

Forty Years of Oxford Planning: what has it achieved, and what next?

I offered to give this talk since the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of Oxford Civic Society seemed a good moment to examine again what has been achieved by all the effort that has gone into Oxford town planning since the war, particularly in the last forty years. It also seems a good moment to look, against that background, at the issues we face now since the future of Oxford and the area round it until 2026 is being determined through decisions on the South-East Plan, the successor to Oxfordshire county council's structure plan, and on the city's Core Strategy, the successor to the current local plan.

Oxford Civic Society owes its foundation in November 1969 to three people - James Stevens Curl, the late Helen Turner and her husband Gerard Turner. (I apologise in advance that I will not tonight mention many others who have contributed to the society's work since I want to discuss the planning issues that the society has faced rather than the history of the society as such.)

They founded it for two reasons. They were outraged at the acceptance by many - including, I am sorry to say, the Oxford Preservation Trust and myself as Editor of the Oxford Mail - of what they rightly saw as destructive, traffic-attracting proposals for inner relief roads. They were also distressed by failures of planning in the city, such as the wholesale clearance of St Ebbe's and the creation of an unrelated jumble of buildings at the centre of Blackbird Leys, and at the loss of small but essential elements in the historic streetscape. This aspect was summed up in the title of a book by Prof Curl, partly based on articles he had written for the Oxford Mail under the pseudonym Adytum, *The Erosion of Oxford*, and they were challenges the Civic Society was to take up.

I will begin with the biggest issue of all - how to handle the traffic pouring through the city centre, which also happens to be the one on which the fledgling Civic Society made perhaps its most important single contribution to the welfare of the city. (A tribute I can pay with complete impartiality since I was not at first convinced that its solution of Park and Ride would work without at least some city centre road-building.)

As you know, Oxford as a city is essentially a crossroads built on a tongue of land between two rivers which have to be crossed to go east, west, or south. The advantage is that its marvellous historic core has mostly been separated from later development by these waterways and by the green meadows that they flood. Only on the north is there no bridge to cross, and there Victorian North Oxford was conceived on a generous scale. The disadvantage, as the city grew, has been that the main shops, the town hall, and the railway station were in the western half of Oxford while most of the houses built for the families of workers in the expanding car industry at Cowley were in the eastern half. For long the only link between them was across Magdalen Bridge which funnelled traffic along the High, the city's finest street, through the heart of the historic university area.

The congestion was further aggravated because at the other end of the High Street at Carfax, the historic crossroads where Oxford's first traffic lights were installed in 1934, east-west traffic crossed the path of north-south traffic, causing long lines of stationary vehicles, belching fumes, to form in High Street, Queen Street, Cornmarket and St Aldate's.

There was general agreement about the first steps which were to take out long distance through traffic by completing the outer bypass ring, begun before the war, and to provide intermediate links between neighbourhoods, crossing the Cherwell near Marston Ferry and the Thames at Donnington Bridge. (The Oxford experience does not show that all road-building is self-defeating. Traffic restraint and road-building were both required.) But from 1941 until 1972 there was a long drawn-out dispute, which became notorious not only nationally but

internationally, about where to build the inner relief roads then thought to be essential to take the traffic out of the High Street and Cornmarket and improve connections to the station. Oxford was considered so important a national treasure that its road problems were even discussed by the Cabinet. I want to try to show you as quickly as I can what the policy assumptions were with which the Civic Society had to contend, and why its contribution mattered so much.

Although the conflict is remembered as being about a road across Christ Church Meadow, the plans went much wider, embracing the then popular planning concept of an inner ring road, later modified to three-quarters of a ring, which now seem astonishingly destructive. However, the focus was on relieving the High Street. Dr Thomas Sharp, who prepared the first professional plan for the city published as *Oxford Replanned* in 1948, called the north side of the High Street "the greatest and most typical work of art that England possesses." The argument was whether the relief road for the High should cross Christ Church Meadow - either as a riverside boulevard, or close to the college, or across the middle - or take a longer, more time-consuming and costlier route, involving two crossings of the Thames, through Eastwyke Farm where the Oxford Spires Four Pillars Hotel now is.

Another strand in the debate, still relevant today, was whether, once the proposed relief road for the High had been built, to force vehicles to use it by closing either Magdalen Bridge or the eastern end of the High to all through traffic except some buses, clearing the traffic out of the historic university area under what became known as "the precinct policy."

What may surprise you now is that for almost the whole of this long drawn-out battle, lasting over 30 years, the dominating assumption was that any inner relief road, if it was to attract motorists and be accepted by the public, had to be nearly as convenient in terms of journey time as the road it replaced. When an inquiry at large into all possible road schemes was held in 1961, arguments about journey times governed the decision of the Inspector, Sir Frederick Armer.

Characteristically, Dr Sharp took the search for a short journey to extremes. In *Oxford Replanned*, which is still well worth reading, he combined a pioneering and outstandingly sensitive analysis of the city's historic townscape with a breathtaking ruthlessness in proposing what he considered the right answers to the city's problems.

At the inquiry he supported the road closest in to Christ Church and Merton (as shown in Scheme B, Fig 3) with a spur to the High Street up Rose Lane past the Botanic Garden. This was based on a road which Duncan Sandys, the founder of the Civic Trust, had as Minister of Town and Country Planning, tried to order the council to build, combined with closing Magdalen Bridge, as "the only way to save a priceless heritage of culture and beauty." Dr Sharp himself had originally proposed a road even closer to the colleges.

The city council, initially divided, favoured a compromise route across the middle of the Meadow. The Oxford Preservation Trust and Oxford University officially supported the longer Eastwyke Farm route but with many dissenters, including at one moment its Vice-Chancellor, A H Smith, who was a keen supporter of the precinct policy and shared the then common belief that only the shorter Meadow route would make closing Magdalen Bridge acceptable to public opinion.

You will also notice that all three schemes extended northwards to relieve Cornmarket and in the case of Scheme A to form a complete ring, partly using existing roads but involving much damaging road widening.

The Meadow road very nearly became a reality. The outcome of the inquiry at large was that the Inspector, Sir Frederick Armer, declaring that sacrificing the Meadow was "inescapable" to save

the High, backed the compromise route across its middle. The Minister approved, adding that the Meadow section should be sunk in a ha-ha, invisible by day but, as its landscaper Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe said, with its lighting "an inferno at night."

The council duly based its 1964 development plan on the Minister's route including a spur along a widened New Inn Hall Street to Gloucester Green and Beaumont Street, crossing St Michael's Street and George Street on a viaduct. The council decided not to close Magdalen bridge but to close Cornmarket at its south end.

But just before the public inquiry into the development plan, the terms of the argument were decisively changed by the publication of Sir Colin Buchanan's report for the Government on Traffic in Towns, which advocated a new national policy of traffic restraint. Reversing the previous assumption that the relief road chosen must be convenient on journey time, it observed that if Magdalen Bridge were closed, the relief road could be put anywhere.

Sir Colin appeared at the inquiry as a witness for Oxford University and strongly criticised the city's plan for not dealing with the likely traffic increases it would cause on the radial roads leading to the city centre. He was not, however, against inner relief roads as such, producing a sketch for a north-south additional radial road along the line of the railway, similar to the route later proposed for a guided busway, with spurs to the east including one on the Eastwyke Farm route south of the Meadow.

To the city council's consternation, the inquiry inspector, Mr AE Rochard-Thomas, rejected the route which the Minister had already approved and supported a route south of the Meadow and even suggested that if there was traffic restraint in the city centre, inner relief roads might not be needed at all.

The Minister, by then Richard Crossman, a former Labour city councillor and don who was all set to approve a Meadow Road, decided he had to call for yet another study. As a consolation, he approved the section extending Oxpens Road to St Aldates through what had previously been a maze of small streets, giving access to the car parks for the proposed new Westgate shopping centre. This road, the only part ever built if in modified form, has been criticised for cutting St Ebbe's in two but provided an essential bypass for Carfax without which the later pedestrianisation of Cornmarket and current semi-pedestrianisation of Queen Street would have been impossible.

The plans for inner relief roads reached what now seems a horrendous climax with the 1968 Oxford Central Area Study, by a team led by Sir Hugh Wilson, which shows what happens if you assume that the roads and car parks must be on a scale to cope with rapidly growing car ownership and led directly to the formation of the Civic Society.

The early relief roads were single carriageway. The Meadow Road pictured in Dr Sharp's book looks like the driveway of a country house open to the public. Sir Hugh's team proposed five, and if financially possible eight, miles of urban motorway with multi-level junctions. Taking up Sir Colin's concept, they provided a north-south motorway along the line of the railway with spurs to North Oxford and to huge multi-storey car parks at Gloucester Green and in St Ebbe's and a motorway running south of the Meadow to and through East Oxford.

They also revived a suggestion of Dr Sharp for a new road parallel to the Botley Road. They argued that any roadbuilding smaller than their scheme would lead to severe traffic congestion. They left Magdalen Bridge open but proposed road closures in the city centre, including sealing off Queen Street and Cornmarket, and city council control of all on-street parking - suggestions that were to bear fruit. Their proposals were approved by the Minister, by then a Conservative, Peter Walker, after a public inquiry. They were acquiesced in, at least at first, by those who had

been arguing for so long, including I regret to say the Preservation Trust and the Oxford Mail, partly because of the attraction of reducing traffic in the city centre, although concern soon grew about their scale.

Fired up by the size and brutality of these proposals, Prof Curl took the lead in founding the Civic Society to urge the city in its pamphlet *Let's LIVE in Oxford* to reject all traffic-attracting, destructive inner relief roads. His strength was that, unlike some who had in the past advocated a policy of wait and see over inner relief roads, he had a positive alternative to propose in the shape of Park and Ride which was just beginning to be tried in this country at Leicester. 15 One of his early recruits was Albert Ramsay, after whom Ramsay House is named, an architect who became a leading Labour councillor and helped to convert his colleagues. They were disturbed by the damage the proposed roads would do, particularly to Hinksey Park, a public amenity at least as important as the Meadow, and in East Oxford. Council officials began to wonder where the money for such expensive roads would come from.

In 1972 Labour took control of the council and, in defiance of the experts, Whitehall and later the county council, pioneered the Balanced Transport Policy, the basis of what we have now. This introduced Park and Ride with car parks on the city's edge and bus lanes on some radial roads. To keep down traffic flow into the centre, parking on and off street in the central area was controlled and limited, and charges set at a level which gave shoppers priority over long-stay commuters. Residents parking was introduced to stop suburban streets being used as commuter car parks. Gradually the Park and Ride policy came to be accepted nationally and locally as a success. Crucially it stopped the growth of traffic in the city centre and on the radials, although it still left Oxford's most beautiful street the High, over which so much energy had been expended, as a major traffic route.

Before this in 1970 the council, still Conservative-controlled, had begun road closures in the city centre, stimulated by the new national thinking about traffic restraint and by the happy accident that when Queen Street was closed while a gas main was repaired, the traffic flowed much better. Queen Street and later Cornmarket were closed to all traffic except buses. The effect was to transfer the inevitable congestion where north-south traffic crosses the path of east-west traffic from Carfax to the area by the station, now known as Frideswide Square, away from the shopping area. Cattle Street, Holywell Street, New College Lane, and Jowett Walk were closed as through routes, stopping the rat-runners, and most of the parked cars were taken out of Radcliffe Square.

But by the 1990s it was felt that more should be done about separating the buses from general traffic. The current Oxford Transport Strategy takes the policy of restraining traffic in the city centre without building inner relief roads even further. The buses have been taken out of Cornmarket, which has been pedestrianised completely and the aim is to do the same in Queen Street. Broad Street has been closed as a through route at its western end. In return, to prevent delays, the buses and taxis have been given a priority route of their own round the city centre from which other traffic has been excluded except for access.

The most striking feature is the inclusion of the High, the subject of so many battles, in this priority route, so that the long debated aim of excluding general through traffic from this beautiful street has at last been achieved. To leave the traffic-calmed access to the university science area along Longwall Street open, the High has been closed not at Magdalen Bridge but nearer its middle.

The choice of a sensitive spot near All Souls was claimed to be necessary to give traffic entering for access space to turn round. The traffic signs here are certainly not a joy to behold, although they have been improved. But when the bus gate is properly enforced, and it is unfortunate there has been a legal quibble, the environmental gain from the expulsion of all through traffic

except buses is obvious. It is far easier to cross the street and throughout the central area it is easier to enjoy the views of the historic university and college buildings, their decaying stonework restored as a result of the 1957 Historic Buildings Appeal.

The latest development is the publication of the county council's leaflet, grandly entitled "Transform Oxford". The county council's commitment to improving the look of the streets in central Oxford and making better provision for pedestrians and for cyclists is highly welcome, although it has still to define street by street exactly what is meant by pedestrianisation and how problems of access will be resolved. The city and county councils will also have to work together to provide more cycle parking, including off-street.

However, as the Civic Society has pointed out, the proposal to stop the buses and taxis from using George Street and Magdalen Street East and West, at present part of the bus priority route, and instead either turn in front of the Martyrs Memorial or join the general traffic in Beaumont Street seems likely to have an unacceptable impact on St Giles and Beaumont Street, two of the city's finest streets. Without a complicated bus priority gate in St Giles, which could itself cause long tailbacks, there are likely to be severe delays for buses and taxis trying to go to and from the railway station and the West End.

The proposal also ignores future requirements. If the Westgate shopping centre is enlarged with a John Lewis store, the city and park and ride bus services from the north should be extended to it, giving shoppers direct access by bus and helping to create the central interchange point between bus services the city so badly needs, as a recent Civic Society study of bus connectivity demonstrated.

"Transform Oxford" seems partly a response to complaints, particularly from some High Street traders, that there are too many buses in the city centre. Obviously it is desirable to keep down the number of buses in the High, but it must not be at the expense of denying people in the eastern half of the city reasonably easy access to the city centre.

In Oxford the competition introduced by bus deregulation has led to increased investment in new buses, an eagerness to attract passengers, and improved services to the different suburban areas at the ends of the main radial routes. But there is now a case for taking stock. Recent changes to competition law allow bus companies and councils to cooperate in new Quality Bus Partnerships. The Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach have agreed to work together in such a partnership with combined timetables and joint ticketing. Such sensible transport planning, which is expected to reduce the number of buses in the city centre by a quarter, is the way forward. We need also more orbital bus routes and the continued introduction of buses with the highest emission standards to reduce pollution.

In framing policy the fact that should count is that more people now enter the centre of Oxford by bus than by any other means. I think that is a vindication of the founders of the Civic Society in their opposition to inner relief roads and their pioneering advocacy of Park and Ride. Another moral perhaps is that consultants are only as good as the assumptions from which they start. While arguing over roads, the city in the 1960s did better over two other major issues still with us today - protecting the city's famous skyline with its towers, spires and domes, and safeguarding the city's green setting.

After the council had let the upright slabs for engineering and for biochemistry - which is now happily due to be pulled down - go through, a proposal by the university authorities to build a 25-storey tower in the Parks for zoology appreciably higher than the spire of St Mary's, fortunately rejected by Congregation, alerted the council to the dangers. Believe it or not, that tower was compared by Sir Maurice Bowra to the towers of San Gimignano! The council adopted a high buildings policy which allows small scale additions like the ziggurat on the Saïd

Business School or the dome and tower of the Islamic Centre but not more great blocks or long unbroken runs of high roof.

The then Vice-Chancellor, Sir Tom Norrington, complained that Oxford could not always be posing for its photograph, but that of course is precisely what it should be doing as the photograph, one of a series taken for the city council by J W Thomas to help in the enforcement of the new policy, was commissioned to demonstrate.

The policy has on the whole worked well, but there have been alarming signs recently of developers pushing entire buildings up to the height limits set by the policy or even trying to exceed them. A test case was the application to build a bulky book depository for the Bodleian at Osney Mead. After revisions the officers recommended this for acceptance although it still broke the height limits. Fortunately a majority of councillors were persuaded to throw it out. That they were right is shown by the fact that their decision was upheld by the Inspector when the university appealed. It has now gone to Swindon.

The establishment in the 1950s of a Green Belt round the city has been a vital instrument in protecting its special character by containing urban sprawl and establishing a defined edge between town and country, even though the inner boundary remained interim until 1997 because of disputes about how tightly it should be drawn and is now again under challenge, - a topic I shall return to later. While the flood plain to some extent protected the valleys, the hills were at risk as the building on Cumnor Hill and at Botley demonstrated.

The Green Belt reinforced the effort to protect green views to, from and within the city which began before the Second World War when the Oxford Preservation Trust, which I always think of as our own mini-National Trust, bought land in strategic places such as Boars Hill, Godstow and Marston and saved South Park and Shotover for the city, later handing them over to the city council. The effort to save the hills continued when the last private owner of the Wytham estate, Raymond ffennell gave part and sold the rest on favourable terms to Oxford University on condition that its "great natural beauty" was preserved. There was, however, a dangerous moment in 1970 when a report commissioned by the university suggested that Wytham was dying and proposed building new housing which would undoubtedly have made the village a dormitory for Oxford. Prof Curl and the Civic Society reminded the university of the condition that the great natural beauty of Wytham should be preserved and, apart from a little infilling, the proposal was dropped.

What is generally agreed to have been the planning disaster of the 1950s and 1960s was the handling of St Ebbe's. Blighted by the gas works that then straddled the Thames, and liable to flooding, it had been declared a slum clearance area before the war. Full of enthusiasm to build a better world and with scant regard for the value of any listed structures in the way, the post-war planners decided that St Ebbe's should be reshaped.

Its residents were rehoused by the council on new estates with houses built to higher space standards which were inevitably mainly on the edge of the city. The largest, Blackbird Leys, situated beyond the ring road, grew to the size of a small town - the Oxford Mail dubbed it Oxford's offshore island - while for long lacking any of a town's amenities and at one point containing a disproportionate number of the city's school-children, reminders of what to avoid if we have a further big enlargement.

In clearing St Ebbe's the council has been accused of destroying a community at the behest of commercial interests anxious to expand. But that seems an over-simplification. The council at first did not want to increase shopping in the city centre. In this it was influenced by supporters of what was known as the "twin city" concept. They thought that the way to save the historic city centre and reduce traffic congestion, especially in the High, was to build a new shopping

centre at Cowley east of Magdalen Bridge and ideally a new civic centre in St Clements as well. This concept was branded by Dr Sharp "an escapist dream" (he thought Oxford was too small to be split) and described more sympathetically by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as making a reality of the old joke that "Oxford is the Latin quarter of Cowley". The council fought to prevent Woolworths, then seen as a key business, from knocking down the historic Clarendon Hotel for a new store in Cornmarket, now the Clarendon Centre.

But the cause was lost when the Minister, Harold Macmillan, later the university's Chancellor, allowed an appeal by Woolworths. Marks and Spencer had to be allowed to rebuild as well. The city persevered with building the Cowley centre, including the city's first and singularly unattractive multi-storey car park. But it became clear that the main shopping area would continue to be in the city centre.

The prolonged uncertainty about where the relief roads would go meant that very little new could be built in St Ebbe's. The proposal, following the 1964 development plan, to build a modern covered shopping centre in St Ebbe's at the end of Queen Street seemed a constructive step. It included a new department store for which consumers had asked. It made use of the fall of the land to allow servicing from underneath, avoiding the congestion apparent in Cornmarket and Queen Street. It created a level buggy push to the upper floor of a multi-storey car park.

But the reality proved disappointing. The new centre was too bulky and inward-looking. The multi-storey car park, although trouble was taken over its design with the canted sides with brickwork and the golf ball control centre that used to be at the entrance, was aggressively rectangular and impermeable and was not properly maintained. The old street pattern with its ways through was obliterated. Far from being comprehensive, development was piecemeal. The ice rink, an early work of Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, and the College of Further Education, as it was then called, look as if they have just been dropped down in the area and surrounded by surface car parks.

It is not surprising that when in the 1980s another big development was proposed on council-owned land at Gloucester Green, a public consultation rejected the idea of another large covered shopping mall and preferred "the romantic option". It had shops round the edge with the open air market, brought back from Oxpens, in the centre above an underground car park. The winning scheme's eclectic post-modern design with its Disneyland touches looks rather like a stage set but proved popular. Unfortunately during the negotiations, space for cars to set down or pick up passengers at the bus station was eliminated and the taxis put at a distance. Such false economies must be avoided when redeveloping the West End.

Even as Westgate was on the drawing board, there were signs of a change of heart, reflecting a greater care for the past, both locally and nationally. Dr Sharp had regarded not only St Ebbe's but Jericho and North Oxford, where he regarded the Victorian houses as grim and gaunt, as outworn and out of date, although in North Oxford he wanted to keep the trees!³² A move by a commercial developer to buy up property in Jericho was an alarm signal.

The local community rallied and the council was persuaded, reluctantly in the case of some councillors and officials, to adopt a policy of repair and renewal rather than slum clearance, although there were some demolitions, mainly for a new school.³³ In 1968 Victorian North Oxford became the first of what are now 16 conservation areas.³⁴ Jericho is not among them, presumably because it was thought to be no longer at risk, but there seems now a case for it to be included.

But changed attitudes did not come altogether easily. As late as 1969 the city council, having destroyed two of a terrace of listed houses in St Ebbe's for a sewer, wanted to tear down the rest for redevelopment. It took a combined campaign by the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, the newly founded Civic Society, and the Oxford Preservation Trust to stop demolition.

The Trust's masterstroke, in answer to the council's claim that there was no viable use for the houses, was to buy them and restore them, partly for its own use as offices, deservedly winning a European conservation award.

The Civic Society, reflecting its founders' concern about erosion, went into action in 1970 when the old street lights in historic streets, especially the High, started to be replaced by modern lights shaped like pingpong bats. It formed a street lighting group and one member, the late Robert MacCoun, an American engineer, designed a special bracket for a modernised version of the traditional lantern which the city council was eventually persuaded to adopt.

A further sign of change was the city council's appointment in 1972 of its first conservation officer, John Ashdown.

But in lamenting the extent of the destruction in St Ebbe's, it is easy to overlook what was one very positive achievement of the planners - the removal, after a battle which began in 1945, of the gas works from both banks of the Thames. The gasholders no longer impinged on the famous skyline and Oxford's riverside was gradually redeemed.

Dr Sharp remarked that the stretch of the Thames through the gas works might be the river of any northern industrial town and called the river "a rake's progress". But slowly the campaign to improve it made progress. The Civic Society and the Preservation Trust collaborated to produce a report on improving Oxford's waterways.

The massive bridge which used to carry the railway line into the gas works became a decorative footbridge to a park on the south bank. There are footpaths on both banks. The neo-vernacular housing on the north bank, built in the 1970s to a master plan commissioned by the city council from John Fryman, an accomplished architect who died recently, compares favourably with anything built since. It is sad how little of Oxford's more recent housing is of any architectural interest.

The council was less successful in its early attempts to complete the development of the rest of the area. A proposal for a leisure complex next to the ice rink, aptly dubbed by its opponents Shed City, was rejected after a public inquiry. Two attempts to refurbish and extend the Westgate shopping centre and build a new car park also came to nothing after the designs had been criticised. A third attempt now has planning permission. It is based on a better master plan although concern remains about its scale and possible impact on the skyline, and about the adequacy of the arrangements for bus stops and for turning buses. A start has been delayed by the recession. John Lewis has recently stated it still wants to have a new store in the development and negotiations are continuing on a revised scheme. There is to be no increase in central area car parking so most shoppers will have to come by bus, as the county council will do well to remember.

Indeed, a major argument for accepting some retail expansion in the city centre is that shops there are accessible by public transport, while allowing more stores off the ring road, or more retail sheds like those developed on former industrial land along the Botley Road, would encourage car use.

The future of the rest of the West End, as it is now called, is being shaped by a city council Area Action plan, covering the area as far as George Street. The basic challenge is to knit the West End as a whole more closely into the fabric of the city and to get the land uses right, particularly the provision for buses and for tourist coaches and for any new public amenity such as a long talked about conference and concert hall. This is a last opportunity. Much is still vague including the future of the ice rink which, it should not be forgotten, was built by public demand and partly through public subscription.

The big question is whether the design of the West End redevelopment will rise above mediocrity. What can be achieved in urban regeneration has been shown at the Castle and Prison site which has rightly won national awards. After a previous developer's uninspiring proposals had fortunately come to nothing, the key to unlocking this site was the commissioning by the landowner, the county council, with the support of the amenity societies, of a conservation study;³⁹ the emergence in Trevor Osborne of a developer with the vision to see how the constraints imposed by the presence of historic buildings could be turned to advantage so that a prison ended up as a luxury hotel; the courageous offer by the Oxford Preservation Trust to assume responsibility for creating a heritage centre at St George's Tower; and the obtaining in the nick of time of grants from the South-East England Development Agency and the Heritage Lottery Fund to help finance the project.

It would be cheering to think that something similar could come about on the Canal Basin site belonging to Nuffield College which at present is an increasingly anachronistic and not particularly attractive surface car park. After all, Lord Nuffield's ambition when he bought the derelict Canal basin was to improve the Western approach to Oxford, something I hope that the Fellows of Nuffield will keep in mind.

I now turn to the fundamental question, facing the planners since the war, and facing us now. What kind of city should Oxford be, and how much should it grow?

The 1953 development plan said its aim was to preserve the existing character of the city as a university city, and at the same time to ensure that it continued to fulfil its other main functions as a regional centre, county and market town, industrial city and tourist centre. But, in contrast to the situation now, it also opposed growth outright. In December 1945 the city council had been alarmed to receive letters from the Nuffield Organisation and Pressed Steel, the two car manufacturing companies at Cowley, demanding 4000 more houses be built for the workers needed to expand exports in the national interest. (By a strange coincidence it is as many as the minimum the city council now wants to see built in the Green Belt beyond Grenoble Road.)

The council arranged a meeting between the two companies, Oxford University and the Labour Minister of Town and Country Planning, Lewis Silkin. The Minister declared that "all possible steps should be taken in an endeavour to prevent the population for which Oxford is the natural centre from increasing". The car firms were persuaded to scale down their demands and Mr Silkin's approach was repeated in the 1953 development plan. The Government, Oxford University and the city council then saw population growth as leading to more demand for housing, more traffic, and more pressure on the historic city centre and its green setting. Dr Sharp's characteristically logical remedy was to propose that the motor industry should be removed from Oxford altogether, warning that the city was dangerously dependent on it and that if it collapsed Oxford might become "a southern Jarrow".

Removal not surprisingly was judged impracticable, but the city council tried to fix a limit for employment at Cowley of 16,000. The council also adopted a policy of not allowing any large new employer into the city and of limiting expansion to small firms and to businesses that were already established in or had an operational need to be in Oxford. This was obviously absolutely essential if the growth of Oxford was to be contained, and still is.

But although Pressed Steel was persuaded to build a plant at Swindon, the number employed at Cowley rose to a peak of around 28,000, with workers commuting long distances from outside the city. It then fell to under a seventh of that figure with the largely self-inflicted collapse of the British-owned motor industry, the closure of the old Morris works, and BMW's creation of a highly automated plant to produce the Mini on the former Pressed Steel site.

However, while Dr Sharp's 1948 proposal for the removal of the car industry came unexpectedly near to being realised, his fears for Oxford's economic future proved unjustified. The expansion as a result of national policy of Oxford's traditional industries of higher education and research, including a second university in the shape of Oxford Brookes, came to the rescue.

When the Morris works closed, the city council was sufficiently alarmed to question the long-established policy of employment restraint. But it settled for adding an important exception for science-based industry to encourage the high-tech enterprises being spun off as a result of university scientific research. Magdalen College was encouraged to develop a science park at Littlemore (Col fig 5) and the Morris Motors site was kept entirely for employment in spite of the urgent need for affordable housing. The council also put increased emphasis on encouraging tourists, including Oxford University's developing conference trade. Between 1991 and 2001 the city experienced the slowest percentage increase in employment of any of the Oxfordshire districts, but the city's prosperity was not visibly affected, a point to remember in current arguments about job creation.

The strongest growth pressures now come from the two universities and the expansion of Oxford as a medical centre and base for high-tech industry. While the colleges have been successful in housing far more of their students, including through some ingenious infill, Oxford University has twice run into crises over land use planning - once with the abortive 1962 proposal for a zoology tower in the Parks already mentioned and again with the initial plan, later dropped, to put the Saïd Business School on a site in Mansfield Road which the university had promised to keep green in perpetuity. It is now better sited opposite the station. (Col fig 6) Note also its addition of a ziggurat to the skyline. The university is now developing the old Radcliffe Infirmary site for expansion and it has just told the Core Strategy inquiry it does not see the total number of students increasing further since an increase in postgraduates will be balanced by a contraction in the number of undergraduates. But it is clear it should decentralise any activities it sensibly can. It has already established a science park at the former Weed Research Station at Begbroke.

If the conversion in 1970 of the city council's College of Technology into a polytechnic had ever been considered as a planning issue, the new institution might have been urged to move to Swindon which was earmarked for growth. But the council was faced by a pronouncement from on high by the Minister of Education and all it could do was to try to make the expanding polytechnic house as many of its students as possible in purpose-built hostels. Helped by its location in Oxford and its innovative modular courses, it has gone on as Oxford Brookes to become the most successful of the new polytechnic-based universities. For a body with a long established School of Architecture, I fear it has been less successful with its buildings. But its general success has added to the growth pressures on the city, not least through the demand from its students for houses to rent. This is still a live issue as some of the opposition aroused by its recent planning application has demonstrated.

The collapse of the Maxwell publishing empire meant that it was able to acquire Headington Hill Hall next to its restricted main campus from the council. It has also with council encouragement acquired the Government buildings site on Marston road and the former Milham Ford School. It has as well two sites outside the city based on former teacher training colleges but surrounded by Green Belt land. It told the Core Strategy inquiry it envisaged student growth of about one per cent a year, but over time that will add up considerably. At some point enough will have to be enough.

The growth pressure in the Headington area has been further intensified by the policy of concentrating the city's hospitals, including a new children's hospital, and the training of medical staff and the new research institutes associated with them on land owned by the

hospital authorities in this part of the city. The traffic problems this is creating have yet to be fully resolved. The Core Strategy suggests there could be a bridge for pedestrians and cyclists and possibly buses giving direct access to the John Radcliffe site from the Northern bypass. So far the further physical growth of Oxford has been restrained by the Green Belt and the supporting policy of keeping employers out of the city who do not need to be there. The immediate effect of the Green Belt in the early 1960s was to make developers look for housing land in any villages around the city marked for limited expansion. But it soon became clear that this piecemeal pockmarking of villages, a course still sometimes advocated, was unsatisfactory.⁴⁷ Oxfordshire county council, which had become responsible for county-wide planning in 1974 when Oxford ceased to be a county borough, then decided to steer development away from Oxford beyond the Green Belt to the county towns where services could most easily be provided and public transport links with Oxford developed - especially in the latest phase Didcot, Bicester and Wantage/Grove.

The Green Belt policy has been blamed for encouraging commuting and car travel, but commuting has long been a fact of local life. Half of the city's working population lives outside its boundaries, although this is not entirely surprising since these do not include virtual suburbs like Kidlington, Botley, Kennington, Cumnor Hill and Boars Hill. The need now is to attract more people to public transport for longer journeys by giving it priority and to put more jobs into the county towns.

The long-term attraction of the county towns strategy is that they have the capacity to grow as employment and shopping centres in their own right and not just as dormitories for the city, taking the pressure off Oxford. Supporters of the policy argue that planning for further growth is the way for them to get the improved infrastructure they are beginning to acquire. Didcot has been named as a Government New Growth Point. Bicester has just been proposed for an eco-town extension.

The reality is that the future of Oxford cannot be considered in isolation. It is now at the centre of what must be regarded economically and planned for as a city region. This is recognised in the current South-East plan, which has superseded the county's structure plan. It shows Oxford at the heart of a Central Oxfordshire sub-region covering also Bicester, Witney, Wantage/Grove, Didcot and the industrial estate at Milton Park, Abingdon, and the science centres at Culham and Harwell.

The big reversal, in contrast to the no-growth attitude of the past which was never entirely realistic as the failure of the city council's attempt to curb the growth of the car industry demonstrated, is the changed attitude to growth of the city council, the Government and Oxford University, joined also by Oxford Brookes. The Government has come to see the development of science-based industry in the Central Oxfordshire sub-region as essential to national prosperity. The sub-region has been named in the South-East Plan with Government encouragement as a "Diamond for Investment and Growth" and Oxford described as "a regional economic hub" and "a New Growth Point" although the need to protect its historic character is also stressed. The question then is how the balance should be struck between land for employment in Oxford and in the county towns where more jobs are needed if they are to enjoy balanced growth. Science-based industry does not have to be in Oxford, although there may be an advantage in having space in the city for start-ups. It is already distributed across the sub-region. The Oxford brand is not confined to Oxford.

The city council, with the support of the two universities, has announced a policy of "managed economic growth" defined as development appropriately located in Oxford to take advantage of the city's existing strengths such as spin-out companies rather than growth that could be located in any UK city.⁴⁸ The key question, and one I want to emphasise, is how far should this be taken when Oxford already has far more jobs than homes?

In normal economic times the city, although it has pockets of serious deprivation, has had relatively low unemployment. Given the growth pressures already exerted on the city by the presence of two universities and the hospitals and by its other roles as a county town, shopping centre committed to expansion at Westgate, and magnet for visitors, and given the fact it still has a major car plant, Oxford does not seem to need any policy of job creation for its own sake, although it may need greater investment in skills training.

In the Core Strategy the council allocated land at Pear Tree for employment in addition to that already allocated in the West End and elsewhere. But this choice for the use of the safeguarded land, given the fancy name of the Northern Gateway, has been criticised as premature, particularly before the road pattern has been settled, and damaging to the job prospects in particular of Bicester. It is located away from where major new housing is proposed and where there is at times severe traffic congestion. There seems also no clear reason to include in the scheme a small amount of land which was deliberately put in the Green Belt to protect the setting of Wolvercote and prevent further urban sprawl along the A40. The issue has been argued over at the Core Strategy inquiry on which a final verdict is still awaited.

Given the fact that Oxford has more jobs than housing, it is not surprising that the city council has emphasised the need for more housing and has been backed by the two universities, concerned about the effect on staff recruitment of high house prices. The South-East Plan inquiry panel and the Minister have supported the city council's ambition to build not only within the city, particularly at Barton and the West End, but to secure an urban extension of 4,000 homes beyond Grenoble Road to the south of the city in the Green Belt. The Minister's decision has now been withdrawn after it was challenged in the High Court on procedural grounds separately by South Oxfordshire District Council, in whose area the land lies, and by the Campaign to Protect Rural England. It has also been challenged by Oxford University, wanting reconsideration of its proposal to build housing on its land at Begbroke. The Begbroke-Yarnton area has more than once been considered by planners as an area for Oxford overspill, but the idea has so far been dismissed because it would encourage sprawl towards Kidlington and be damaging to the aim of creating more jobs at Bicester.

Clearly much of the Green Belt must remain inviolate to achieve its declared aims of protecting the city's historic setting and the fingers of green along its rivers and to prevent the joining up of settlements. For example, Kidlington, for all its suburban stretches, is proud of its claim to be the largest village in England. Long may the narrow but psychologically significant Kidlington Gap between it and Oxford continue!

But there is an argument that in an area where these considerations have less force, the inner boundary could be altered, provided that the Green Belt principle of creating a defined edge to the city is maintained. Those who want to do this need a strong case. The city council's opponents, led by the CPRE, have asked where this process, once started, would stop with so many landowners anxious to get in on the act and make a huge profit.

The Green Belt has been blamed for Oxford's housing shortage and high prices. Oxford is now said to have the least affordable housing in the country in relation to average income. But releasing more land for building does not seem likely by itself to bring prices down. Landowners will not sell unless they can get the going price. Developers will not build at a rate which depresses the market.

The city has in fact in the recent past been remarkably successful in reusing brownfield industrial land, including most of the way up the Canal in North Oxford. The housing supply has also been increased by the adaptation and extension of existing houses and some replacement since the definition of brownfield land extends, to some people's consternation, to houses and their gardens. The danger then is if over-encouragement of infilling and replacement erodes the

fabric and history of neighbourhoods and damages the interplay between buildings and green spaces which is so much part of the city's character. Buildings of some local merit outside conservation areas are at risk.

The trouble is that Oxford is a desirable place in which to live where the demand for housing is normally strong. It even attracts commuters to London, whose numbers seem likely to increase if, as is proposed, a rail service to Marylebone opens and the Paddington line is electrified. The city will then have two competing rail services as well as two competing coach services to London. It has also attracted buy to let investors.

Oxford shows the limitations of a housing policy which is aimed at creating a property-owning democracy but under which many of those involved - whether house-owners safely established on the housing ladder, landowners, developers, mortgage lenders or estate agents - have an interest in seeing valuations and prices rising, creating a sense of economic well-being which has turned out to be spurious.

The fact is that, left to itself, the market will not provide the affordable housing that is so badly required. The city council has attempted to square this circle by insisting in the most recent local plan that on sites capable of holding ten or more homes, half of the new houses built must be affordable social housing. The political attraction of breaking into the Green Belt is that it would provide a large site where a substantial amount of affordable housing could be built. But creating this Strategic Development Area could take some time. Even if the legal challenges are eventually surmounted, perhaps by a fresh inquiry into the Green Belt as a whole, there will be argument at the inquiry about how large any extension should be. The question, and this is another thought I wish to leave with you, is what are the prospects of such an extension being carried out successfully if the affordable housing is produced as a by-product of the fits and starts of private development and with one of the councils involved opposed to the concept. Will the poor planning and lack of infrastructure of the 1960s be repeated? If Bicester can have an eco-town extension, should not Oxford aim to have an extension, if it has to have one, built and designed to a high standard, produced in effect like a mini new town?

Faced with all this, it is easy to see change as the enemy. Yet one of the attractions of living in Oxford is that it is not a museum frozen in time. It has too much life flowing through it for that. It has adapted to changing needs. It has become a centre for innovation. It offers a spectrum of modern architecture to add to the old. There is no better proof than St John's College Garden Quadrangle where the Society recently discussed "Oxford Architecture: the last 40 years" with the building's architect, Sir Richard MacCormac, taking part.

Summing up, and I am grateful to you for your patience over what I regard to some extent as my swan song, I feel there are things that have gone right such as the removal of the Gas Works and just lately the opening up of the Castle and Prison, and fortunate escapes such as the abandonment, largely thanks to this society, of inner relief roads and the changed attitude to slum clearance and wholesale redevelopment. The high buildings and Green Belt policies have helped to protect the setting of the historic city, and there has been more care over conservation. But, as we all know, continued vigilance from a society like ours is needed. Forty years on, there is no disguising the continuing pressures on Oxford and the challenges that lie ahead.

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It is an updated and more forward-looking version of one I was originally invited to give at Rewley House in February 2007 as part of a Day School to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Prof James Stevens Curl's book, *The Erosion of Oxford*. In putting that lecture together I drew on articles I had contributed to two previous Civic Society publications, a history of the Oxford roads controversy in *Transport and the Future of Oxford* (July 2000) and a history of post-war Oxford town planning in *Visions for Oxford in the 21st Century* (December 2003). This is the lecture as delivered to the Civic Society with some minor amplifications and updating. Much of the lecture is based on personal knowledge but I have included at the end main references and notes giving some additional information. Oxfordshire Studies at the Westgate Central Library has proved invaluable for tracing documents and photographs. I am also grateful to the Oxford Mail and The Oxford Times for access to their library and the supply of photographs.

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