The huge popular interest in local heritage was demonstrated recently when thousands of people flocked to open days at the Westgate excavations where Oxford Archaeology revealed the vast site occupied by the Greyfriars for nearly 300 years from the 1240s. Continuing work on the new Westgate has now obliterated that site, but the vital evidence gathered there will inform the accuracy of the Oxford Historic Towns Atlas currently in preparation. The British Atlas of Historic Towns project was established back in 1963 as part of a European project to produce atlases of consistent scale and content so that the growth and development of towns and cities could be more easily compared. Banbury and Reading were included in the first volume published in 1969, and Cambridge featured in volume two, published in 1975. Oxford has had to wait a long time for its place in the sun, but the delay will ultimately prove be to everyone’s advantage. The latest atlases published for Windsor and Eton, and York demonstrate that today’s volumes are much more ambitious, and of more general interest, than their predecessors. The main map for each atlas is now based on the first edition large scale Ordnance Survey plan – in Oxford’s case, a survey in 1876 – and it features much additional material showing the sites of principal medieval and later buildings and structures. The Oxford atlas is due to be published in 2017, but fund-raising for the project is still ongoing. Contributors to the Oxford Historic Towns Atlas give their time free, but map production and professional cartography come at a high price. The newly-published An Historical Map of Oxford, based on the main map in the forthcoming atlas, is therefore an appetiser for the project and a fundraising initiative. The map costs £8.99 from local booksellers, and it features on the reverse a brief history of the city, historic illustrations, and a gazetteer, listing major buildings on the map and providing a brief history of each one. The delightful cover illustration from William Combe’s History of the University of Oxford (1814) is instantly recognizable as a view of Christ Church from Carfax, but, two centuries on, many elements of the scene are very different. The 18th century Town Hall was replaced in the 1890s, and Abbey House (1932) now stands on the south-west corner of Carfax. Notice though the quarterboys on the former Carfax church, copies of which still adorn Carfax Tower, all that was left of the church after its demolition in 1896. Oxford is sometimes thought to have changed little through the centuries, but this is easily disproved by map extracts showing Greyfriars and St Ebbe’s.
former St Martin’s Church at Carfax, and the vanished medieval buildings at Queen’s College and University College. The published Oxford atlas will include nine supplementary maps, showing the urban area at critical phases of development from the early 11th century through the medieval period and the Civil War to 1800. Key published maps of the city by Ralph Agas (1578), David Loggan (1675) and Richard Davis (1794) will inform the later supplementary maps, and the Oxford atlas will contain facsimiles of these and other maps as well as around 100 historic illustrations, including aerial photographs, street scenes, and topographical views. The accompanying introduction will provide a well-researched and readable account of the city’s history and development up to the last quarter of the 19th century, and complement the information shown on the maps. It will incorporate topographical data derived from many decades of archaeological excavations, detailed studies of surviving historic buildings, and extensive documentary research. Until the 1960s, for example, the friary sites in St Ebbe’s were hidden beneath the 19th century suburb, but the wholesale clearance of that area has enabled archaeologists to reveal the layout and the sheer scale of those lost religious houses. Other excavations have provided vital information about the Saxon origins of the city, the development of Oxford Castle, and the earthworks built in the 1640s when Oxford was the Royalist capital during the English Civil War. Individual buildings have also been the subject of archaeological and documentary research, casting new light on the city’s history. During extensive restoration in the 1980s, nos. 26-27 Cornmarket Street, long occupied by Zacharias & Co, waterproof clothing manufacturers, were shown to be part of the New Inn built in around 1390. In 2006, investigation of the former Merton College stables in Merton Street identified that this inconspicuous building is in fact a rare example of a Norman stone house dating from around 1200. Our knowledge of the history of Oxford was revolutionised in 1979 by the publication of the city volume of the *Victoria History of the County of Oxford*, popularly known as the VCH. This was the product of years of fieldwork and documentary research in local and national archives, and it has provided the foundation for all subsequent studies of the city. Alan Crossley, the editor of that seminal work, is now editing the Oxford Historic Towns Atlas, and he is also a member of the small team of archaeologists, historians and cartographers working on the volume. Their challenge has included the compilation of a gazetteer, a comprehensive encyclopedia of all the buildings, streets and other features named on the 1876 main map, with a brief history, references,
An Historical Map of Oxford from Medieval to Victorian Times and an index enabling readers to find their locations. The VCH has proved invaluable in tracing the history of the many 18th and 19th century streets, schools and other buildings which appear on the main map, but have since vanished as completely as Smith Gate in Catte Street or St Mildred’s Church in Turl Street.

To accompany the launch of the Historical Map, copies of some the most significant historic maps of Oxford will be on display in the Proscholium of the Bodleian Library from January 14-24, 2016.

- The Historic Towns Trust is looking for sponsors and supporters to enable the completion of the volume, and will welcome any enquiries through its website at: historictownsatlas.org.uk.