

OXFORD CIVIC SOCIETY – SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
To accompany the 100th circulation of the Society's newsletter, March 2005

“In the beginning ..” by James Stevens Curl

In the 1960s it was more than apparent that roads and motor-vehicles were regarded in official bureaucratic circles as much more important than the fabric of towns and cities, and were accommodated at the cost of wrecking huge swathes of urban fabric and displacing whole communities. Relativism was on the increase everywhere, and concepts of beauty, historical importance, agreeable townscape, and aesthetically pleasing environments were being ignored (you cannot measure beauty or aesthetic excellence by means of cost-benefit analysis, so those aspects were always left out of the equation). Urban deserts were being created (which have now become huge problems in themselves).

Some of us, deeply worried about this, and by what I termed ‘The Erosion of Oxford’ (meaning the creeping destruction of the urban fabric, including street-furniture, road-signs, windows, and buildings), determined to establish a Civic Society as a pressure-group, partly to educate the public and act as a focus for concerns, and partly to tackle issues as they arose (or before they became menacing). The catalyst was the horrific proposal to impose upon Oxford a road-plan that would have been immensely destructive. Believing that towns and cities should be places to be lived in and enjoyed, rather than wrecked by obsessions concerning traffic -densities and -flows, we formed the Society (not without opposition), with the intentions of bringing fresh ideas and common sense to causes of conservation, and of encouraging a more enlightened approach to urban issues.



Professor Emeritus James Stevens Curl

We formed a working-party which produced the booklet *Let's LIVE in Oxford* (1970). This document set out our ideas for a less destructive plan, more concerned with traffic-management and the conservation of the city *and its suburbs* (including the maintenance of viable communities) than were the official schemes. In 1977 my own *The Erosion of Oxford* came out, based on a series of articles I had written for *The Oxford Mail* (with the support of the then Editor, Mark Barrington-Ward). Those articles (and the book) contained a whole series of observations on destruction and how it might be reversed, pleas for a more sensitive approach to Oxford's built fabric, urban spaces, settings, and landscapes within and around the city. Concerns, such as the conservation of Oxford's remarkable silhouette or skyline, were voiced, and need to be voiced again, as much damage has been done to it. We repeatedly observed the seemingly arbitrary destruction of the urban environment: nothing appeared to be properly thought out, and it looked as though departments did not talk to each other when dreaming up their next moves.

I was the Civic Society's first Chairman, and am proud of the Society's achievements in those far-off days, when much time was expended for altruistic reasons of civic concern. After I was appointed Architectural Editor of the *Survey of London* I was obliged to resign, though I occasionally gave talks to the Society and helped when possible. My move to Scotland in connection with European Architectural Heritage Year 1975 weakened my links with Oxford, although Richard Blackwell backed the publication of *The Erosion of Oxford* and consulted me about the new shop-front of Blackwell's bookshop in The Broad which is there today.

I love Oxford, but return visits have not always raised the spirits. Erosion continues, some of the creations of the 1950s and 1960s have not aged gracefully, and the countryside around the city looks more grubby and tired. There is much that is an indictment of 20th-century architecture and planning when compared, for example, with the rich urban fabric that extends from the Turl down to Magdalen Bridge. It is clearly up to a new generation to give its support and energies to a Society that is still much needed.

Professor Emeritus James Stevens Curl was elected Chairman in 1969. His Oxford Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture will be published in 2005, as well as The Egyptian Revival, and Victorian Architecture. (Editor)

The Society's first known Newsletter circulation to members:-

Oxford Civic Society

NEWSLETTER August 1970

Members will know from the local Press that the Society was one of the objectors at the Public Inquiry into the Oxford Development Plan, which opened on 16 June. We were fortunate enough to be represented by Mr. K. J. Farrow MA, BCL, Barrister-at-law, who generously gave his services without a fee. Our chief witness was Mr Leslie Smith, General Manager of Leicester City Transport. The Public Inquiry was adjourned on 13 July, because of the illness of the Inspector, before the Oxford Civic Society's case was completed. It has just been announced that a new Inquiry will probably start on 2 November, under another Inspector.

We would remind members that our booklet on the Oxford Road Plan, Let's LIVE in Oxford, is still available at central newsagents or from the Secretary, price 3/6d.

The Society has also been active to prevent the demolition by the City Council of the 17th century houses in Charles Street, St Ebbe's. A public inquiry is now to be held to decide the fate of these listed buildings, thanks in part to our efforts. We have also been concerned with the designs of the Bridewell Square development, and the proposed hotels at Folly Bridge.

The Committee has arranged two meetings for the early autumn :

Saturday 3 October Critical Walk with the Friends of Iffley Village. Meet at 6.30 pm in Iffley Turn, by the bus stop for city centre-bound buses from Rose Hill. Coffee and discussion to follow, as guests of the Friends.

Tuesday 27 October General Meeting at Friends Meeting House, St Giles, 8.15 pm. At this meeting we hope to plan policy and activities for the coming year. The Committee needs more than your subscription, it needs your active support and opinions, and, if possible, some of your time. Please make a special effort to attend this meeting. If you cannot come, please write to us with offers of help and ideas for the future.

The Secretary (*who was then Gerard Turner – Editor*)
46 Hamilton Road
Oxford

Recollections of a Founder Member, by Vic Berry

Shortly after moving from London to Oxford in 1967, I was asked by a colleague where I was living. When I told him that I had bought a house in North Oxford, he enquired whether I was aware of proposals to build a new road close by. This filled me with horror as no such scheme had been drawn to my attention through the normal searches carried out by my Solicitor. Would this be my first experience of planning blight?

Further enquiries quickly established that the whole of Oxford was to be affected by new roads and that areas of housing, if they weren't to be demolished, would be blighted by the threat of such schemes.

The City Council had employed Consultants to draw up traffic plans without any consideration as to what might occupy the spaces between the roads. Armed with the recommendations of their consultants the City Council churned out many Development Plan options with no regard to the quality of the environment, amenity or conservations and no consideration of the long term impact these proposals would have on residential areas. The 17th century houses in Charles Street were to be demolished to make way for a service road to the new commercial centre. Fortunately these houses were spared under later amendments. The Oxford Preservation Trust purchased the terrace to guarantee its future as part of the city landscape.



Current OCS member, Vic Berry

The road proposals were horrendous. A large spine road was to be constructed from the Peartree roundabout to the one at the south end of Abingdon Road, adjacent to the railway line. A great deal of lobbying had convinced the Council that the inner relief road, that was to be in a cutting through Christchurch Meadow, would be disastrous. In effect, it was simply moved a little further south through Eastwyke Farm. Other new roads were planned parallel to the Botley Road and cutting east to west through North Oxford.

No consideration was given to improving the public transport system – **these were truly desperate times.**

Whilst a Public Inquiry was planned for 16th June 1970, no serious attempt had been made by the Council to inform the public. Opposition was growing more vehement by the day, but it was still very fragmented. There was an urgent need for a co-ordinating group. Fortunately a small, very articulate and dedicated group came together to warn the citizens of Oxford of the catastrophe that was upon them and to identify feasible alternatives that were cheaper and would not devastate the city.

Oxford Civic Society was born on 27th November 1969.

A small working group was deputed to produce a booklet setting out the basic flaws of the line taken by the Planners and to put forward proposals that would improve the quality of the environment and amenity, whilst preserving that special character that is Oxford's – known and admired throughout the world. The booklet's title '*Let's LIVE in Oxford*' should remain the fundamental driving ambition of the Civic Society to this day. The views and aspirations it contained were dynamite and changed forever the approach to planning in Oxford and many other cities in Britain.

A friend, Albert Ramsay, and I went along to the inaugural meeting of the Society and were truly inspired by the likes of Helen and Gerard Turner, James Curl, Dame Penelope Jessel, John Barrow and many others. Albert soon came to the view that one way to make sure that changes were made was to join the City Council. He did just that, becoming an outstanding Labour Councillor and Chairman of the Planning Committee and the driving force behind the City Council's "Balanced Transport Policy", which embraced the concepts of bus lanes with Park and Ride car parks on the outskirts of the City – all proposals that had been explored in '*Let's LIVE in Oxford*'. Whilst other projects were piloted for bus lanes in other cities, it was in Oxford that a comprehensive policy for the motor car and public transport was first put into practice.

There is so much work still to be done – the Civic Society deserves our long-term and active support.

“The number at the top of our newsletters is there at the request of the British Library’s UK National Series Data Centre (ISSN : International Standard Serial Numbers). In 1975 we were requested to send copies of back numbers to the British Library and a copy of each issue also goes to the Bodleian, to Cambridge University Library and to the National Library of Scotland (as well as to Oxford’s Central Library which is an Associate Member of the Civic Society).”

An excerpt from the Society’s Newsletter of September 1977, the year in which serial numbering was first introduced. Contributed by Mrs Christine Butler, Oxford Civic Society Archivist.

Oxford Civic Society Publications

Copies held within the Society’s archives:-

Oxford Castle, a handbill for Environment Week 1985, by Joan Wheare 1985
Oxford Castle, a promotional leaflet by David Sturdy n.d.

Supplements to previous Newsletters:-

Motorways in the News Again – a supplementary leaflet to Newsletter no. 18 1978
Conservation Area Advisory Committees – a special report with Newsletter no. 19 1978
The M40 Motorway – a supplementary leaflet to Newsletter no. 26 1980
M40 Public Enquiry – a supplement to Newsletter no. 34 1983
Notes about Encroachment on Common Land – a supplement to Newsletter no. 37 1984

Available at The Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, Central Library, Westgate:-

Lets LIVE in Oxford, a study of the road plan, co-written by OCS members 1970
Summertown – an integrated community, by Vic Berry 1971
Street lighting in Oxford, by Thomas Braun 1971
Oxfords Waterways, a collaboration by Oxford Waterways Action Group 1974
Christchurch Meadow (2 walks), a leaflet by Mavis Batey 1981
Port Meadow (updated in 1990), a leaflet by Alison McDonald 1984
Transport & the Future of Oxford, edited by Edwin Townsend Coles 2000

Available at meetings for £12 or by mail order for £14 (incl p&p) from Oxford Civic Society, 21 Walton Street, OX1 2HQ:-

Visions for Oxford in the 21st Century, a diverse collection of essays 2003

Available to members by annual subscription:-

Newsletters, three issues per year distributed each March, July and November

Then, as now ...

The aims and objectives of *Oxford Civic Society* at its inauguration in 1969 are clearly stated in the records of that time as being ■ “ *to encourage citizens to express their views on their city* ■ *to convey the opinions of citizens on town planning and services to the authorities* ■ *to cooperate with local amenity societies and community groups* ■ *to preserve the best in our environment from the menace of piecemeal planning, traffic, noise and pollution* ■ *to ensure that new developments are suited to the needs of people and not to administrative convenience or commercial greed* ”.

Today, with a growing membership of over 900 and some thirty-five years after its foundation, the Society vigorously pursues an active and varied agenda in pursuit of each one of those aims under the banner headline of ***Protecting Our Heritage and Shaping Our Future***. That is why it is as appropriate today as it was in August 1970 to re-emphasise that “*The Society needs more than your subscription; it needs your active support and opinions, and, if possible, some of your time.*” ***Please let us know if you can spare some time to join one of our work groups, on an occasional or a regular basis. Thank you.***

Tony Joyce
Chairman, Oxford Civic Society