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THE FAMOUS STORY PAPER FOR WOMEN
EVERY THURSDAY No. 6729 JANUARY 9, 1999

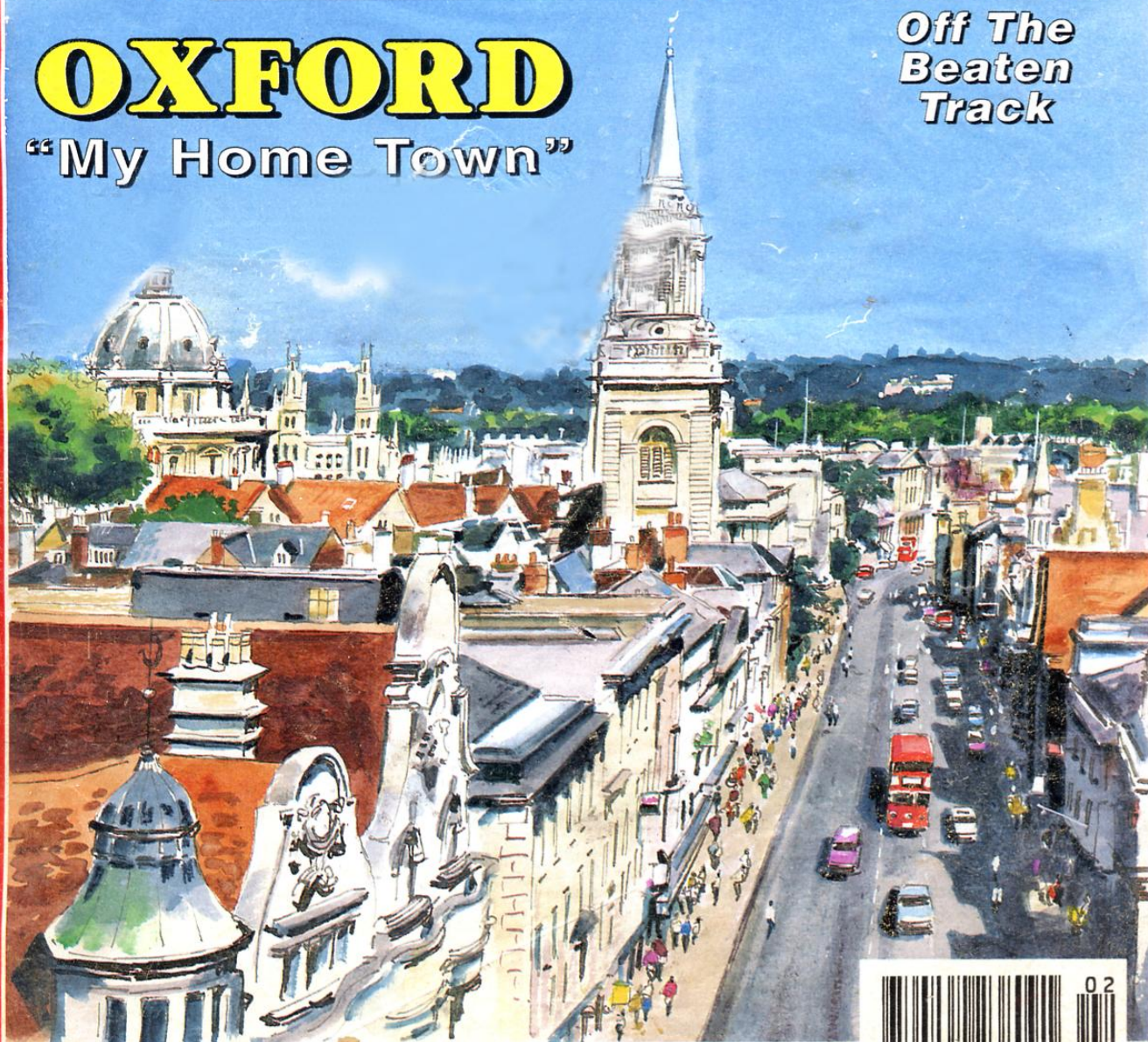
KNIT
Our
Stylish
Aran
Jacket

TRAVEL

Off The
Beaten
Track

OXFORD

“My Home Town”



FREE 1999 DIARY

OXFORD: J CAMPBELL KERR



The Sheldonian — someone's a bike short today.

ILL never forget my first day in Oxford. I imagined it would be like walking on to the set of "Inspector Morse", with students wearing cap and gown and bells ringing from mediaeval towers.

My first glimpse from the train window was not of dreaming spires, but a cemetery on one side and a wasteland full of crushed cars on the other!

In those days it was nearly as bad arriving by coach — the old bus station, now thankfully gone, used to look out on to the backs of shops and theatres.

It was a job in bookselling that brought me to Oxford. For 14 years I bought, sold, displayed and dusted more books than I would ever have thought possible.

It was great fun, though. We used to keep a list of all the odd requests.

"I know it's got a yellow cover and it's being serialised on 'Woman's Hour'."

"Have you got 'Tess of the Dormobiles'?"

Those were two of my favourites.

About ten years ago I wrote a book on the Queen Mother, and



On the way to her final exams.

of course I placed a large pile of them near the till.

One day I was recommending a book on Dunkirk to one of the local academics.

Suddenly she noticed the picture of Her Majesty smiling across at her from my book cover, and whispered, "Oh, dear, what a terrible looking book!"

"Well, actually I wrote it," I said, and she laughed even more and said, "Oh, you are a hoot!"

Opening the back cover, I showed her the picture of me labelled "author". I've never seen anyone turn white so quickly!

It was often said that they could have modelled "Are You Being Served?" on us . . .

Pauline, who worked on the front desk, had a very loyal following but at the same time didn't suffer fools gladly.

Any request from "What time do you close?" to "Have you got a toilet?" was answered by the set phrase, "Have you looked on the shelves?" followed seconds later by, "Well, if it's not there, we must be out of it, then!"



Kermit speaks at the Oxford Union.

Ian Lloyd's Oxford

Most people see Oxford from the outside, admiring the backdrop to "Inspector Morse". Ian Lloyd chose to live there, and gives us the insider's view of one of the world's most famous cities.

About once a fortnight she would say, "Do you want your dinner, love?" and without another word, she'd leave the shop and expect me to follow her bike home.

The problem was Pauline always cycled down the towpath along the Thames to Donnington Bridge, two miles away.

Nine times out of ten I would end up with a puncture, and Pauline, still in front, would shout back, "I'll go and put the kettle on. Don't be long!"

For years I rode Granny's bike, the only one I had that never got stolen. It weighed a ton, half of which was probably the thick gloss paint Grandad used to apply every few years.

It took a lot of pedalling to get going, but once you were under way it did carry on quite well under its own momentum.

Biking was made easier for me when the council built a cycle track across the fields to where I live on the outskirts of the city.

The field is quite often full of cows, with occasionally a bull to keep them company.

I remember getting very cross one day, pedalling like fury to get to work on time, when I turned a corner to find the track blocked by a massive heifer who had no intention of giving way!

When I finally got to work and started moaning about stubborn cattle, a voice from behind a bookcase said, "You know, some people have to put up with the M25!"

A cycle ride I never mind is through the back lanes of the colleges, on those long summer evenings when the sun turns the stone into a gorgeous honeycomb colour.

Cycling through New College Lane, the smell of wisteria greets you, and the glorious sound of Evensong reaches out over the walls of Queen's



Exams over!

College Chapel. It is absolutely magical.

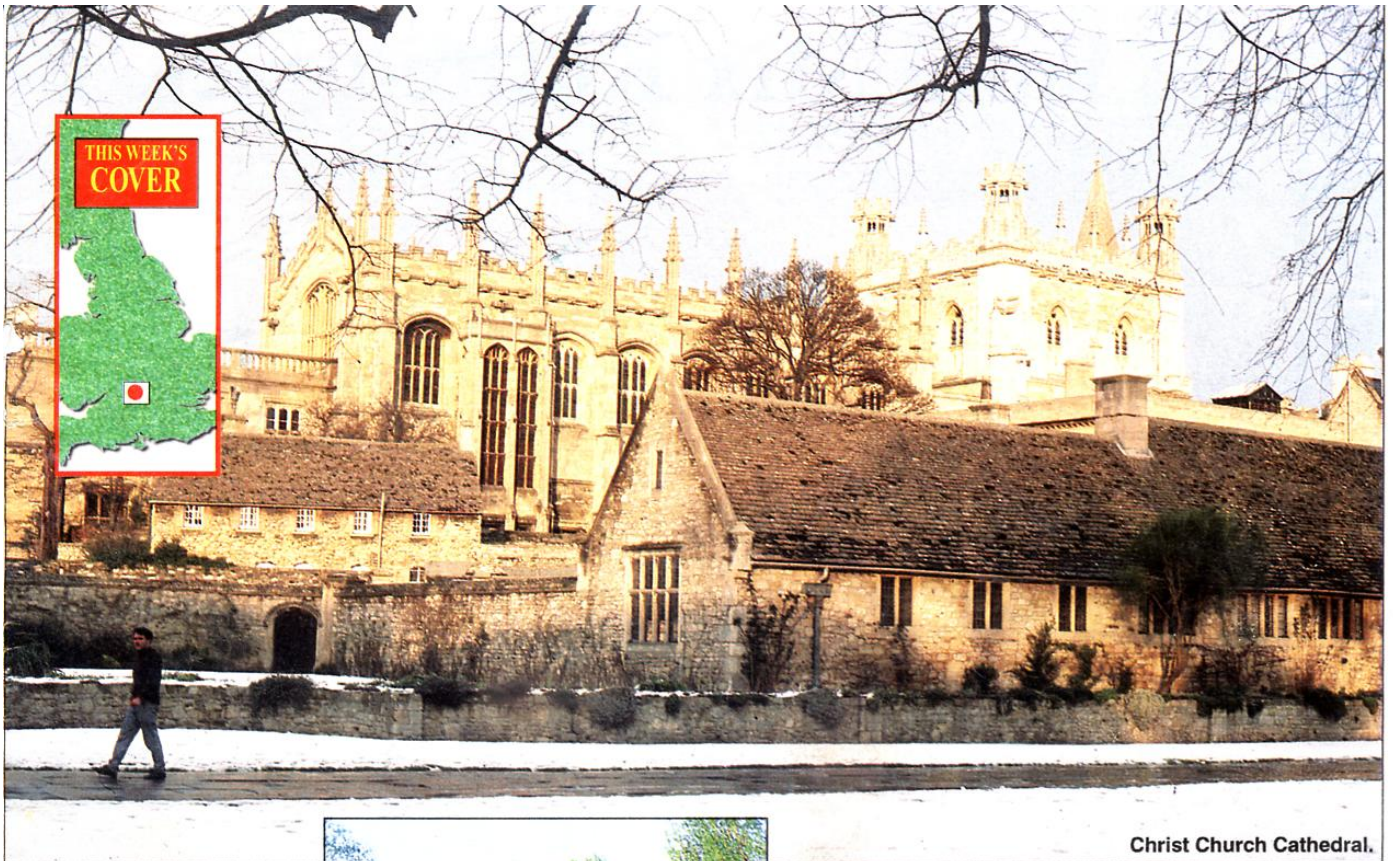
The other smell on those balmy nights is of shaving foam, traditionally sprayed by the gallon on to students who have finished their final exams.

Friends meet them armed with champagne, roses and bags of flour, which is also thrown at the happy finalists.

This can get out of hand.



The Covered Market.



Christ Church Cathedral.

There's the occasional mistake when three pounds of self-raising lands on the wrong person, but, by and large, it passes without too much going wrong.

FOR centuries the citizens of Oxford have been divided between Town and Gown. Townies like me aren't supposed to get on with the students, yet I must admit to finding some of their antics hilarious.

I remember the first Comic Relief Day, for instance, when a red plastic nose appeared on the statue of Sir Thomas Bodley outside the Library named after him.

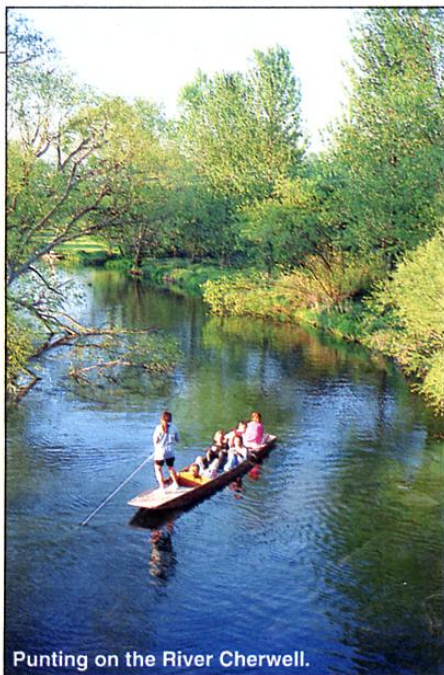
More recently the Oxford Union, a debating society that has played host to distinguished speakers from Gladstone and Mother Teresa to Kermit the Frog, had a visit from O. J. Simpson.

One of the students handed this controversial man a piece of folded paper and asked for a signature.

O. J., obviously keen to appear as charming as possible, happily signed his name.

You've guessed — typed on the other side were the words, "I did it!"

The students are only around for half the year, since the three terms that make up the



Punting on the River Cherwell.

University year are each eight weeks long. From June to October, the students leave and the tourists arrive.

All nationalities visit this small city, but the Americans and Japanese are the most numerous.

The Americans tend to base themselves in London, and "do" Oxford on a six-hour tour that also takes in Stratford and Blenheim Palace, birthplace of Winston Churchill.

It's a hectic pace and I often

wonder how much they can possibly take in.

One or two have stopped me and asked, "Which city are we in?" or "Where's the university?"

The Japanese love to photograph. Many set up a camera on a tripod near the famous sites and wait for you to cycle past, so they can get a genuine Oxford bike into the picture (even if mine did come from Manchester).

The tourists love the "quaintness" of Oxford. It's a real eye-opener for the citizens of Manhattan or Tokyo to see the Covered Market, where at Christmas whole deer and sides of beef hang in the butchers' shops, and tiny cafés nestle alongside bookshops and florists.

Oxford still has its share of old-fashioned "quality" shops.

There are gentlemen's outfitters, cobblers that hand make shoes, and my favourite, Gill & Co., the ironmongers, established in 1530, where they still search through boxes to find the right size of nut or bolt for you.

Tourists who never go further than the city centre miss many interesting things.

My favourite part of town is Jericho, which 50 years ago was one of the roughest areas of the city, but is now one of the

most sought after for house buyers.

A "Coronation Street" type terraced house here will set you back £150,000, and if you want one with a garden, well, win the lottery first!

At the top end of Jericho is Lucy's, the iron foundry that until recently used to have furnaces blazing into the night.

From across the Oxford Canal, the bright flames and the noise of machinery were like something out of Dickens.

The road to Lucy's takes you down to Port Meadow, a three-mile stretch of open grazing land that plays host to geese, swans, horses and cattle.

Occasionally all four species wander over to look at you at once, and it can be a bit unnerving trying to cross the grass on your own.

Fortunately, on the other side of the meadow, next to the Thames, are two of the finest pubs in the Cotswolds, so at least you can summon up the courage to tramp back home!

I suppose what I love most about Oxford is that it's a totally manageable city. You can walk the length of the centre in five minutes.

Then, just half a mile out, you reach open countryside and the rivers, with spectacular views and total peace . . .

The End