

Catherine Robinson, *Hayfield Road: Then and Now*, Oxford: Frog Lane Press, 2023, 112 pp, with full-colour illustrations. £10 plus p&p, available from the author at froglanepress@gmail.com

(All profits from the sale of the book are donated to [The Gatehouse](#), a local charity supporting homeless and vulnerable people.)

I must be honest and say that when asked to write a review of this new publication I had no idea of the location of Hayfield Road and I had to consult Google Maps. But I need not have worried, as there is an excellent hand-drawn map by Bernard Barsley at the beginning of the text, showing that the road borders the Oxford canal and the Trap Grounds Town Green, in the vicinity of Port Meadow.

This new publication is a revised and extended edition of *Hayfield Road: Nine Hundred Years of an Oxford Neighbourhood* by Catherine Robinson and the late Elspeth Buxton, published in 1993. The author takes the story of the neighbourhood back to the Jurassic Period, some 150 million years ago, followed by evidence of activity in the Bronze Age: a funeral barrow on nearby Port Meadow was excavated by T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), then living in Polstead Road nearby. The Romans then followed, and at some point an ancient track now known as Aristotle Lane was created, leading to Port Meadow from the south end of what is now Hayfield Road. It was along this lane that on the 3rd June 1644 Charles I escaped with his army from Oxford, heading towards Worcester. The author tells us that the 1720/1721 map of Port Meadow, engraved by Benjamin Cole, is the first documentation of the road then known as ‘The Upper Way to Wolvercote’, and from that date the history of the road under various names can be traced in detail. The present houses were built on a modest scale between 1886 and 1888 on land owned by St. John’s College since 1573. The architect was H. Wilkinson Moore, who also designed many of the grand houses along Banbury Road.

The stories of the local inns, St. Margaret’s Church, the garage (formerly livery stables), the canal (I was unaware that a coal wharf had been built in the area when the canal was completed), and railway line are told in detail and in many cases using the oral evidence of local residents. This use of oral evidence is of vital importance for any local history, and the author must be congratulated for recognising this and interviewing as many people as possible. I was particularly delighted to read the story of Mahdy Tavakkoly and his well-known delicatessen, as I worked with Mahdy in All Souls College for a time. Every aspect of the road has been covered, producing a fascinating story of the inhabitants and the development of the area, including an interesting comparison of the original price of the new-built houses with today’s prices: one house was sold recently for one million pounds.

As someone who makes daily use of the Census Returns and the 1939 Register, I was delighted to find extracts from the 1891 Census and from the 1939 Register. This is important for those of us tracing Oxford ancestors that may have lived in the area, and for the social and economic development in those fifty-odd years. I was intrigued by the reference to George Sadler, who in 1891 lived with his family in number seventy-two and was a ‘stamper at Post Office’, and I did wonder what sort of work that entailed. In 1891 we find college servants, coal merchants, railway employees, gardeners, printers, and, among other occupations, George Cox, a rope-maker’s assistant. By 1939 college servants are still there, but in addition there is George Simpson, a record keeper for the Home Office. A deputy mayor’s sergeant has moved in; and members of the civil service are in evidence. All this illustrates the

changes in the social aspect of the road and perhaps illustrates how the rents were starting to rise at this time.

The two-page list of sources and further reading is extremely helpful should anyone wish to explore the road and its neighbourhood further. And the index is ideal – rarely do you find one in a local history of a street. Well done for including it, as it adds greatly to the value of the text.

This present work is an excellent example of what a history of a road or area should be – clear, concise, and including as much information as can be gleaned from printed sources and local residents. I would have liked more illustrations, but an author can only include what there is available. What illustrations there are help to create a picture of a distinctive local community. I particularly liked the 1905 image of the Robinson family, looking very striking in what was probably their Sunday best. And the montage of the house numbers on page seventy-one was fascinating – amazing how many variations of a house number there can be.

Norma Aubertin-Potter, Kidlington, August 2024

Dr Aubertin-Potter is archivist (formery Librarian-in-Charge) at All Souls College, Oxford.