





# I. INTRODUCTION



The Cam is a very small river, gathered from many streams, yet one early crossing point over that river, established more than two thousand years ago, eventually made 'Cambridge' into a substantial place. The gravel-capped top of Castle Hill, the highest point in Cambridge, and the solid river-gravel terrace opposite to it were such a strategic point for the Romans; they built a great straight road through here from south to north. This highway, one of many that the imperial power made north through England, avoided the mire and mosquitoes of the Fens to the east, passing them by on their western side. The Cambridge river was crossed, most probably, first by ford and only later by bridge. If you approached up this river, from the sea, by longboat through those boggy Fens (as did the Saxons, Angles and Vikings) here also was a landfall onto higher ground. Taken together, this river-crossing, the hill look-out and river's quayside were a commanding place militarily. That small but highest hill in Cambridge housed the first Roman fort and settlement. After the Norman invasion, a thousand years later, that same hill had a castle on its top (p 80). Where the earliest people met beneath what is now Castle Hill, crossing the river by road or trading and travelling by water, a larger settlement grew up on the low gravel bank that is now Cambridge City. With a wealth of good pastures to the east, fertile farmland on the river terraces, river fishing, road and river trade, all these combined to make a thriving town centre. Merchants and the Church with their mutually increasing wealth and power and, importantly, the monastic teaching of dons made it into a small city with a developing scholastic tradition. Its reputation and wealth attracted the power of monarchs who themselves added to its stature and influence. Today Cambridge is justifiably famous for hosting one of the finest universities in the world. It would not have happened here without this little river.

The Cam is an astonishingly short river with a total length of only about 30 miles from its most distant southerly source to its junction with the Old West River. Here it becomes the Great Ouse (see the map, p 127). To the south, upstream of Cambridge are four sizeable tributary streams with a plethora of names: the **Granta**, the **Cam**, the **Rhee** and the **Bourn Brook**. This list of names requires some sorting. Such names are tied up with history, culture, tradition and language. The earliest Iron Age Celts of East Anglia and Belgic tribes were well established here before the Romans came.

