

# Cooking up the tale of Cowley Road

Rather than having to sail the seven seas to sample the world's exotic cuisines, they can be found conveniently compressed into just over seven hundred meters on a single Oxford street, writes **Richard O Smith**

**O**n the Cowley Road it is possible to taste most of our planet's culinary exotica and the road's status as a destination for the curiously tastebudded is celebrated in a new book by Martin Stott, a resident of the street for 35 years.

*The Cowley Road Cookbook* is much more than just the mere cookbook the title implies as it charts the food history of one of Oxford's most famous streets. This is achieved by focusing on how the unfamiliarly flavoursome began to arrive from overseas in eateries and grocers' shops along the same street just over 50 years ago.

Once an unremarkable sprawl of shops indistinguishable from most streets, the transition of the road occurred in the early 1960s and quickly gathered momentum. Oxford can claim the distinction of having one of the UK's first Indian restaurants

outside of London when the Taj Mahal opened in 1937 (finally closing 2010).

By 1962 the Cowley Road had its first Indian – named The Himalay. Two years earlier the first Chinese restaurant, The Kumling, had arrived on the street – quickly followed by another, The Pagoda, in 1962. A street offering three such colourful restaurants, augmented with fledgling foreign delis, would have been a novelty in monochrome early 1960s Britain.

Today it is hard to compute the sheer culinary radicalness of such new dining experiences. After all Britain was a nation of unadventurous eaters and mainly greeted such untried extrinsic gastronomy with several heaped tablespoons of suspicion. Yet food is a proven bridge between cultures, and the British soon discovered a liking for this thrillingly new cuisine.

By the turn of the last century the Cowley Road boasted a choice of nine Indian restaurants. Their number has subsequently dwindled. However the

rising interest in Nepalese food has augmented the street's curry house count – contributing three more. Offering a Nepalese spin on the traditional curry, two of these new establishments offer proof of both food evolution and speedy assimilation, by listing "Chicken Cowley" on their menus!

Although Cowley Road cuisine is well-represented by the popular Asian "curry countries", one of its earliest and arguably strongest continental influences remained Italian. Giuseppe "Joe" Arcucci and his wife Anna exchanged the Capri sun in the 1950s for East Oxford drizzle.

Opening the architecturally distinctive wood-clad La Capannina restaurant, their daughter Carmelina recalls in *The Cowley Road Cookbook*: "When we opened you couldn't buy a pepper and nobody knew what an aubergine was."

For a famously educated city, Oxford's culinary ignorance was glaring. "There is a strong tradition of Italian influence in the Cowley

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Road – the Caprese in England have focused on Oxford,” Stott confirmed.

Albeit on a smaller scale in Oxford, this “coffee shop colonising” replicates the longstanding tradition of Italians settling in South Wales mining communities, ensuring the Welsh had access to decent coffee decades before the High Street cappuccino chains arrived elsewhere in the UK in the 90s.

There is a cornucopia of international foods available on the street. Diners can opt to try Afghanistani, Algerian, Albanian – and that’s just the A’s. A veritable United Nations of cuisine. In all there are currently 63 cafes, restaurants and food stores on the Cowley Road, with another 13 in immediate proximity just off the main strip. That is a lot of choice. And it offers the opportunity to dine in a different country each evening without leaving OX4.

Fittingly for the chronicler of so many nationalities, Stott is a geographer by academic discipline, having read the subject as an undergrad at Mansfield College. Brought up in Wootton near Woodstock – where his 93-year old mother Clare still lives – he credits his foody upbringing to his parents. Both worked at Stoke Mandeville hospital where “they met over the beds” when treating polio patients.

“I learnt to cook through my parents,” he informs me. “My father Frank was a keen bread maker and vegetable grower. He gave me the confidence to cook and not microwave everything.”

As Stott’s book makes clear, there is no requirement to stab the film on a microwave meal again if you live within accessible proximity to the Cowley Road.

Both the social and physical history of the street is documented in the book. There are fascinating photos of the imposingly grand Cowley Workhouse casting its sinister shadows – alongside a 1920s butchers covered from roofline to doorstep with row upon row of slaughtered Xmas turkeys dangling



*Oxford Co-op bread delivery van 1924 in East Oxford*

in the refrigerating December cold.

Amazingly large swathes of the Cowley Road remained pastoral by the 1920s, proven by a photograph of a shepherd attending his flock. Stott’s work makes good reference of Annie Skinner’s excellent 2005 book *Cowley Road: A History*.

There is also the story – and crucially

the recipe – of the Oxford Sausage. Invented in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the savoury snack went viral in 1861 after being described by Mrs Beeton as “the ideal sausage” in her multi-million bestseller *Book of Household Management*.

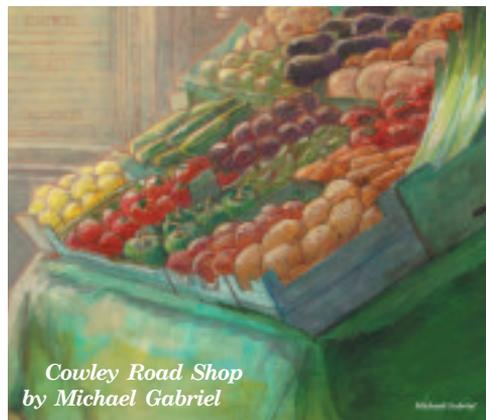
Oxford’s very first supermarket opened its doors on the Cowley Road in 1951 to mainly bewildered customers. Helping yourself to pre-wrapped items represented a revolutionary behavioural change difficult to re-imagine today.

The smoothly named Bobby Silk had returned from a recent trip to the States convinced he had just seen the future of shopping. Replicating the supermarket system witnessed in the USA, he opened Silk’s Self Service Stores. The name was designed to offer a what-to-do prompt for customers. The ensuing decades, it has to be said, did rather prove his vision correct.

Tesco founder Jack Cohen knew Bobby Silk and reportedly reassured him that Tesco would defer on opening a store providing competition in the area. This promise was kept until 1962 when the current Tesco was opened on the Cowley Road. Although the company was well established before the Second World War, by the time Tesco moved into Oxford they only owned around two hundred shops nationwide, compared to its portfolio today of over 3,600 UK stores.

As Tesco proves, not every Cowley Road food shop is necessarily exotic or continental in origin. Traditional fish and chip shop Simon’s has been present on the street from the 1940s and still fries today.

Another quintessentially British restaurant – marking strikingly the changes in food culture in only a few quick decades – was the Municipal Restaurant. As the name suggests, this was one of two restaurants owned and



*Cowley Road Shop by Michael Gabriel*



*Gordon Thompson in Bucklers Fish Shop early 80s*

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run in the city by Oxford's council. Before its closure in 1974 this popular state-owned eatery, instigated in war time, provided "cheap and cheerful" sustenance.

Chatting with Stott, he agrees that the Municipal Restaurant feels like it belongs to a completely different era – yet he recalls eating there himself. It is a reminder of the unstoppable pace of retail evolution.

Walking along the Cowley Road together we notice an Asian shop has changed its name and frontage within 48 hours! Nearby the boarded up Cowley Road institution Excelsior remains clearly visible – a café that once boasted "Open until 10.40pm!" to attract revellers.

Greek Cypriot owner Andreas Koumi opened the establishment in 1961 and Stott witnessed the same proprietor departing his café for the final time in 2014 on Koumi's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Excelsior's extremely cheap yet very edible food attracted a clientele ranging from Rick Stein (who came regularly to sample the moussaka whilst an undergraduate at New College) to "those who are often on the margins of society, even by Cowley Road standards!"

The road's culinary history is date-stamped by recipes – ranging from a 13<sup>th</sup> Century pottage (that would likely have been served to pilgrims on route to St Bartlemas) to 21<sup>st</sup> century victuals – with all intervening centuries covered. Indeed the recipes deliberately often stick to only a few ingredients – all available on the book's eponymous road.

Complicated flavours are sought from simple recipes. "I believe in keeping things simple and straightforward so people do not get intimidated," Stott told me. "Cooking as theatrical performance is okay but won't be done more than a few times a year." However, Stott insists he is devoid of the ambition "to be a chef in the making. I know my limitations!"

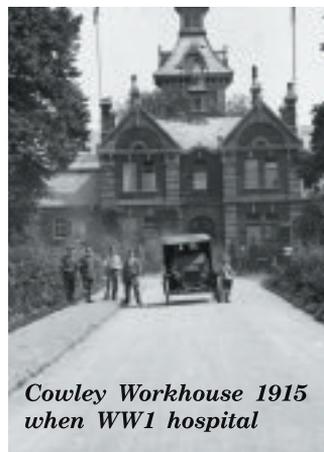
However he has considerable experience of food and is clearly enthused by the nearby allotment he has loyally tended for decades. His first job was in catering – at the Bear in Woodstock where, as a teenager, he was given the decidedly unglamorous task of skinning every hare and rabbit that arrived in the hotel's gamey kitchen.

Published by Signal Books – an Oxford publishing house fittingly located an Asian scone's throw from the Cowley Road – *The Cowley Road Cookbook* utilises considerable local literary expertise.

Project orchestrator James Harrison of Oxfordfolio – a bespoke book designer, book packager and book maker (two words, not one) – took on "the sweaty process" of design and layout alongside graphic designer Nick Withers. His intention, Harrison informs me, was "to tell the history of the street rather than just be a recipe book." Stott concurs: "It's significantly more than a cookbook. It's



Author **Martin Stott**  
on Cowley Road



*Cowley Workhouse 1915  
when WW1 hospital*



*Headington Quarry  
sheep roast 1899*

about drawing out the story of an area through food. Cowley Road is a complex combination of physical form and the imprint left by various overlapping and intermingling waves of migration: pilgrims, traders, scholars, refugees, immigrants, residents and visitors upon a street that has become over time one of the most vibrant, eclectic and diverse in England."

Recognising that, author Stott required a committed artist on board to deliver the book's obvious potential, Harrison brokered an introduction between author and painter Michael Gabriel.

After studying at the Massachusetts College of Art and The Ruskin School of Drawing, Gabriel worked as an animator on feature films *The Snowman* and Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. His seventy vivid illustrations catch the colour of the Cowley Road and its tempting foodstuffs – where palette meets palate!

Since 2009 Gabriel has been the visual artist-in-residence at Oxford Playhouse. A visit to Gabriel's latest Playhouse exhibition, coupled with seeing the artist's food depictions in the recently televised *The Snowman and The Snowdog*, convinced James Harrison

to recruit Gabriel to the project.

Gabriel informed me about his involvement: "The subject was perfect for my capacity as a painter [enabling] me to specialise in pictures that have atmosphere – not just prosaic pictures of food." Indeed the atmosphere of Cowley Road is neatly captured in a fusion of Gabriel's acrylics washes, Stott's text and vision and Harrison's layout and design. "Michael's pictures really do repay return looks," Stott informs me, proclaiming his favourite as "the picture of Bartlemas chapel."

I ask Stott a final question. "So, if you're on Death Row – for a crime you didn't commit, obviously – what would you request as your final meal?" Whilst Stott is pondering the question, I also ask what is his guilty food pleasure? The answer, he announces, is the same to both questions: "Gooseberry fool and a glass of port." He shouldn't have much trouble getting either on the Cowley Road. **LE**

• *The Cowley Road Cookbook* (£14.99) is published by Signal Books.

Martin Stott is signing copies at Blackwells, Oxford on December 10.