

Mike Osborne, *Defending Oxfordshire: The military landscape from prehistory to the present*, Barnsley: Fonthill Media, 2025, 272pp, £16.99.

Mike Osborne is an experienced writer of county military histories. This is his twelfth volume since he began the series in 2010. He obviously enjoys writing them because the subject could be quite dry, but the text is in fact peppered with little asides, jokes, and curious anecdotes. The book is what the title says it is, but it is more than just a book about the military landscape in the topographical sense. It covers a huge range of subjects which inform the reader as to just why Oxfordshire has such a rich history, from Empress Matilda's escape across the ice from Oxford, the Levellers' rebellion, the various imperial adventures of Oxfordshire forces, to the activities of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the development of 'secret weapons' during the Second World War.

The book is set out chronologically from the prehistoric forts and defended settlements that the Roman invaders encountered, to the nuclear age exemplified in USAF Upper Heyford, and the role of RAF Brize Norton today. What this says is that despite England being an island nation constantly under threat (real or imagined) of invasion from the sea, land locked Oxfordshire has had a pretty important role in the military history of the country. The River Thames and some of its tributaries played a crucial part. In Saxon times Oxford lay on the border between Wessex and Mercia. The author argues that Boundary Brook, which winds its way through Cowley and is referenced in local street names, marked that border. In 1940 one of the principal anti-invasion defence lines traversed the county along the course of the River Thames from Kelmscott to Pangbourne.

Oxfordshire's relative proximity to London has always been a factor in its historical development, whether that be its ancient university, or as Charles I's capital during the English Civil War. Medieval Oxfordshire could be dangerous, rewarding and challenging, as Osborne illustrates with an account of the four Harcourt brothers who joined William I's invasion in 1066. Some of their successors established what would become a prominent Oxfordshire family, while some returned to Normandy. Those who stayed were granted lands in Leicestershire and later inherited lands around what became Stanton Harcourt. Those who returned found themselves in a more conflicted situation. As Osborne puts it, 'with a foot in both French and English camps the Harcourts fought to preserve their lands in Normandy by siding with whichever side could offer them the greater benefit'. It didn't end well as (the French) Geoffrey de Harcourt became a member of the Woodstock-born Black Prince's bodyguard at the battle of Crecy, while his brother Jean IV Comte de Harcourt was killed fighting on the French side. Changing sides yet again, Geoffrey ended up dying in an ambush in Normandy in 1356.

Oxford was in early medieval times the sixth largest town in England, with a population of around five thousand guarding the route through Oxfordshire from London to Gloucester and South Wales. Oxfordshire's strategic importance at the time was reflected not only in the castles at Oxford and Wallingford, but also those at Deddington, Chipping Norton and Mixbury. Indeed, Deddington Castle was held by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, half-brother of William I. Oxfordshire's proximity to London meant that Woodstock Manor, which originated as a hunting lodge in the Forest of Wychwood, became one of Henry 1's favourite royal residences and an important centre for his spreading bureaucracy. The site of what is now Blenheim Palace, it was an early indicator of how significant the royals considered Oxfordshire to be in their kingdom.

Oxfordshire's role in the Civil War was another example of its military and political significance. Driven out of London by Parliamentary forces, Charles I established his court in Oxford and closely surrounded the town with fortifications and an outer ring of fortified strongpoints. The city itself had defensive walls and access through just five gates left over from medieval times, and further defences were built. Maps, diagrams and photographs of what remains of the fortifications add considerably to Osborne's text which rehearses the story of the city's role in the Civil War and details which colleges were re-purposed for which activities, including storing munitions in the tower of New College. This description is interspersed with lively anecdotes of life in the city. Bored soldiers took to drink. Their equally bored officers quarrelled and duelled, while insanitary conditions and food shortages caused discontent and outbreaks of diseases. Osborne drolly captures the moment; 'Miseries were compounded for citizen and soldier alike by the psychopathic Governor Sir Arthur Aston...Showing off in front of a group of ladies on Bullingdon Green he was thrown by his horse, breaking his leg which then had to be amputated. His successor, one Legge, afforded ample opportunity for court wits to gloat. Few tears would subsequently be shed when Aston was said to have been beaten to death with his own wooden leg at the siege of Drogheda in 1649.'

Life was hard in the besieged city of Oxford, but the surrounding countryside had to contend with warring armies and their demands for taxes. Some unfortunate communities occupying the no-man's-land of disputed areas ended up having to pay twice. The impact resonated down the centuries. As a child in the 1960s I recall visiting Chastleton House with my parents. Still lived in by the impecunious Clutton-Brocks, the house was in an advanced state of decay, and when my mother admired some piece of furniture they immediately offered to sell it. 'You see we lost all our money in the War', they explained. The Civil War.

Other aspects of change in the landscape had an impact on the military organisation and infrastructure of Oxfordshire. Enclosure was one. Combined with rising prices, this led to unrest amongst the rural population. Local magistrates were unwilling to convict for acts against enclosure and it became impossible to recruit special constables, owing to conflicting loyalties. Anti-enclosure groups escalated their activities, culminating in a crowd of one thousand people destroying the fences on the newly enclosed Otmoor in September 1830. Forty-two activists were arrested and conveyed from Islip to Oxford under armed guard. They hadn't accounted for this coinciding with St Giles's Fair and the crowds attending it ensured the escape of the prisoners. Despite yeomanry and regular troops being deployed to patrol Otmoor, it took a further five years to enforce the enclosure, a campaign commemorated in the popular local ditty, 'The fault is great in man or woman who steals the goose from off a common: but who can plead the man's excuse who steals the common from the goose?'

During the First World War, any invasion was expected to be from the east coast and evacuation routes from the Essex coast leading through Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire were physically marked with arrows painted on buildings. Prisoner of war camps were established in the county, including at Enstone, Hook Norton, Banbury and Deddington. Oxford became a significant centre of care for the wounded in military hospitals, with the 3rd Southern General Hospital established in the Examination Schools as early as 16 August 1914. The rapid advance in aviation technology and the establishment of the RAF at the end of the war led to Oxfordshire being identified as a site for bomber airfields, including at Abingdon, Bicester and Upper Heyford.

These became very important with rearmament, and the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1939. Oxfordshire was in certain respects on the front line, with the Thames acting as a key defensive line in the event of a ground invasion, and the River Cherwell/Oxford Canal acting as part of a 'stop line' in the defence of Birmingham's vital industrial centres. Morris Motors at Cowley was repurposed to produce military vehicles and later, aircraft. In 1939 it became the HQ for the Civilian Repair Organisation which repaired damaged aircraft and collected non reuseable parts for scrap and recycling. The Metal Produce and Recovery Unit covered 100 acres and is immortalised in Paul Nash's classic wartime painting *Totes Meer*. Equally important was the role the county played in 'the secret war', with Thame Park becoming the training school for the Special Operations Executive (SOE), Oriel College hosting MI6/SIS training courses, MI5 moving to Blenheim Palace, and Mansfield College and Oxford University Press taking on staff from Bletchley Park, working particularly on codes and ciphers for naval use. Medical research and development played no small part either, with Howard Florey and others developing the mass-production techniques for penicillin. Post-war activities and infrastructure are covered in Osborne's book too, with the continuation of RAF bases at Benson and Brize Norton for military purposes worldwide, and the use and eventual closure of the USAF base at Upper Heyford, site of controversial nuclear weapons in the 1980s.

The subject matter is necessarily bloody, but this military history of the county is comprehensively researched, well referenced and illustrated and written with a light touch that will appeal to a wide readership.

Martin Stott, Oxford local historian, September 2026