

Medieval to modern

Oxford, home to England's oldest university, is shaking off its dusty image, writes **Charlotte Francis**.



Just 90 minutes from London, one of Britain's most famous university cities is undergoing something of a transformation. Forget *Midsomer Murders* and grumpy detectives cruising rural lanes in antique Jaguars – modern-day Oxford has a little of everything, from croquet to cocktails, pubs to punting and hippie to happening.

While tradition still holds sway in the historic heart of Oxford, with its medieval college cloisters, pouting gargoyles and walled gardens, the city is drawing in the young and affluent from the nearby capital as heritage buildings and commercial spaces are given a new lease of life.

Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver recently revamped the historic Cock and Camel pub into Jamie's Italian, with no-frills classics served up in a bold, industrial-style space. It is the first of a planned nationwide chain and locals have welcomed the arrival of affordable European food to the usually not-so-smart side of town. The upmarket eateries of trendy Jericho, in the city's northwest, now have some competition.

Oxford's historic hotels, such as the Old Bank and the Old Parsonage, celebrate the city's heritage with a contemporary twist. Next to Oxford Castle, luxury hotel Malmaison has been converted from a prison; the building itself dates back to 1071. Guests can relax in a room (converted from three cells) complete with barred windows, studded door and all mod cons.

In a similar fusion of past and present, the newly opened O3 Gallery, in the castle complex, makes good use of the circular stone walls and flagstone floors to display the latest in regional art.

With hearty brasserie food, art, music and workshops, The Jam Factory (www.thejamfactoryoxford.com), housed in the rustic, red-bricked erstwhile Frank Cooper's Oxford Marmalade Factory, has become a lively hub of the local arts scene, while Modern Art Oxford (www.modernartoxford.org.uk) in Pembroke Street has attracted some of the best shows outside London, including those by Tracey Emin and other Saatchi Gallery protégés. Even The Ashmolean (www.ashmolean.org), the world's oldest public museum, is modernising. Out goes the 1845 building with its glass case exhibits and in comes the 2009 rebuild, with 39 state-of-the-art galleries topped off with a rooftop restaurant with dreamy spire views.

Not all attempts to move Oxford into the 21st century are finding favour: Walton Street's Jericho Tavern, where local band Radiohead performed their first gig, has been jazzed up and many, including members of the band, claim it has lost its character.

The city has a reputation for great student bands and live music, much of which can be traced to Cowley Road. Here, The Bullingdon Arms, know as the Bully, is popular for blues on Monday nights and the nearby Carling Academy, the biggest music venue in the city, attracts national touring bands but without London's cost or queues.

Oxford's nightlife is not all rock 'n' roll, though – it ranges from quiet, ancient beer-sipping pubs and elegant new wine bars to pulsating night clubs. Give the western district of Park End Street a miss unless you like student dance parties and Generation Y binge-drinking. Attracting a more eclectic crowd, Po Na Na,

Left and above: old meets new in Oxford at the Malmaison hotel housed in a 937-year-old building. Top: the Old Parsonage dates back to 1660.

in Magdalen Street, is smaller and has a laid-back vibe, as does Moroccan-style Baba, on Cowley Road. For chilled sophistication, Raoul's in Walton Street steals the show with its extensive cocktail menu and 1960s style decor.

Once a 14th-century coffee house, the Vaults and Garden Cafe, overlooking the Radcliffe Camera, home to the Radcliffe Science Library, is alive with chatter and buzz on weekday mornings and all through the weekend. Served by dynamic eco-entrepreneur Will Pouget, greenies, bright young things, academics and tourists gather over cups of Fair Trade coffee and organic dishes made with locally sourced produce.

"Oxford is much less stuffy than it was," says Pouget. "It's becoming more funky and experimental with more movement across social and academic divides. Once you get here, it's hard to leave."

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) and British Airways (www.britishairways.com) fly from Hong Kong to London daily. Trains to Oxford run regularly from London Paddington (www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk) as do buses from central London (www.oxfordtube.com).