

THE ENIGMA OF MEDIEVAL CITY LEYS

Mave Calvert, Ridings Dowsers, June 2022

In the Society of Leyhunters Newsletter #70 (June 2022) I wrote an article entitled “The York Ley: A Line of Sites and a Line of Sight” that described what members of the Ridings Dowsers found when we walked the York Ley at the end of March 2022. The City of York is the capital of the English county of Yorkshire and was a significant northern Roman town known as Eboracum, later settled by both the Saxons and Vikings. The York Ley, also known as the ‘Corridor of Sanctity’, is a straight alignment of 8 sites in less than one mile oriented roughly north to south, terminating at the confluence of the Rivers Ouse and Foss.

In 1984-5 Jill Smith undertook a year-long pilgrimage around an ancient a landscape zodiac known as the ‘Gypsy Swich’ which was centred around Arbor Low, the well-known stone circle and henge in the Derbyshire Peak District. Jill visited places that represented this zodiac on the ground at the relevant times of the year. Since York represented Leo, she visited the city for a fortnight in July/August 1985 where she met up with Brian Larkman who first introduced the York Ley to the world of Leyhunting. In each place they stopped Jill and her friends would seek out the sacred or esoteric centre of the land. On page 315 of her book, ‘The Gypsy Swich and other Ritual Journeys’ Jill tells us *“I became aware that the sacred centre [of York] must be the confluence of two rivers which joined and flowed into one, creating a female Y-shaped piece of land between them. This was known as St George’s Fields and there had once been a Templar Church there”*. When the Ridings Dowsers walked the York Ley in March 2022, we started in the south at the river confluence and felt it to be a special place.

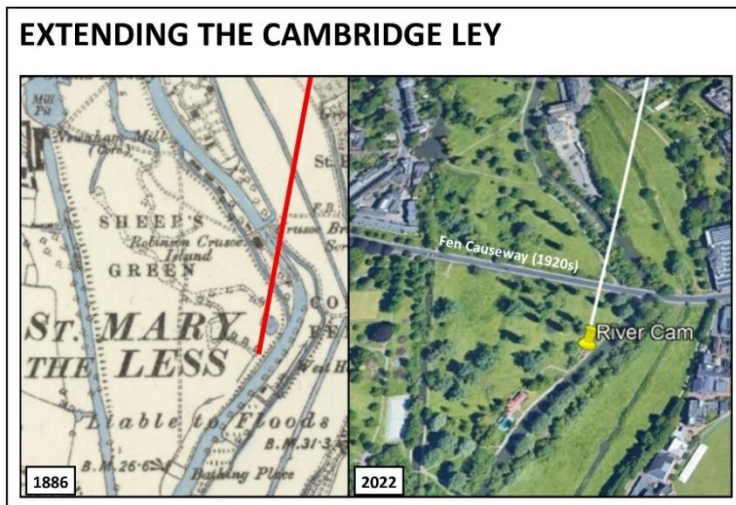
Medieval Leys in University Cities

Not long after the Ridings Dowsers visit to York, I spotted a book on eBay entitled ‘Lines on the Landscape: Leys and other Linear Alignments’ written by Nigel Pennick and Paul Deveraux and published in 1989. My Dowsing suggested I press the ‘Buy it now’ button so the book was duly purchased. When it arrived, I found that the York Ley is briefly mentioned in a section entitled ‘Medieval Alignments’ (pp 216-220) along with another very similar Ley in the University City of Cambridge.

I managed to find an online article about the Cambridge Ley by Nigel Pennick and Michael Behrend in the digitised version of The Journal of Geomancy, Vol 3, No 2, January 1979. It had first been noticed by Nigel Pennick in 1967. I studied the detailed map in this article and realised that if the Ley was extended southwards, it would reach the River Cam in the same way the York Ley reaches the River Ouse/Foss confluence.

I plotted the Cambridge Ley on Google Earth. Just like the York Ley it consisted of seven medieval sites. It started with the famous Cambridge Round Church in the north. An eighth site could arguably be added with the former Emmanuel Congregational Church which was built by the Victorians on the site of the Half Moon Inn close to Little St Mary’s in 1872-4. I extended the Ley another quarter of a mile south on Google Earth and saw that it passed through Peterhouse College and reached the River Cam close to a bend in the river where it

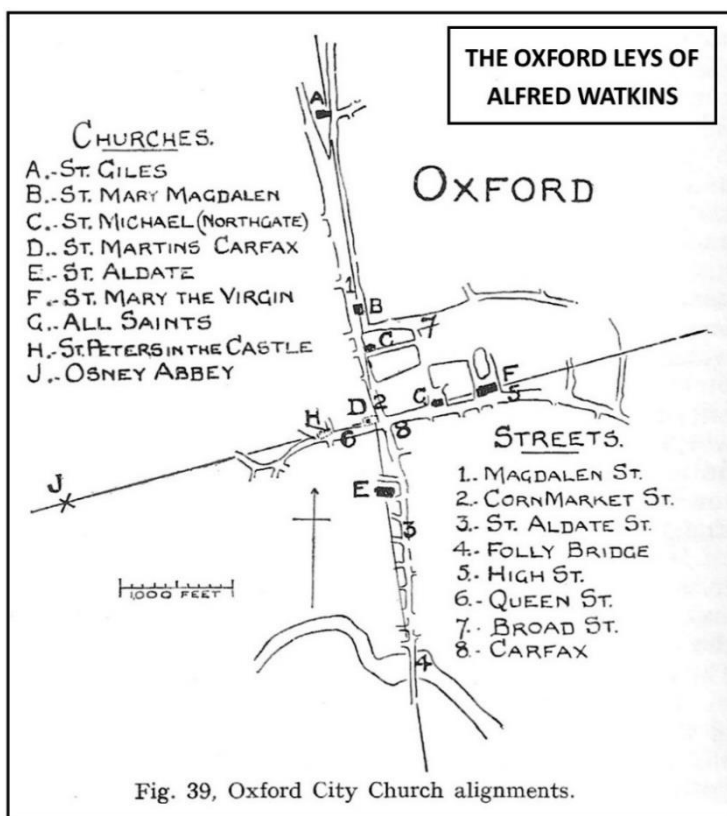
is now crossed by the A1134 Fen Causeway road. Further research showed that the river here



is now canalised but originally meandered through the area known as Sheep's Green which was prone to flooding and therefore used for the grazing of animals. The extended Ley hits the current River Cam right next to a stream that is thought to be the original course of the river. The area was apparently used by men and boys for nude bathing in the late 1800s and a Victorian Ordnance Survey map shows the

word "Bathing Places" a little further south.

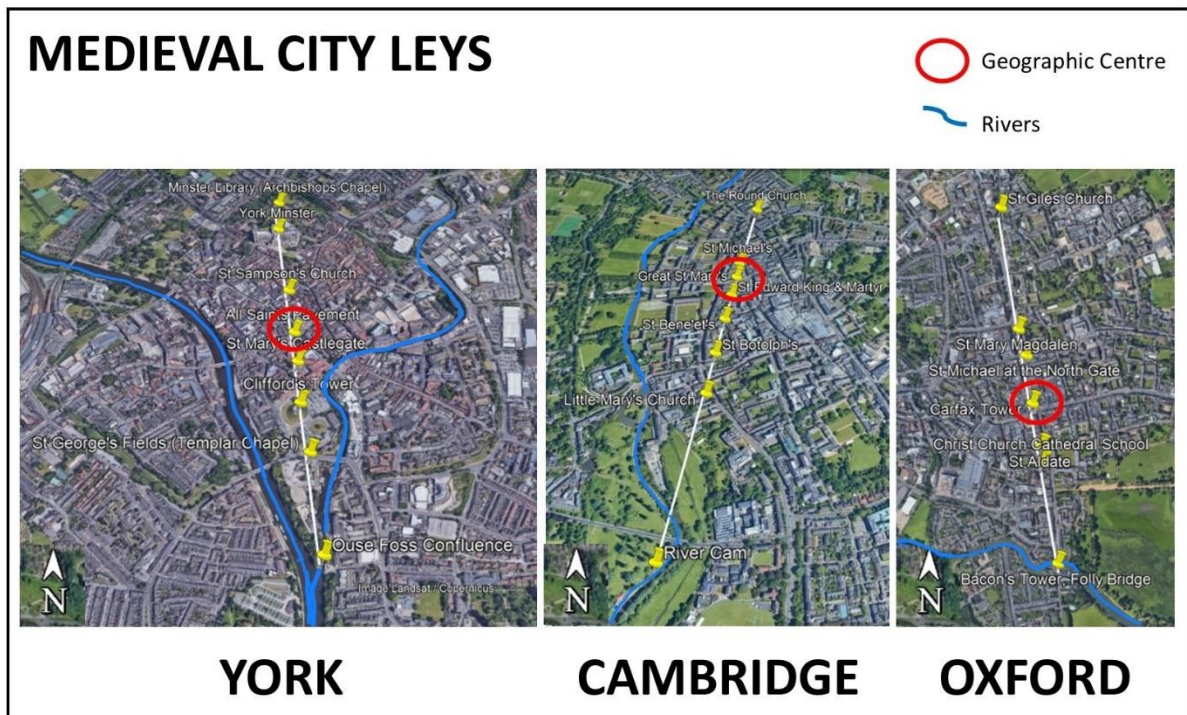
A few days later I was re-arranging my bookshelves and found my copy of 'The Ley Hunters



Manual: A Guide to Earthly Tracks' written by Alfred Watkins in 1927 and re-published in 1983 with an introduction by John Michell. On page 48 Alfred Watkins shows two Leys running through the University City of Oxford forming a cross. One is aligned roughly east-west and the other roughly north-south. It was the north-south alignment that piqued my interest though because it passes through five Medieval churches, terminating in the south at Folly Bridge over the River Thames, above which the hexagonal 'Bacon's Tower' once stood. Demolished in 1779, this tower is said to have been used as an astronomical observatory by the 13th Century

Franciscan Friar and alchemist Roger Bacon. Presumably it would have been possible to look northwards along the Oxford Ley from this tower towards the northern constellations such as Cygnus. Indeed, it's angle, just west of north, is very similar to that of the Belinus Line (Spine of Albion) that runs from the Isle of Wight to Northern Scotland that Gary Biltcliffe suggests is oriented to the constellation Cygnus.

I plotted the Oxford Ley on Google Earth and when I placed it beside the corresponding plots of the York and Cambridge Leys, I was found the similarities remarkable:



The sites involved are as follows:

The York Ley (0.83 miles)

Archbishop's Place Chapel (now the Minster Library) – The Cathedral Church of St Peter (York Minster) – St Samson's Church – All Saints, Pavement – St Mary's Church – Clifford's Tower – Site of Templar Chapel at St George's Fields – Confluence of Rivers Ouse and Foss

The Cambridge Ley (0.82 miles)

Cambridge Round Church – St Michael's Church - Great St. Mary's Church – Church of St Edward King & Martyr – St Bene't's Church – St Botolph's – Emmanuel Congregational Church (1870s) - St Mary the Less Church - River Cam

The Oxford Ley (0.94 miles)

St Giles Church – Church of St Mary Magdalen - St Michael's Church (Northgate) - St Martin's Carfax – Church of St Aldate – Bacon's Tower on Folly Bridge over the River Thames (Isis)

The Power of Centre

In their book 'The Power of Centre' (pp 194-203) Gary Biltcliffe and Caroline Hoare show how the city of Oxford was laid out according to ancient customs. They describe the ancient Etruscan ritual of town and city planning which was later adopted by other cultures including the Romans and Saxons (pp 10-11):

“The priest geomancer of the Etruscans, or Augur, wore a conical hat and held a rod, just as today’s Bishops hold a mitre and carry a crook. He would first survey the land by determining the positions of the stars and planets in conjunction with the landscape topography ... once the Augur had identified the centre, he then stood on the spot at night in order to observe the pole star, marking a line towards this fixed northern-most star on the ground with his rod. The name of this true north-south axis in Latin was ‘cardo’. At right-angles to the cardo, he then marked an east-west line called ‘decumanus’ creating a cross on the ground. Symbolically, this crossroads to the cardinal points then acts as a conduit for the cosmological powers that radiate out from the axis mundi at the centre. The Priest then faced the south and recited the words ‘this is my front and this my back, this my left and this my right.’ Honouring the south was an ancient custom in many cultures around the world, but this sacred direction changed to the east in Christian times.”

In the northern hemisphere the Sun is always exactly due south at Solar Noon. This is also the time when it is at its highest daily elevation in the sky making Solar Noon the daily equivalent of the annual Summer Solstice. The exact time of Solar Noon varies slightly each day and depends on longitude but is usually within 20 minutes either side of 12 noon GMT (13:00 BST). Additionally, at the time of the Full Moon each month the Moon is always due south and at its highest elevation in the sky around midnight, known as its ‘Transit’. This may be part of the reason behind the ancient custom of honouring the south that Biltcliffe & Hoare refer to.

In Dowsing we are taught that the geometric (geographic) centre of any site, be it a stone circle, a henge or a city, is normally in a different place to the esoteric or sacred centre so we look for both.

In **York** the Church of All Saints, Pavement marks the geographical centre or omphalos of the city, while the esoteric or sacred centre, according to Jill Smith, is the confluence of the Rivers Ouse and Foss.

In **Cambridge** Great St Mary’s Church claims the title of the geographical centre. A plaque at the base of the west tower marks the datum point for distances from Cambridge which were originally marked with the first milestones erected in Britain since the Romans left.

In the 1987 booklet ‘Strange **Oxford**: A Guide to Local Legends, Ancient Sites, Folklore, Magic and Mystery’ (pp 33) Mary Karmeres tells us that *“The tower of Carfax ‘fourways’ marks the original centre of the old town. From it four roads lead out in each of the cardinal directions”*. In the ‘Power of Centre’ (pp 11) Biltcliffe and Hoare tell us that the name ‘Carfax’ was often used by the Romans for the central crossroads of a town or city where north-south and east-west roads meet.

Conclusion

So, we have three Leys of nearly the same length, each aligned almost north to south, each in a major English city, each no longer than one mile, each connecting several medieval churches and each terminating in the south at water.

These short 'Medieval Leys', all of which pass through the geographic centre of their respective cities, are most likely part of an ancient town planning system with the significant sites being successively built upon, culminating with the medieval buildings we see today.

However, it seems very significant that when extended a little further southward each of them reaches a significant point on a river. Perhaps, as Jill Smith found in York, the water was where the sacred centre of a city was to be found and where the ancient Goddess worship, and maybe total immersion baptisms, took place. It could also be that pilgrimages or initiations took place by walking these north-south routes at significant times with water and the positions of the Sun and Moon being an important part of the pilgrimage. Indeed, in April 2022 when Gary Biltcliffe and Caroline Hoare led the Ridings Dowsers on a pilgrimage around the Roman Town of Aldborough (Isurum Brigantum) 15 miles north-west of York, walking to the nearby River Ure to ground the energies was an important part of the pilgrimage.

The name Isurium is thought to have been derived from the River Ure and may have been combined with the name "Isis" in the same way as the river flowing through Oxford was known by the Romans as "Thamesis" and is often today referred to as the River Isis. Perhaps another allusion to the ancient sanctity of water.

In future when I come across a Ley, especially a relatively short one, I will be studying the maps to see whether there could be another one intersecting it at near right angles and checking whether the site where the two meet could have been an ancient landscape centre with a river nearby.

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