

What the Norse did for us

Richard O Smith puts his pen to paper alongside Ann-Turi Ford to explore the fascinating history of the Vikings and their influence on Oxford's history

Norse & Nordic Oxford – which I co-authored with lifelong Oxonophile and Norwegian journalist Ann-Turi Ford – wants to prove a point: there's more to Nordic culture than hygge, flat pack furniture and impossibly blonde Scandinavians looking good in knitwear while solving crimes on BBC4.

Nordics have exerted a profound influence on shaping Oxford throughout the last thousand years – sometimes literally as their presence can be traced in the modern layout of the city.

Recorded in the Burghal Hidage – compiled between 914-919 – Oxford is listed as one of 33 fortified burhs specifically designed to defend itself against Viking raids. Around a thousand years ago the River Thames in Oxfordshire defined the edge of Wessex and Oxford, then a wild border town, was likely re-designed in an attempt to Viking-proof the city.

Yet there is a rich fecundity of Nordic influences in far more modern times. The book reveals how Norse and Finnish influences shaped the work of Oxford dons JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis. Two Norwegian kings attended Balliol, Iceland's Magnus Magnusson read Old Norse at Jesus College, Queen Margrethe of Denmark illustrated Tolkien's works, Christ

Church hosts the annual Scandinavian St Lucia service, Swede Kris Kristofferson first performed paid gigs with a guitar in Oxford when here as a Rhodes scholar.

Fostering links between Oxford and Nordics, Wadham College has run a Norwegian scholarship since 1920 and houses an impressive archive of Norway's national poet Nordahl Grieg.

His namesake and compatriot, composer Edvard Grieg, certainly hit the wrong note in an embarrassing visit to the Sheldonian in 1906 that all went very wrong indeed.

With the Sheldonian Theatre filling up in anticipation of the maestro's visit, Grieg sent a telegram from his London hotel saying he preferred to rest so wouldn't be attending. One furious lady informed the *Oxford Times* that on hearing this news she departed the Sheldonian and "said some very rude things indeed" to a picture of Grieg displayed in the High Street to mark his intended visit. Grieg then proposed returning a week later, but was informed that "the world's greatest genius cannot expect an audience in Oxford during Eights Week."

Fortunately, Grieg realised the offence he'd caused locals and rescheduled another – far more successful – visit.

Oxford University today is full of Nordics. We spoke to many fellows and students currently at the University about their experiences here

for the book. Unsurprisingly there is an active Scandi Society at Oxford too. Yet if we could travel back about a thousand years to a pre-university Oxford, there is a strong likelihood of encountering many more Nordic people – of the sort called Vikings.

Especially so in the St Clement's area east of Magdalen Bridge, once a district of important strategic stature. In the early Christian period, Scandinavian churches were often devoted to St Clemens, the patron saint of seafarers. The Danish-English Clemens cult culminated in King Canute the Great's reign in England in the period 1016–35.

King Canute possessed a greased diplomacy rare for the age. This resulted in a meeting in Oxford during 1018 where he attempted to negotiate an agreement between the Danes and aggressive locals. *The Anglo Saxon Chronicles* – seemingly the sole media of the day – said that he was successful in brokering an agreement. When King Canute died in 1035, in Oxford his death prompted a large international meeting of counsellors, governors and military figures who all converged in the city to pay their respects and praise his policies. Typical Oxford: always looking to get conference trade – even then!

Oxford University archaeologist Jane Harrison (her current day job is working on Viking sites in Orkney) suggests in *Norse & Nordic Oxford*:

Co-authors Ann-Turi Ford and Richard O Smith



