



# Digging for Meaning

## Research from the Oxford School of Archaeology

*A Podcast*

### Episode 3

Dr Nathaniel Erb-Satullo on: *'Cycling to Archaeology!'*

*(Dr Sainsbury: You are listening to Digging for Meaning - Research from the Oxford School of Archaeology.)*

Hello, and welcome to the *Digging for Meaning* Podcast. My name is Nathaniel Erb-Satullo: I'm a Lecturer in Archaeological Science at Cranfield University, and a Research Associate at the School of Archaeology at Oxford. For my day job, I study ancient technology and innovation, especially in the ancient Near East and the Caucasus region. Today, though, I want to talk about something a little bit different: cycling to archaeological sites around Oxford.

Now, as you can probably tell from my accent, I'm an American transplant. I've been living in Oxford for the past three years and in that time, I've developed a love for exploring the countryside around the city. One of the great things about Oxford is that it's relatively compact, so it's fairly easy to get out and explore. In this Podcast, I'm going to talk a little bit about these hidden archaeological gems that are just a short cycle right away.

So maybe you're a student who just moved to Oxford, or maybe you've been here for a couple of years, and the pandemic has narrowed your travel opportunities. And you know, you just want to get out of town for the day. But you don't want to take public transportation, because you know, there's a pandemic, or maybe you're a long time resident of Oxford interested in archaeology and I've been to many of the sites I'm going to talk about, but maybe you haven't tried cycling there. Or maybe you're just a visitor passing through and want to explore what's outside in the city's hinterland. So if any of those categories apply to you, then this podcast is for you. Now, first, I'll talk a little bit about what I pack on these longer cycle rides and talk a little bit about what there is to see along the route, and of course, talk about the archaeology as well.

So in terms of what I bring on these cycle trips: I often bring two to three litres of water, especially if it's a hot day, bring some sunscreen, and my camera phone for navigating directions and also emergencies if I need to give a call. Also, especially for these longer rides, especially during the pandemic, when trying to avoid public transportation, I was bringing a few basic tools that would allow me to fix something like a broken chain or flat tire, or just adjust my brakes or seat height, I'd have actually gotten a flat tire on ride outside of Oxford. Fortunately, I wasn't very far away, but I didn't have anything with me so from that point on, I started bringing some tools along with me. Also, most importantly, I always wear a helmet when I ride. I think that's really good, good practice, to bring a helmet and wear a helmet on these rides.

In terms of what my bike is, it's a fairly basic used trek-hybrid that I purchased on Gumtree last year. Roughly like 28 to 30 millimetre tires, so it's not a road bike, but it's not also a kind of full off-roading mountain bike. So I think that should give you a sense of what kind of terrain I'm going over. Most of the routes that I'm talking about are almost entirely on paved roads, sometimes of varying quality, occasionally, short sections on trails, which I sometimes might end up walking, I mean, or just the last little bit to the site.

So, for each of these different routes, I'll make sure to add the some links that show the exact routes that I meant, so you can see exactly where to go. These routes tend to avoid the really heavily trafficked roads around the city. So, the different routes that I am going to talk about are going to somewhat move from closer to more distant sites. And just because of the way things work, they move generally from more recent archaeological sites to more ancient ones.

The first one I want to talk about is Godstow nunnery. This is a relatively short ride. I recommend going up Woodstock Road, cutting across through Wolvercote and just when you pass the the Thames on your left, you will see a ruined nunnery. This is a 12th century nunnery that was most commonly associated with a mistress of King Henry II, the so called fair Rosamond who either was educated at the monastery or ultimately spent her final days there after the affair with the king was over and eventually I think she was buried there as well. And the monastery is mostly ruined now, I think there's one kind of chapel still partially standing all though without its roof. And definitely worth checking out for its Thames side location and the nearby trout pub.

Now I recommend in order to kind of get a little bit of a different perspective to continue instead of going back the way you came to continue through Wytham which also has a nice pub and then swing South and come back in Oxford through Botley Road. All told, it's about a little bit less than eight miles. So, it's a nice, relatively short ride, just to get you started.

Another great short ride I want to talk about may not actually qualify as an archaeological site since it's still a working church but is a really fantastic site that I think is really worth taking a look at. And this is St. Mary's at Iffley. It's a small church, you can get to just by taking the Thames path South out of the city, and then going up the hill from Iffley Lock. And this is a Norman era church, so built in the 12th century, and has some absolutely fantastic carvings, both on the main doorway in the main entrance to the church and also inside and also on a doorway that is on, I think, the south side of the church.

And if you've never seen Norman carvings before, they're absolutely spectacular. The kind of main facade, the front of the church is covered with these really kind of toothy looking Crow's beak spurs anyway, it looks the kind of a sarlacc mouth scary looking thing that you go into to the church, but absolutely spectacular. And if you look, again, over to the side on the right exterior door, a smaller door, on the south side of the church, you'll see a number of really spectacular carvings including a Green Man, one of these common motifs in ecclesiastical architecture, of either a person emerging from leaves, a person made of leaves, or a person having leaves and fully growing out of their mouth. It's a really interesting and much much discussed piece of symbolism, but there's a kind of little one there. And there are all sorts of other carvings of knights and maybe a dragon as well. So definitely worth checking that out.

Inside the church, I recommend going inside as well, you can see additional carvings, really spectacular stuff. I will say that in recent years, they've aligned washed the church to help preserve it. And so this strikes me is a little bit too bright at the moment, hopefully it will kind of weather and fade because right now it's kind of a brilliant sort of yellowish white color. But uh, nonetheless, still definitely a site worth visiting. All told this route, if you take my suggested route, this is about five miles, so another really short one that can be done in an hour or two.

Okay, so moving both back in time, and significantly farther away, is the North Lee Roman Villa. Now this route takes about 29 miles if you loop through Stonesfield, but if you just want to go out and back, it's kind of a minimum of about 26 miles. This is a Roman era Villa site, and it's supposedly has Iron Age origins but the Roman Villa at the site was founded and built in the late first early second century AD. Much of the foundations are exposed, you can see some bits of underfloor heating, and there is a mosaic, I believe of the kind of early fourth or third century. The villa was abandoned in the fifth century AD.

The setting here is really quite nice. It's kind of cradled on the hill slope, you have to descend on a path from the main road. This is cyclable, but it's pretty steep, and it's not paved. There is a mosaic there, but it's in a kind of enclosed building, with rather low-quality plexiglass windows, so it was hard to see if it wasn't actually open.

Now, as I said, I recommend incorporating this new loop and kind of heading north into the village of Stonesfield and coming back along a slightly different route through Combe. This is a kind of really the edge of the Cotswolds now, so it's starting to get a bit hilly, but there are some really nice kind of views of rolling hills along this route.

Also in this sort of middle distance range about 20 miles away round that's round trip is a site called the Devil's Quoits. That's Q U O I T S. And this is a henge monument with a stone circle that dates to about the third millennium BC. And the henge part of the monument consists of a bank and ditch encircling the interior stone circle. Now this site is particularly interesting because when I was going there, I definitely thought I was going the wrong way. It's actually located adjacent to or even partially within a gravel quarry. So you're kind of going down this road and you'll constantly be thinking that you might be heading the wrong direction. So the the charm of this site I think, is really the hidden discovery aspect, that it's really tucked away and not many people know about it. The other kind of cool thing about this site is that the stone circle - the stones that make up the stone circle- are this conglomerate-y, pudding stone that looks kind of like concrete, but actually it is a natural, sedimentary rock.

And if you're like me, you may wonder what, what are 'quoits'? Why is it called the Devil Quoits? How did it get this name? Well, the legend goes, and many of these stone monuments around Oxfordshire have kind of legends associated with them, the quoits are a type of game of some kind. And the legend goes that the devil was playing this game on a Sunday and God chastised him for, you know, doing frivolous things on the Lord's day and the devil got angry, and he tossed his things he was playing the game with and they fell in this area.

So you'll notice on the route that I will upload to the show notes that this route is an out and back route going through Swinford and Eynsham and one of the reasons for this is in fact, the bridge over the Thames at Swinford is one of the few bridges over the Thames in this area. And I think there's actually a royal decree that forbid any other bridge being built over the Thames more than several miles upstream or downstream of this point. I mean, it's actually a toll bridge, believe it or not, which can sometimes back up with cars, but when you're cycling, at least I've never had to pay the toll. So Devil's Quoits, it's definitely worth checking out. Again, the distance is about 20 miles round trip if you go straight there and straight back.

The next site I want to talk about is the site of Cherbury Camp located to the southeast of Oxford and this is a fortified Iron Age site. It's similar to a hillfort, but in fact, it's a fortification but not on a hill. And this is a kind of characteristic fortification that we often see in the first millennium BC, the Iron Age in Britain. This site because of so called multi-vallate, which means it has multiple banks and ditches, and it's located near the village of Charney Bassett and so the route that I'm recommending takes you to the village and then you either have to, you have to walk about a mile north of the village. But it's really worth checking out. I was totally alone when I visited - ideal for the pandemic. And a lot of these hillforts seem to potentially used for a variety of different purposes, some of them seem to have enclosed settlements, some seemingly did not. In this case, a geophysical survey - a way of understanding what is buried beneath the soil without having to excavate - a geophysical survey of the site done about 10 to 15 years ago, was actually able to identify a number of Iron Age roundhouses in the signature of the geophysical survey. So, when you go to the site, the interior will be entirely flat, there won't be any kind of mounds within the interior. But when you go there, just kind of imagine that there would have been a series of houses and some kind of settlement within the walls of this fortress.

While you're visiting the site, keep an eye out for one or several hares that I saw when I visited. I'm also happened to see some red kites. They are a bird of prey that you see commonly flying around the Oxfordshire countryside.

Okay, the last two rides I'm going to talk about are for those of you who are really looking to go on a long trek. Both of these are about 50 to 55 miles round trip, really a kind of full day adventure. But as you'll see in a minute, they're really worth checking out because there's some really spectacular sights.

So, the first set of sights that I want to talk about are the Rollright Stones. These are a series of stone monuments just to the north and a little bit to the west of Chipping Norton, and this is again in the direction of the Cotswold hills. So, cycling out there, once you hit the Cotswolds, you're going to get a lot of kind of rolling hills. It is beautiful countryside, but just get ready for some climbs, especially once you get out beyond Chipping Norton, those last few miles. So, because it's hilly, the Rollright stones are a set of three separate but probably related monuments that are perched on the top of a really nice hill. So, he has a nice kind of views of the rolling countryside around.

And the Rollright Stones consists of three separate but interrelated monuments, the so called The Whispering Knights, the Kings Men -which are stone circle-, and then the King Stone, a single monolithic stone located across the road from the other two monuments. So, it's important not to miss any one of these. You may be able to tell from the names that there is some kind of local legends associated with these monuments. The legend goes that a king was traveling with his men, and a witch turned the king to stone and King's Men along with him and the three Whispering Knights or lagging behind a little bit and the witch met them as she was coming down the hill. Legend has it that they were conspiring against the king and the stones are kind of tilted towards one another. So, you can kind of get that sense from looking at them. And so, the witch turned them to stone as well.

So local legends aside, actually these monuments date from very different periods, although undoubtedly, they would have been eventually considered a kind of unitary whole, once they had been built. So, the Whispering Knights is the oldest of the monument states to about 3800 to 3500 BC, belongs to the Early Neolithic. Whereas the King's Men, that stone circle, dates to the Later Neolithic, about 2500 BC. Whereas the King Stone is even later, somewhere in the early Middle Bronze Age somewhere about 1500 BC.

There are a number of other associated myths and stories about these stones. For instance, the legend has it that you cannot count the number of King's Men. But if you've somehow managed to and you get the same number three times over, you will allegedly get whatever your heart desires. And in fact, the site is still significant to the present-day pagan community. And you may see, if you visit there, evidence of their activities. For instance, when I was visiting, there were a number of things hung in the trees around the King's Men, including interestingly enough, a COVID facemask. Undoubtedly some kind of protective ritual going on there.

Finally, I want to talk about another really long ride this out to Uffington White Horse, Uffington Castle and Wayland Smithy. This route is again about 50 and 55 miles so it's a real long day ride, but certainly doable within a single day. The route to this set of monuments runs through what is called the Vale of the White Horse and the path is actually mostly flat until the very end when you go up a very steep hill that leads on to a very ancient route of travel known as the Ridgeway along which these different monuments are located. The route that I took went not the direct way that most cars will travel to these monuments but actually went, did the climb up that ridge a little bit to the east, and then traveled again along this Ridgeway trail, a bit rough, but it avoids going up very steep hills where there might be a lot of cars.

The set of three monuments consists of a chalk figure, the so-called White Horse of Uffington, although it's a little bit unclear whether it's a horse or some other type of quadruped animal. And this

is a monument that is about 3000 years old. Archaeological excavations have demonstrated a date to the Late Bronze or Early Iron Age, and it had to be continuously scoured to maintain the figure because otherwise grass will grow over in the chalk will degrade and you won't be as visible. Up until recently there were a village tradition of scouring the White Horse. So, think about this kind of 3000-year-old tradition and continuity in this region.

Directly adjacent to the White Horse is Uffington Castle, which is an Iron Age hillfort dating to the first millennium BC and actually this hillfort is positioned on the high point the highest elevation in all of Oxfordshire. So, if the weather is nice, and the visibility is good, you should get some spectacular views across the landscape.

Now a short distance maybe half a mile, a mile, to the west of Uffington castle and you can reach it by traveling again along the Ridgeway route (It's a kind of gravel path-cyclable, but not going to go very fast on it) is Wayland Smithy, which is a much older, Neolithic, Long Barrow, dating to maybe the middle of the fourth millennium BC. There are actually two burials- one a little bit earlier than the other and the second larger one then covered the original earlier burial. The second barrow has been partially reconstructed and so there are some really nice standing stones really impressively large stones.

Tolkien fans will be interested to hear that the site of Wayland Smithy actually served as inspiration for the encounter with the Barrow-wights on the Barrow-downs in the Fellowship of the Ring. So, this trio of sites Wayland Smithy, the Uffington White Horse and Uffington Castle are certainly among the farthest treks that I've described in this podcast but they're also collectively probably the most well-known sites that I've described. So definitely worth taking a ride but definitely make sure to bring lots of water and bring lots of food.

And with that, I will wrap up my recommendations of cool archaeological sites to cycle to in Oxfordshire. So, I hope one or more of these routes has intrigued you and you get out while the weather stays warm and explore some archaeology. Thanks for listening and happy riding!

*(Dr Sainsbury: Thank you for listening to Digging for Meaning. For more information about this topic, or for any of our other episodes, please go to our website at [arch.ox.ac.uk/podcasts](http://arch.ox.ac.uk/podcasts).)*