



# One Roll in Oxford

Issue Four

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## One Roll in Oxford

Oxford moves at two speeds. The stone stands still. Everything else passes through.

On a bright May morning, with the temperature already climbing toward 28 degrees, I walked the city with a single roll of film. Twenty-four frames. No second chances. A Canon 300V loaded with Kentmere 200, paired with a 24-70mm L series lens that has followed me for years.

The intention was not to document Oxford. It has been documented endlessly. The intention was simply to be present in it. To notice where light gathered against old stone. Where people moved through spaces built for permanence. Where the ordinary and the ancient occupied the same frame without ceremony.

Kentmere 200 is an honest film. Unforgiving in bright light. The highlights clip early and completely. On that day, in that heat, that became the photographs.

The negatives were developed in Rodinal at 1:25 for ten minutes. Agitated every sixty seconds. Scanned on a Canon R5 with a Sigma 105mm macro at f8 over a white box lightpad. What came back from the scan was already close to what I had seen.

In post, contrast was pushed hard. A selective Orton effect was applied and then carefully removed from the architectural elements — leaving the stone sharp and present while the world around it softened and dissolved. The blown highlights were kept. They were always part of it.

Twenty-four exposures. One day. One city that has stood for a thousand years, largely indifferent to both.



## The Long View

This is where you begin.

Not because it is the most dramatic view Oxford offers, but because it is where the city announces itself most plainly. Stone on three sides. A spire climbing into light that has already given up holding detail.

The cobbles in the foreground should anchor the image. On this day, in this heat, they dissolve instead. The Kentmere couldn't hold it. Neither could I.

The figures move through without looking up. That is the thing about Oxford that strikes you immediately as a visitor — everyone here has somewhere to be, or is pretending they do. The tourists photograph. The locals pass through. The stone watches both with equal indifference.

St Mary the Virgin has stood on this spot since the thirteenth century. The spire you see here was added in 1280. On the morning this frame was made, nobody in it was thinking about 1280.

That gap — between the permanence of what was built and the transience of who passes through it — is what this series is about.



Every city has its own shorthand. Its visual signature that tells you immediately where you are.

Oxford's is bicycles.

Not the bicycles themselves particularly — the makes, the models, the states of gentle disrepair — but the sheer accumulated weight of them. Leaning against every wall. Locked to every railing. Left in rows along lanes that have carried foot traffic since the medieval period.

Nobody here thinks twice about them. They are as permanent a feature of the streetscape as the stone they rest against.

This lane runs quietly away from the main corridors of the city. Two figures visible in the distance, neither in any hurry. The wall on the left belongs to one of the older colleges — its surface worn to a texture that no new building attempts to replicate. The ivy on the right has already begun dissolving into the light.

The bicycles are the sharpest things in the frame. Mundane objects, rendered precise. Everything else — the lane, the figures, the sky above — softens toward its edges.

That felt right.



MAGDALEN - STREET

North Oxford   
No loading  
No parking

## **Magdalen Street. Late morning.**

Three people, three directions, three different relationships with where they are going. The cyclist on the left leans into a turn. The figure with the backpack pushes forward. The third crosses the frame entirely, already halfway somewhere else.

None of them are looking at each other.

Oxford does this to people. The city is so dense with things worth looking at that its inhabitants develop a kind of selective blindness — a learned ability to move through extraordinary surroundings without registering them. The tourists look up. The locals look forward.

The trees above Magdalen Street are in full summer weight here, heavy with leaf, the light breaking through in the way that only happens on genuinely hot days when the air itself seems to slow. The Kentmere rendered them almost silver. Almost unreal.

The street sign holds its ground in the lower right. Sharp, readable, certain of itself. Everything around it — the figures, the light, the canopy overhead — is in some stage of passing through. That is the image. That is, more or less, the whole series.



The Radcliffe Camera was completed in 1749. It has been photographed approximately one million times since.

This is not an attempt to add to that record.

What interested me here was the absence. On a day when Oxford was full to its edges with people, Radcliffe Square was briefly, inexplicably quiet. The tourists were elsewhere for a moment. The students were inside. Only two bicycles remained, leaning against the railings with the casual permanence of things that have been left and forgotten.

The sign at the gate reads No Visitors Allowed. It has probably always read that. Oxford has always been, in some fundamental sense, a city that exists for people who are already inside it.

The dome holds every detail the film could give it. The carved stone, the columns, the darkened windows that reveal nothing. James Gibbs designed this building to be looked at from every angle. On this morning it had no audience. Only a camera, and two bicycles that weren't going anywhere.

The sky behind it is completely gone. Burned out by the heat and the film's limits. The building floats on white.

That felt accurate.



## **Everyone stops here.**

The Bridge of Sighs connects two parts of Hertford College across New College Lane. It was built in 1914, making it one of Oxford's younger landmarks — though you would not know it. It has the confidence of something much older.

It is named after the Bridge of Sighs in Venice, though the resemblance is loose. Oxford borrowed the romance of the name and applied it to something distinctly English — ornate but restrained, grand but collegiate. A bridge built not for prisoners but for students moving between buildings on a cold morning.

On this morning it had an audience.

The group beneath the arch has the particular stillness of people who have been told to gather and wait. A tour, perhaps. A guided walk. Someone with a lanyard and a practiced voice explaining the history to people from elsewhere who have come specifically to stand in this spot and look up.

The bridge doesn't acknowledge them. It hasn't acknowledged anyone in particular since 1914. The carved stonework at the apex holds every detail the film could find. Below it, the figures soften. The pavement whitens. The city beyond the arch retreats into light.

Above and below. Permanent and passing. The same photograph as all the others, seen from a different street.



## **Bath Place.**

A 17th century hotel. Telephone 01865 791812.

The sign has probably not changed in thirty years. Possibly longer. It has the confidence of a business that does not need to advertise because the people who know about it already know, and that is enough.

This lane does not appear on most maps of Oxford. It sits behind the main thoroughfares, connecting nothing in particular to nothing in particular, and it is all the better for it. The cobbles are original. The whitewashed walls have been whitewashed so many times that the surface has become its own kind of texture.

There are no people here. Just a passageway that curves gently away from view, a spire appearing at its end as if placed deliberately, and the heat pressing down on surfaces that have absorbed heat for four centuries.

The Orton effect found its natural subject in this frame. The white walls needed nowhere to go but white. The highlights didn't blow — they simply completed what was already there. At the end of the lane, barely visible, the tip of a church spire. Oxford cannot help itself. Turn down any alley, look through any gap between buildings, and something ancient will be there, waiting patiently at the end of it.



**This is the one.**

Not because it is the most dramatic, or the most technically accomplished, or the most obviously Oxford. But because it contains, in a single frame, everything this day was about.

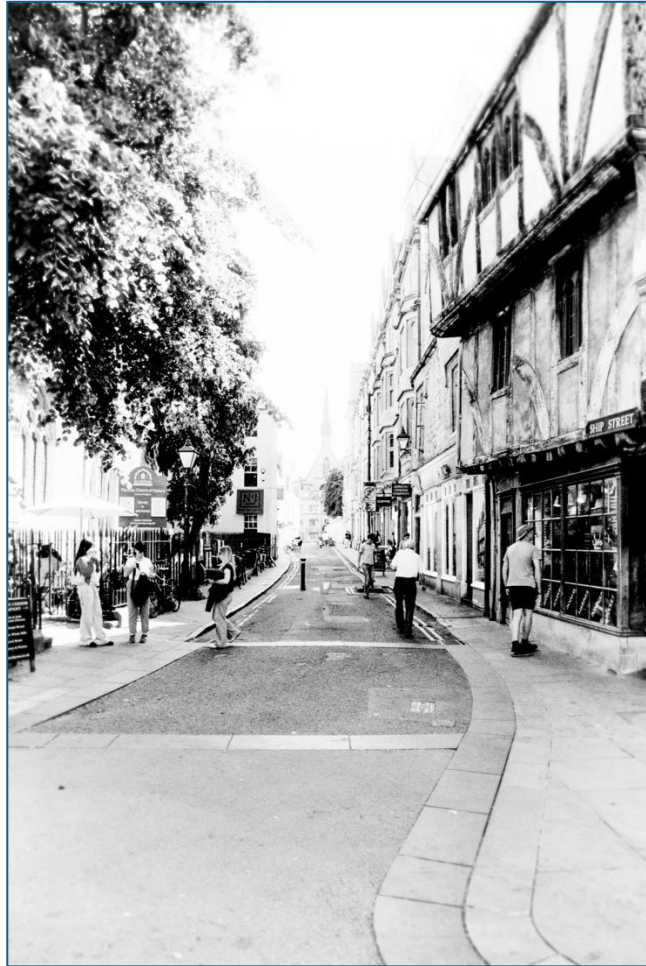
A square that has held this shape for three hundred years. Buildings on three sides that were built to impress and have not stopped. The Bridge of Sighs in the middle distance, reduced now to a detail. And one person, crossing.

No destination visible. No particular hurry. Just the act of moving through a space that was not built for moving through — that was built to be looked at, studied, revered. The figure doesn't appear to be doing any of those things. They are simply going somewhere else.

The pavement has dissolved almost entirely in the heat. The figure casts the only shadow with any weight. That shadow is more present than the person who made it.

I took this from a distance. I didn't want to get closer. Getting closer would have changed what it was.

Some photographs only exist at a certain distance. This is one of them.



## Ship Street.

Late morning, turning toward afternoon.

This is what Oxford actually looks like.

Not the squares and the domes and the famous bridges — though all of those are real enough. But this. A narrow street with a coffee shop and a cheese company and a timber-framed building that has stood here since the sixteenth century, currently advertising something on a chalkboard that nobody is reading.

People on both pavements, moving at the pace of a warm day with nowhere urgent to be. The double yellow lines running down the centre of the road, insisting that this is still a functioning street in a functioning city, not a museum exhibit.

And at the end of it, where the buildings narrow to a point and the light takes over completely, another spire. Of course. There is always another spire.

Oxford does not resolve. You do not reach the end of it and feel that you have understood it. You walk its streets for a day, use twenty-four frames of film trying to hold something of it, and come away with the impression of a city that was here long before you arrived and will be here long after you have gone.

The stone stays. The light stays. Everything else passes through.

## A Note on the Making

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One Roll in Oxford was made on a single day in the summer of 2025. Twenty-four exposures on Kentmere 200, shot at box speed through a Canon 300V and a 24-70mm EF L series lens. The film was developed in Rodinal at 1:25 for ten minutes. The negatives were scanned on a Canon R5 with a Sigma 105mm macro lens at f8, over a white box lightpad.

The blown highlights were not corrected. The selective Orton effect was applied in Photoshop and deliberately removed from the architectural elements — leaving the stone present and the world around it dissolving. What you have seen in these pages is close to what the film gave back.

This zine forms part of the wider photographic work and ongoing archive at [FineArtPics](#).

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Buildings • People • Light • Contrast

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