'.

The area is geologically mixed, with Lower Greensand and rare sponge gravels (witnessed by Rogers's Concrete works) and clay,

The town has been growing on the col, which is also a watershed, between Faringdon Hill (now better known as Folly Hill and the Ring Clumps.

Further west stands Badbury Hill, a little higher than the others.

Seven old roads converged at the Market Place close to a former brook. The east west 'high' road from Oxford above the flood plain along the south side of the Thames valley, which, just beyond the ford across the brook, forked left, into Marlborough Street, to continue via Shrivenham to the south-west, and right, into Gloucester Street, to lead, via Lechlade to Cirencester and Gloucester. Two roads ran to the south, Southampton Street and Stanford Road via Stanford to Wantage. To the North a road led to the Thames crossing at Radcot, which was bridged as early as the 14th century, and the north.

Little is known for sure about its pre-Christian history. Roman-style bricks are visible in a cellar of the Crown Hotel, and various small Celtic and Roman finds confirm the obvious, that the valley land would have been early populated, and these three hills would have been important for defence against aggression from the north. The Thames had certainly long been a defensible boundary between West Saxons and Mercia. In those Dark Ages Faringdon is thought to have had a West Saxon palace. King Alfred was born in nearby Wantage and successfully united Saxons and Angles; his son Edward the Elder succeeded him, and extended his kingdom up to the Humber. The passage in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which says he died, in 924, at 'Farndon in Mercia' may mean Farndon-on Dee in Shropshire, rather than support the long-cherished view that he died in Faringdon, for he was much occupied in the north fighting invaders from both Ireland and the East.

The Saxon Minster Church (now All Saints') to the north of the Market Place was recorded in 1086; the nave was built in the twelfth century and later the choir added. [see site ..] In 1144 supporters of the Empress Matilda, the acknowledged heiress of Henry II, unsuccessfully fortified the Faringdon Hill in attempt to overthrow the usurper, King Stephen.

Faringdon was a Royal Manor . In 1190 the men of Faringdon paid 20 marks to have the town “at farm” again, ie to receive certain local dues. In 1203 King John granted the manor to the Cistercians of Beaulieu Abbey (Hampshire); they built a grange (recently excavated) down near Grove Wood; no great religious complex was built, monks retired two years later to Beaulieu and the Abbot still retained Lordship of the Manor until the Reformation. There remain the famous tithe barn at Great Coxwell [National Trust:] and another at Little Coxwell, testimony to a considerable agricultural wealth.

In 1218 a market was granted, and is still held on Tuesdays. Nine years later a fair was granted to be held on 13th February. With the secularisation of the Manor, the town was governed by a bailiff, who held a weekly court, and his constables. The Court of the Manor was held once a year, by the Lord, who still holds the advowson. In 1551 there were 31½ burgages [properties rented of the Lord] east of the brook and six to the west. Queen Elizabeth is said to have stayed at Upton Manor, ie Unton (now Wadley Manor).

During the Civil Wars the buildings in the town suffered heavily in the fighting between Royalist and Parliamentarians There are some medieval survivals in later shells, notably at the Bell and the Crown and Franco’s restaurant. The “Old Market Hall” was built soon after the monarchy was restored. Poulton House, opposite the new Police Station, was built in 1710.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century great changes began. The Pyes rebuilt Faringdon House about 1780. [see site..] A canal from the west was linked to the Thames just above Lechlade, which added to the town’s trade and introduced slate roofing as well as cheaper coal. The introduction of regular mail coach services from London to Gloucester increased passing trade and demand for overnight accommodation, to the great advantage of the Crown which housed the Post Office.

Several substantial town houses were built during the next century, as well as other places of worship for Baptists, Wesleyan Methodists, Unitarians, the Society of Friends. Considerable details are recorded about the town in the directories of the time, names of residents and the streets they lived in, the carriers timetables, the schools, the various professionals.

The population in 1831 was 2,729 and in 1841 had risen to 3,277. There were several specialised markets during the year. The Post Office was open from 7am to 9pm. The main features of the mid 19th century were the introductions of railway

and gas. In 1864 the Faringdon Railway Company opened five miles of broad gauge line from the Faringdon Road Station on Brunel's Great Western Line with its terminus in the building in Parks Road now occupied by Scats, the agricultural merchants.

The great centre of the carting trade at the junction of Marlborough and Gloucester Streets, the Green Dragon (emblem of Wessex) was demolished and the present Corn Exchange erected; one of the roundels sculpted high on the north wall shows a railway engine of the time. The gas works was built in a spur off the Lechlade Road appropriately named Gashouse Lane (now Canada Lane) In 1860 the Old Pound nearby was acquired as a burial ground for 'Dissenters'. (Free Church Cemetery)

The first town council was elected in 1894. The 20th century brought new features to the town. The War Memorial commemorating by name 111 young men who died in two world wars. The Cinema, (later Bingo Hall and now Regent Mews). The petrol pump in the Cornmarket. The great increase in through motor traffic, especially the articulated lorries loaded with car bodies and engines. The saw mills, the car showrooms of the Fish Brothers, the Funeral parlour of Baker & Son, the growth of the Carter brothers' supermarket, taken over by Budgens in 1998, the building of Marlborough Gardens and the Lees, and the estates of small and 'executive' houses to the north west and south east. But of greatest effect has been the by-pass on the A 420 in reducing the through traffic, and defining more land for development; while the new houses and general prosperity of an increased population has increased the commuter traffic through the town's narrow streets.

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