

# Handbook for Travellers in Oxfordshire

## Some Reviews of the *Handbook*

This was published in 1894, the result of his travels around the county in the 1880s with his undergraduate friends and with members of the Noble family. At the same time, he wrote a short poem – *Dedication for Murray's Guide* – probably to one of the latter.

Dear Lady, you whose praise I rate  
A guerdon richer far than gold:  
Your kindness makes me over bold  
To bring this tribute to your gate.

For still I know your artist mind  
Will breathe upon the dried-up bones,  
Will hear the voices of the stones  
And find a charm where some are blind.

A dull red guide-book, times and trains,  
Hotels and roads and points of view,  
And where to go and what to "do",  
How most to see with smallest pains.

So haply from the Golden Gate  
The page shall catch some transient rays,  
Some far-off glow of Oxford days,  
Sweet summer days of '88.

Certainly, he took pains over the preparation of the book, as he admitted in his Preface: "*Care has been taken to make this Handbook as trustworthy as may be, and every place described has been personally visited by the Editor, most of them many times*".

**Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch** referred to "Murray's excellent *Handbook of Oxfordshire*" in a 1914 lecture. One more recent commentator, **Dr. Bernard Jones**, has remarked that, to a modern reader, the book is "*an elegy upon a lost world*". **Kenneth Warren**, Falkner's biographer, argues that the Handbook [together with Falkner's History of the county] shows "*his sympathetic appreciation of scenery, and, inevitably, amidst all his erudition, his idiosyncrasies, prejudices and lively sense of humour*".

Although Falkner commented that at Burford Priory – "*the whole scene wears an air of indescribable romance*", he still engineered two stanzas of his own "*2nd Ballade of Burford*" into his subsequent description!

He was not enamoured with most of the mid/late nineteenth century "*improvements*" to earlier church buildings: at Westwell, just south of Burford, he tartly remarked that "*the Church... suffered restoration in 1869, when it was thought necessary to add a W. portion to the nave*", whilst at nearby Holwell "*an ugly erection of 1842 takes the place of an aisleless Norm. church*". Chipping Norton's church was "*too zealously restored*", and the recent work at Thame left "*something to be desired*".

He could wax lyrical about some Oxford Colleges: "*Whatever else is left unseen in Oxford, Magdalen should be seen... wrapt about with an ineffable charm... [it]... has a beauty entirely her own, perfect, and self-contained... She is the very embodiment and expression in stone of all that is highest in Oxford culture*". However, he was damning of his own college, Hertford: "*...the mean little chapel... [and] the buildings unfortunately possess nothing of the slightest interest*". Reading, just across the border, was dismissed as possessing "*few objects of antiquarian interest, being now chiefly remarkable for its Gaol, for Huntley and Palmer's manufacture of biscuits, and Sutton's seed establishment*".