

V. CAMBRIDGE CITY

TOWN AND GOWN







The dense residential heart of Cambridge



Cambridge, as a medieval town in 1200, was 'defended' island-like by the Cam on the west side and the King's Ditch on the east. The King's Ditch, named after its source at the old King's Mill, carried a stream of water around the old town in an eastward arc to join the Cam again below Quayside opposite Magdalene. This ditch was dug in the 9th century, most likely by the Vikings. In the following Middle Ages, apart from the water drawn from wells, the town's water supply would have come either from the rivers or have been ducted into the city from the Conduit Head on the Madingley Road. Such water supplies cannot have been hygienic; it was safer to drink beer than plain water. Worse, however, the King's Ditch and the main river also acted as the town's sewers. Thus in the early 17th century a large stream, which rose from the chalk at Nine Wells and flowed from there to Newnham, was diverted into Cambridge town in a clay-lined channel to supply the Hobson's Conduit. This stream ran, and still runs, in channels right into the town. Initially it supplied clean water to the Market Square. It also assisted in flushing the waste thrown out into the old King's Ditch back into the River Cam. By all modern standards the river then was highly polluted and stank. It is easy to forget that a modern city depends vitally on both clean water and sewage disposal. Today a massive infrastructure of both piped water and sewers lies beneath every street in the whole City. These water mains and sewers are certainly invisible from the air and may only be viewed by the inquisitive pedestrian who peers into the depths of one of those innumerable Cambridge road-workings. The earliest sewers all emptied into the river. This situation continued until 1894 when the town's sewage, piped downhill to Riverside, was pumped away from the town to a new sewage works at Milton. This very first sewage pumping station still stands (p 96). It is a wonderful example of early sustainable management as the steam engines were powered, in part, by the incineration of the town's waste rubbish. This historic sewage pumping station is now the little known Cambridge Museum of Technology.

Away from the river, Cambridge has a myriad of novel buildings and open spaces. It would be impossible here to do justice to more than a tiny fraction. The business of the city, as a centre of population, is closely intermingled with the activities of the University. The 'town' and 'gown' are juxtaposed. After centuries of co-existence theirs is a mutually supportive yet often awkward