

Press Release

Historic re-enactment of ancient River Thames ceremony in Oxford

On Monday 4 October 2021, an ancient Oxford ceremony was enacted by the River Thames for the first time since 1984. At the Free Water Stone, which marks the historical extent of the city's fishing rights a short distance above Iffley Lock, the Lord Mayor of Oxford, Mark Lygo, disembarked to exchange greetings with the symbolic leader of an obscure, jocular branch of the Freeman of Oxford. Historically, this individual was always a waterman, dubbed the King of the Sclavonians, but times change, and this year, for the first time ever – there are suggestions that the concept may date back to the Saxon period – the Freeman were represented by a Queen, Susanna Pressel, a former Lord Mayor herself.

The event was made all the more noticeable to pedestrians on the Thames Path and boaters on the river by the traditional accompaniment provided by a trio of Oxford Waits musicians. A highlight was a performance of a song which the Oxford photographer Henry Taunt composed after observing the ceremony in 1892.

Historically this symbolic meeting at the Free Water Stone constituted a detour from the once-regular circuit of the entire boundary of the city by successive Mayors since at least the 14th century. Because most of the boundary, also known as the franchise or liberty, was defined by rivers – the Thames, its side-streams and the Cherwell – watermen were crucial to the success of the day, both in providing boats as well as planks to cross the myriad streams and ditches to the west of Oxford. Obstacles of this kind led one Victorian participant to describe the day as 'an irregular steeple-chase around the entire environs of Oxford'. Probably because of the conveniently positioned waterside pubs en route, another summed it up more succinctly as 'irresponsible jollity'.

Remarkably, a short section of the boundary, marked by a side-stream of the Thames known as Hogacre Ditch, has remained unaltered since the earliest known accounts. This stretch was walked by the Lord Mayor and others on their return from the Free Water Stone as far as a boundary stone erected at the village of North (or Ferry) Hinksey after the last such commemoration in 1984.

This year's event coincided with the publication by the Museum of Oxford of an illustrated booklet by Oxford local historian Mark Davies: *What a Liberty! Memorable Moments along Oxford's Ancient Ridden Boundaries*. The Museum reopens for the first time in several years on Monday 11 October 2021, after a major Heritage Lottery-funded refurbishment.