

Case Study 3.3 - A history of the Oxford Meads, Oxfordshire

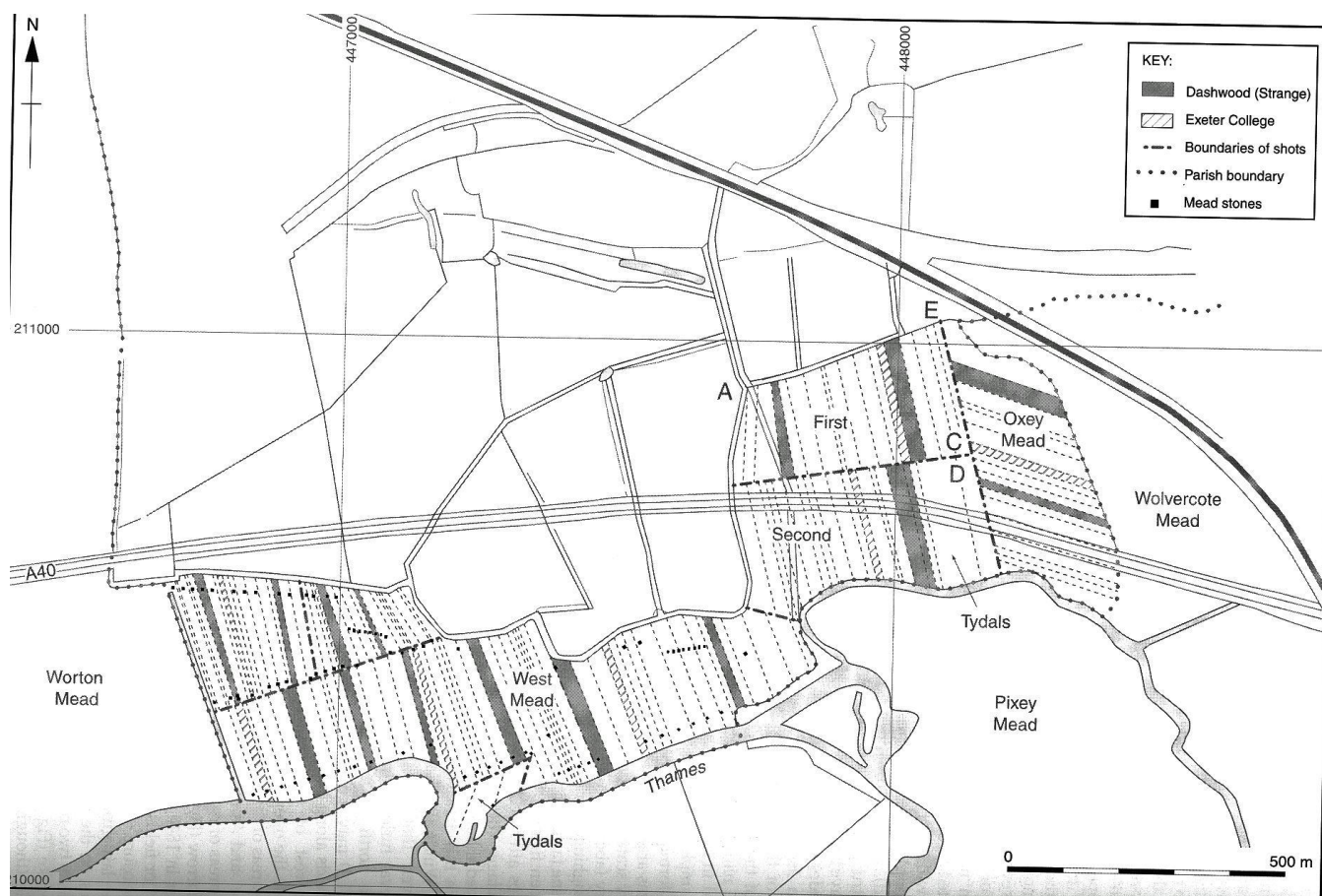


The first historical references concerning the Oxford Meads date from the Anglo-Saxon period, when it is presumed that 'West' and 'Oxhey'¹³ Meads, Yarnton, Wolvercote Lot Meadow and 'Picksey'¹⁴ Mead (McDonald 2007a) were set aside for hay. (13 now known as Oxey Mead, 14 now known as Pixey Mead)

The Domesday Book (1086) provides firm evidence of the existence of the Oxford Meadows and by 1142 references to Picksey Mead can be found; it was given to Godstow Nunnery at this time with five shillings of the endowment to be used for it to be mown on the Nativity of St John Day (24 June).

The meadows survived enclosure in the 15th and 16th centuries and continued to be managed in the same way. Mere stones were used to identify the position of different lots and as the local Population grew in size, the customary acres were divided into smaller areas. During the 19th century, as subsistence farming declined, rural workers moved into towns leaving no-one behind to gather the hay-crop, so Landowners imported large numbers of labourers from outside the village. In Yarnton, this led to bad behaviour and drunkenness and, in 1817, the system was changed to enable local people to cut the hay over three days rather than one.

From at least the 9th century, the meads were divided into unenclosed strips (Hey 2004).





Mere stones at Yarnton Mead. © Alison McDonald



During the 13th century, on Picksey Mead, rights to a customary acre were “vested in the ownership of a small cherry wood ball. Each owner of a ball would receive one customary acre every time it was drawn so that each farmer had the chance of getting some good hay and some poor hay each year. The number of times the balls were drawn was different according to the amount of meadowland available” (McDonald 2007a). The custom was to cut all the strips of hay in each mead in one day, beginning the first Monday after old St Peters Day (29 June).

During the 20th century, with the reduction in the number of farmers wanting the hay, the lots for the year were auctioned to people from outside of the village. In 1958, when six acres of Picksey Mead were lost to the Oxford bypass, the remainder of the meadow was re-divided into 26 smaller lots. Soon after, the traditional management pattern of allocating hay as lots on this site was stopped altogether and management was undertaken by a single contractor.

In the 21st century, the tenancy was taken over by a multinational organisation (FAI Farms). The meads are managed mechanically, with the intention that traditional hay cutting in late June/early July and aftermath grazing by cattle followed by sheep will be reinstated once fences have been repaired. In the meantime, electric fencing allows aftermath grazing by sheep. Stocking levels are greater than in the past but the period of grazing is reduced *pro rata*.

