

## Reflections on Transport Issues, by David Townsend, Transport Secretary

Looking back over the story of transport and traffic in Oxford, one realises that many current opinions fail to agree. Much is made at the moment about 'air quality' and 'pollution' in Oxford as if, somehow, we are worse than other cities. Part of the problem is that we can now measure the levels of various substances in the atmosphere but the results depend very much on where the measurements are taken. In Oxford, the main sampling point is in St Aldates, at the roadside. Most other places measure the 'background' levels so, obviously, Oxford's figures are higher, or 'worse'.

Go back 50 years and remember when we had real pollution, mainly caused by the widespread burning of coal! Since the big clean-up by the University, 40-50 years ago, the change-over to diesel power on the railways, the removal of the gas works with the coming of natural gas from the North Sea and the rest of us ceasing to have coal fires, Oxford's architecture has remained clean : surely a sign of lower air pollution?

The enormous increase in motor traffic during the same 50 years has produced different pollutants, many of which have now been reduced by more stringent emission controls on motor vehicles.

A further change has taken place with the gradual restriction of private motor traffic in the city centre, leaving predominantly buses as the main culprits of pollution there. But severely reducing bus numbers would bring diminishing atmospheric benefits and be largely self-defeating. The need for people to be brought into the city and to move about

within it is surely essential; a very high proportion of journeys are cross-town requiring bus routes to cross the city centre. The desirability of a clean atmosphere has to be balanced against costs in a world where limited resources are in great demand.

The attraction of electrically powered trams, clean in themselves, is outweighed by the enormous cost involved, and the need for wide roads as well as overhead wires in our loveliest streets. Furthermore, the generation of electricity inevitably produces its own pollution, whilst hydrogen power is a technology needing a huge amount of investment and probably decades away from realisation.

The installation of the '*Parry People Mover*', a lightweight tram powered by flywheel energy, has been suggested between the railway station and the Westgate Centre to carry shoppers. But there is already a frequent bus service between these two points – necessarily part of a longer route. The tram would merely abstract income from the bus services when what they require is increased revenue and even more investment in pollution control in order to attract greater passenger numbers into an expanded local network.

In many ways, Oxford has led the way in traffic management by consent. It is probably the only city of any size that has managed to restrain the growth of motor traffic without resorting to some form of congestion charge. It has been a slow process but, by and large, it is working. ***So let's not be so negative about Oxford and, above all, let's not lose the 'good' in pursuit of the 'ideal'.***

## Past and future

The publication of this our 100<sup>th</sup> numbered Newsletter with its commemorative supplement prompts one to re-consider the last thirty-five years in Oxford. The human memory kindly suppresses some of its more painful contents but I am sure most people will recall the packs of predatory cars circling Broad Street to pounce on any vacant parking space, or the old quip of one resident hailing another across the High:

*“How did you get across?”  
“I was born this side!”*

Buses in Queen Street today are a pale reflection of the asphyxiating two-way chaos of pre-OTS Cornmarket, when local radio warned against visiting the centre of town because of the pollution levels. Headington residents as they contemplate the present queues on the London Road may recall past home-match days when mounted police closed the street as a matter of course and in all neighbouring side roads cars were parked continuously nose-to-tail, frequently across residents' driveways rather as in other areas they still are today.

Oxford has had its traffic problems since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century – its focal position in southern England ensures this – and its river system, the creator of the city's setting and its delight except at flood times, applies a stealthy straightjacket to much expansion and access to the central areas.

These influences are not going to go away. Neither are the tensions generated by the continuing development of the Universities, the challenge of social change, or the pressure of economic expansion. To all of these we must seek to respond, keeping firmly in mind the objectives so well expressed at the Society's foundation. I trust that the other reports contained within these pages show that we are doing so.

**Tony Joyce**  
**Chairman**

## Report from the Planning Sub-Committee

Update on applications mentioned in recent news-letters:- Plans were permitted to convert to flats at **1 Ferry Hinksey Road** and **21 Cave Street**, and to provide 52 car-park spaces on the **Milham Ford School site**. Plans were refused for flats at **11 Rupert Road**, and behind **40-49 Juxon Street**; for a garden shed at **10 Cordrey Green, Iffley** and for increased parking behind **58-62 St Adates**; also refused was an application made in January 2005 to demolish **No 62 St Aldates** and replace it by a 4floor block of offices. An application was withdrawn for six houses at **1 Finch Close, Headington**. Still not decided are plans for amendments for **574 Banbury Road** and for the **Royal British Legion Club House site, Hadow Road**. Plans for extension of the **Pitt Rivers Museum** have now been approved. Proposals for the large site near **St Barnabas Church** are subject to a Public Inquiry.

The following applications stand out among the 40 to which we have objected since the last newsletter. In *November* the contentious proposal to redevelop the sites of the **River Hotel and the Westgate Hotel** in Botley Road and **1-3 Mill Street** met with many objections but a second identical application was made in February. **17 Iffley Road**, an unusual and attractive 19<sup>th</sup> century house, has suffered from neglect and unsympathetic alteration over many years. Fortunately a proposal to demolish and replace it by a block of flats was overturned in February.

*December's* applications included amendments to **The Plasterers Arms, 9 Marston Road**, permitted despite our continuing objections that the replacement building would be too bulky with large monopitch roofs. A proposal to make vehicular access from Richard's Lane into the grounds of **304 Woodstock Road** was rejected in February. At **120 Marlborough Road**, extensive changes were proposed, and then permitted in February: demolition and re-development for eight one-bed flats, and also demolition and conversion to a terrace of four houses.

In *January 2005*, at **332 Abingdon Road**, it was

proposed to demolish a retail unit, and replace by a 2-storey block of flats and bedsits with a covered accessway to four parking spaces to the rear, but this was immediately rejected as over-development. At **108 Cowley Road**, 74 students' rooms are proposed.

In *February*, proposals for large poster boxes on to the newly refurbished **Goose Public House, Gloucester Street** were made and swiftly rejected, as was the conversion and extension of **81 Donnington Road** to four 1-bed flats. Proposals to demolish **351 Woodstock Road** and erect two 4-bed houses and a block of 8 flats, and similarly at **452** and **454 Banbury Road**, have been withdrawn. A proposal to remove an attractive Victorian shop-front and door at **15 Cowley Road**, and to insert two modern windows, first appeared in October 2004 and was refused, but has now returned, sadly. Plans for the **Health Centre, Manzil Way, Cowley Road** have reappeared with many amendments.

*Mark Barrington-Ward, Kate Miller,  
Chris Rayson, David Townsend*

### **Community Groups, Liaison**

Representatives of 13 different Residents Associations met with members of the Society's Committee, the Chairman and the President on Wednesday 23 February at St Michael's at the Northgate for the latest in our regular series of informal discussions. A lively exchange ensued embracing Cornmarket, the Local Plan, transport and planning concerns as well as the disturbing impact of recent changes to licensing laws, amongst other topics. We plan to meet again in the autumn to review progress on the range of topics raised and to explore others.

***To become involved in this working partnership, contact the Membership Secretary (see final page) for details of how your Association might affiliate to the Society.***

### **"Evolving City", April – June 2005**

*Oxford Inspires'* latest initiative includes a year-long programme of events and activities grouped under 5 themes:- *Science in the City, Artists and Communities, Festivals, Oxford and*

*Europe, and Oxford 2015.* This full and very varied programme of talks, displays, events and projects is designed to encourage new thinking on how one might care to see Oxford evolve over the next ten years. (*In exploring this theme, the Society's 'Visions for Oxford in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' is virtually required reading – Editor.*)

The first of three programme guides (detailing events from April to June, month by month) is already widely distributed across the city. **Register at [www.evolvingcity.com](http://www.evolvingcity.com) for regular updates, or telephone 01865.278821 to obtain your own copy of the guide.**

### **Oxford Milestones**

Readers puzzling over the challenge published in November's newsletter (no. 99) on the location of the four stones within the ring road will be pleased to know that these are sited between the Thornhill Park & Ride and 243 Woodstock Road as follows: on the London Road in Headington (one near *Wharton Road*, and one near the top of *Headington Hill*); at *Magdalen College*, and outside *12 Woodstock Road*.

*Stephanie Jenkins, Civic Society Webmaster*

### **Forest Of Oxford**

The Society needs to find a caring member, interested in trees, to take over from Wendy Reid the role of liaising with Forest of Oxford on our behalf in order to raise the profile of urban trees and to encourage the planting of more specimens.

***Further details of what this might involve are readily available from the Chairman. See also [www.forestofoxford.gov.uk](http://www.forestofoxford.gov.uk)***

### **Subscriptions**

If you are amongst those whose subscription for 2005 (due 1 January) is still overdue, please consider making the task of our newly elected Membership Secretary, Liz Grosvenor, a more straightforward one.

***Please promptly return to her (see contact details on final page) the 2005 Renewal Form enclosed in the November 2004 Newsletter or simply request a Banker's Order form from her.***



**Your letters page** – A new and regular feature of the Society's Newsletter, dedicated to your comments on topics in print or on views that you hold and wish to share. To contribute, contact the Editor at the address shown below, or email [ocsnewsletter@aol.com](mailto:ocsnewsletter@aol.com). NB Copy deadline for our next issue is **Thursday 7 July**.

from Stuart Skyte, 30 Plater Drive  
[skyte@ukgateway.net](mailto:skyte@ukgateway.net)

### **Bonn Square**

*Oxford is a city without a heart. Or, at least, there is a sort of heart but it is not a healthy organ. Broad Street should be the heart of the City and we now have some exciting proposals for regenerating what should be a beautiful space there.*

*That will call for public money, which is why I object to large sums being thrown at a grotty back yard in the centre of Oxford's shopping area. I refer to Bonn Square. By no stretch of architectural imagination could this be described as a square in the European city sense. It's a corner of an ugly street with grossly out of proportion trees. The idea that the City Council is to spend a six-figure sum on this place beggars belief.*

*I would get a local landscape architect to produce a modest design for Bonn Square, involving lowering it to the level of the surrounding space, removing the wall by the shops, introducing some modern planting and seating, and possibly even using some modern sculpture. But please don't waste lots of our money on it when this could be far better spent on Broad Street.*



from Laura King  
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### **Safeguarding our Heritage**

*I was appalled to read that Associated Property Owners tried to have that splendid gothic house knocked down at the bottom of Iffley Road near the Plain, purely for the sake of three additional flats. Thankfully the city council planning department has rejected the application.*

*But what is being done to keep an eye on the house or to enforce immediate restoration so that it is not allowed to degenerate to the point where it really is an unsafe structure and can be bulldozed? I hope OCS will make this building a priority!*

*Much though I acknowledge the need for additional*

*flats in Oxford, I do not want to see them at the expense of what increasingly vanishing heritage we have left. Not least when there are plenty of 60's & 70's monstrosities on the estates (of no architectural merit) that are ripe for redevelopment.*



**NB** The local authority does have limited powers to insist that owners in conservation areas take responsibility for the maintenance of their property. Such powers are infrequently invoked and very much depend on reports from local residents, where a particular case might merit intervention. (Editor)

from Katherine Shock and Anthony Stones  
[shocks@clara.net](mailto:shocks@clara.net)

### **Broad Street**

*Whilst many have greeted Kim Wilkie's presentation for a solution to Broad Street with pleasure, we were left feeling disappointed that his solution had focused more on the eastern end of the street, leaving the remaining area less resolved.*

*His plan brought with it real practical problems of its own and having waited silently to watch them find resolution we now feel the time has come to draw attention once more to our original plan. This was presented earlier to the Friends of Broad Street and many others and we believe that it could be a beautiful and practical solution to the problems of use and access.*

*We hope that – in spite of the fact that we are not professional townscapers, just deeply committed carers for this City who have considerable professional spatial and artistic experience between us – those seeking a resolution to Broad Street's plight will view our plan seriously.*



**NB** [www.oxfordcivicsoc.org.uk](http://www.oxfordcivicsoc.org.uk), carries Kim Wilkie's Broad Street Plan. Drawings and further details of the alternative outlined above are available online at [www.shocks.clara.net/broadst.htm](http://www.shocks.clara.net/broadst.htm) or from Katherine Shock, 369 Woodstock Road, OX2 8AA (Editor)

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**Newsletter issued in March, July and November and published by  
Oxford Civic Society, P O Box 149, Oxford OX2 7ZX (phone/fax 01865.764898)  
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**Printed by Will Print, 1 Newtec Place, 66-72 Magdalen Road, Oxford OX4 1RE**