Snapshots of Oundle through time.

**Location and Geology:**

Oundle is located in the eastern part of Northamptonshire and is within the modern administrative area of East Northamptonshire district council. The county is a long narrow ellipse in shape; with its long axis orientated NE-SW. Oundle is 32 miles from Northampton and 12 miles from Peterborough. The town occupies an irregular site to the west of the River Nene in a horseshoe of the river at its junction with Lyveden Brook, which is just south of the town. The lower ground is of Marls and Limestones and higher, to the west is Oxford clay with Boulder clay of the Jurassic/Triassic period, about 200 million years old. Ordnance Survey contours show heights in the town of 25 to 40 metres above sea level. Oundle is located in the broad flat lowland of the River Nene an area of mixed farming and village/town communities and is part of the area identified by Geologists as the Oxford Clay Vale. The river was navigable up to and possibly beyond Oundle in medieval times.

**Bronze age / Iron Age:**

The Royal Commission for Historical Monuments records evidence of Bronze Age Burials and of collared urns near the present day cemetery. This suggests that Oundle has been occupied since that period and further findings of coins indicates continued settlement through the Iron Age and into the Roman period.

**Roman:**

There have been many finds relating to Roman settlement, particularly coins, pottery, skeletons, a Roman cup in the churchyard, a kiln in Oundle wood and within the bounds of Oundle the Roman township of Ashton near the present day roundabout on the A605; approximately mid-way between the River Nene and the Roman road between Durobrivae and Titchmarsh.
Anglo-Saxon:

Bede informs us that St Wilfred, The Bishop of York, died in 709 A.D. at the monastery in Oundle. There is archaeological evidence of Anglo-Saxon occupation in Stoke Doyle Road, Black Pot lane and St., Peter’s Church and the surrounding area. Many authors have suggested that Oundle was a significant religious centre and that it probably had a Minster Church. The Peterborough Black book records ‘The Boundary of Oundle in 971 A.D.’ and Charters of Peterborough Cathedral refer to it’s Manor of Oundle and a Market confirmed by King Edgar in 972 A.D.

Norman:

Oundle as a significant place in this period is evident from the records in the Doomsday Book of 1086. The people were 23 villagers, 10 smallholders, a miller, a woodsman and 3 slaves. These were the significant people but do not include the whole household, extrapolation of these figures indicates a total population in the region of 150/200 individuals. There is no mention of ‘Freemen’ unlike Elton where there were 6.

‘[in Polebrook Hundred]

in OUNDLE 6 hides. Land for 9 ploughs. In lordship 3 ploughs; 3 slaves; 23 villagers and 10 smallholders with 9 ploughs.
A mill at 20s and 250 eels; meadw, 50 acres;
woodland 3 leagues long and 2 leagues wide;
value when stocked, 20s. From the market 25s.
The value was 5s; now £11.
To this manor belongs 1/2 hide in THURING. Land for 1/2 plough.
1 Villager.
The value was 2s; now 40d.’

However by the early 12th century, Beresford and Finberg find that there are 10 burgesses who pay 30s each to Peterborough Cathedral.

Late Medieval Period:

Clearly from the Norman Conquest onwards there was a time of prosperity for Oundle, which may have resulted from the ‘very good market’ referred to by Leland in the 1530s. In addition he described Oundle as ‘al buildid of stone’, clearly the town had many stone buildings including the large and beautiful parish church of St Peter, which is mainly 13th century. A charter issued by Peterborough Abbey in the early thirteenth century sheds some light on the life of the medieval town: the population was probably around 500, and it included cloth workers, a skinner, a smith and two masons.
The 1565 survey by Thomas Austell, lists street by street all the properties in the town, and shows a layout of Oundle similar to that of today. The site of the Jesus Church was known as Chapel End, after the chapel of Saint Thomas of Canterbury, which had stood there in medieval times. The survey also contains an interesting reference to the hall of the pre-Reformation guild of Our Lady of Oundle, which had been purchased by “Mr Laxton somtyme maior of London”.

In earlier times, pre-reformation, there had been a modest guild school, held in the Parish church, but Sir William Laxton, left provision in his will of 1556, for the former guild house be acquired and used as a grammar school with accommodation for ‘seven poor honest men’. The guild house stood in the churchyard on the site of the present Laxton School. In 1611 Nicholas Latham founded another double foundation of an almshouse for women and a school in North Street. Latham's Hospital still fulfils its original purpose of providing a home for elderly ladies, but his Bluecoat school merged with Oundle Church of England School at the end of the nineteenth century.

**Early Modern Period:**

During these times there was considerable wealth, which is reflected in the modernisation of and some replacement of many buildings. Typical of these is Cobthorne sometimes described as 'Commonwealth house' and a miniature facsimile of Thorpe Hall on the outskirts of Peterborough. The prominent families of the time were the Whitwells, Bramstons and Creeds who took every opportunity to display their wealth through building and/or face lifting in the classical style. There are however mixed views amongst local historians about the lot of poorer families. Some suggest that the seventeenth century Mill Road workman’s cottages show a degree of prosperity whereas others claim that the cramming in of buildings in the ‘yards’ and ‘back lanes’, prior to enclosure of the ‘Open Fields’ indicates an element of poverty amongst the working classes.
John Clifton, master carpenter, and diarist, wrote vividly of the pleasures and hardships of the late eighteenth century, including floods, smallpox, fairs and bull-running, as well as the interests townspeople, including astronomy and gardening. His will shows that he was a learned man who owned a considerable library. From this it is clear that like many other small market towns, there were a wide range of occupations, such as Cordwainers, Fellmongers, a Tanner, a Turner, a Hemp Dresser, a Rope Maker, Slaters, Watchmakers, ‘Inn holders, a Fishmonger, a Miller, Grocers, a ‘Jockey’ (who was probably a Horse Dealer), some Glovers, and a Gunsmith.

The developments of the latter end of this period are perhaps less obvious. However 1825 saw the Improvement Act passed, 1845 brought the railway, and the building of three Non-conformist churches Congregational (1865), Baptist (1852) and Methodist (1885) and the Jesus Church as an Anglican Chapel, later to be Oundle’s Roman Catholic Church. The nineteenth century also brought the building of the Oundle Poor Law Union Workhouse, designed by G. Gilbert Scott. The 22nd Report of the Commissioners in Lunacy to the Lord Chancellor, submitted by Alan Longbottom, in 1867 shows that there were ‘7 male and 7 female insane, idiotic and imbecile inmates.’ The loss of the workhouse and its treatment of people is perhaps no loss but the demolition of a well-known architect’s work is perhaps unfortunate.

**Late Modern Period:**

In 1892 F. W. Sanderson was appointed headmaster of Oundle School and thus began the transformation of the school from a fairly insignificant private school into the highly successful public school we see today. The purchase of several town houses and the building programme was instrumental in the development and moulding of the town. This continues in recent times with the New Science Building and more student accommodation. State education in Oundle is provided at Prince William School and Sixth Form Centre in Herne Road and by the Primary School in Cotterstock Road. It would however be a failure on my part if I did not draw the reader’s attention to the most significant
event in the educational history of Oundle, the formation of The Oundle and District University of the Third Age. The Oundle U3A as it is commonly referred to, was launched in 2008 and has continued to provide the opportunity for retired people to continue to develop their learning and understanding of a wide range of subjects. It continues to expand today, finding new areas of study for it’s increasing membership.

Each year on Remembrance Day, the town’s people gather around the War memorial to remember the many who fell in both world wars. Those men whose names are written on the now refurbished memorial are recorded in a small book entitled ‘Shadows from the Past’ by Ray Rundle, the buildings are recorded in ‘Oundle's Historic Buildings’ by David Parker,

and all printed books and documents about Oundle past and present are listed in ‘Oundle in Print’ by Robin Rowe, three books written since the formation of the Oundle and District U3A whose authors are members.

My references for what is essentially a brief snapshot are many, the above books, my own former, more serious academic investigations and the Oundle Museum website. I make no apologies for the lack of references and/or sources. It is a bit fun for the Oundle and District U3A, thrown together in an afternoon when the unexpected snow kept me indoors. Enjoy!

John G. Cooper.