

## The Erosion of Oxford by Ann Spokes Symonds



Attention to detail? Observe one aspect of the recently designed Castle Square and a sadly neglected underpass, nearby

In the 1970's, Oxford suffered one of its worst periods of erosion since the medieval houses were destroyed to make way for monuments to Victorian architecture. James Stevens Curl, a founder member of Oxford Civic Society and its first Chairman, published the concerns of Oxford conservationists of the day in a book entitled *'The Erosion of Oxford'* (1977); Curl described the many vandalisms, small tragedies in themselves, as an erosion of the city and a squandering of its heritage.

*The Erosion of Oxford* was also the title of a Day School at Rewley House on 3 February 2007 – one of many held in recent years by the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education on the subject of Oxford and Oxfordshire. James Stevens Curl was appropriately the first speaker of the day. He is still suitably angry, not only about the changes that took place before his book was published, but about the erosion which has occurred since. His was a lively and astringent lecture which spared neither planners, Councillors, Governments nor architects.

In fact, many of their slab-like monstrosities

won architectural awards. They were the order of the day for the Modernists who branded their opponents as old-fashioned and out-of-date. Fortunately tastes change and some of the 1970's buildings, which even Curl admired, are now out of favour.

Next, the Day School featured a masterful survey of Oxford's planning by Mark Barrington-Ward, President of Oxford Civic Society. As an important figure in the early days of OCS and an influential one at the centre of Oxford life as the Editor of the *Oxford Mail*, it was he who published Curl's early articles on the subject of Oxford's erosion. Mark skilfully took us through the various traffic plans for Oxford, from *Oxford Replanned* and the saga of the Meadow road to the later transport strategies. He went on to remind us that Cattle Street was once a main route for traffic from the east to the north, and that The High, once full of cars as well as buses, is now known as 'the most beautiful bus lane in England'.

Mark gave credit where it was due in questioning what the planners had achieved: the introduction of the Green Belt to preserve

Oxford's setting and the tall buildings policy to protect its skyline were important milestones. He also reminded us of the proposed skyscraper of a Zoology building in the Parks (twice as high as St Mary's church) which was fortunately turned down by Congregation. All this and more can be found in the Civic Society's publication *'Visions for Oxford in the 21st Century'* (2003). The same pressures exist today as developers seek to fill sites to the maximum that planners will allow.

John Ashdown, Conservation Officer for the City Council from 1972 – 2000, spoke on an alternative planning framework for Oxford and the importance of historic detail. His excellent summary and beautiful slides covered the period when he was a key figure in the field of conservation in Oxford. He, too, regretted the introduction of long horizontal buildings which showed no respect for the traditional vertical structures that up to then had so characterised the Oxford street scene. However, as John made clear, Listed Building Consent was not introduced until 1969 and it had, therefore, been difficult to save some priceless structures.

Attention to detail, for which the Civic Society has campaigned over the years, is vital. One example John gave was the preservation of the Lucy Dean gaslight columns which ensured that some historic streets did not suffer ugly new electric light columns. In conclusion, John observed that planners had time to think in those days – unlike the treadmill of today's planning processes.

The day ended with a lively presentation from Debbie Dance, Director, The Oxford Preservation Trust entitled *'From dreaming spires to castle mound'*. It is Debbie who has done so much to give the Trust a high profile, ensuring that it has moved with the times whilst giving a positive lead on recent occasions: the restoration of the Martyrs' Memorial is one example, but the most notable is the Castle site. What was uncovered when the site was cleared and dug in the 21st century was layer upon layer of richly historical artefacts revealing the Saxon town,

evidence of the dominant Normans with their motte and bailey castle (of which only the mound remains), the college of St George within the castle (of which the crypt remains) and the beginnings of the University where teaching took place there in the 1130's.

Now, at the *Castle Unlocked*, people of all ages can see for themselves the crypt and the prison cells with audio-visual guides revealing details of prison life; visitors can also climb the Saxon tower, one of the oldest buildings in England. (**Note:** Concessionary admission rates apply for Oxford residents – enquire at the front desk. *Editor.*)

The Trust's work is ongoing from its 1927 purchase of land on Boars Hill to its more recent purchase of Chilswell Farm on Hinksey Hill – both acquired in order to save the essential view of Oxford's spires and towers.

Day School delegates will have derived much satisfaction in seeing and hearing four such imaginative, stimulating and worthwhile presentations – each complimentary to the others. Professor Malcolm Airs, Director of Studies for his last Day School, thanked each speaker for their talk – from “the rage of James to the seduction of Debbie”.

**Editor's note:** **Ann Spokes Symonds** is a local historian. She has been Lord Mayor of Oxford and Chairman of Oxfordshire County Council. She is now an honorary Alderman of the City of Oxford.



### Extracts from Chairman's Address to AGM (10 March 2007)

“Last year was a momentous one for the Society, and indeed for the city as a whole. Our Annual Report shows our very wide involvement in the city's affairs, and the range of your hardworking committee's responsibilities, some of the most important of which rarely hit the headlines.

2006 may well come to be regarded as particularly significant in the city's history. The granting of planning permission for the development of the **Westgate Centre** will have a profound effect on the pattern of retail

provision and the balance of activity in the city as a whole. How the city will absorb such a large increase in retail space however, and what effect this will have in other parts is less certain, and will pose many challenges in both the immediate and the longer term. Such a major development as this should make a really significant contribution, not only to the improvement of neighbouring public spaces like **Bonn Square**, but also to the fundamental problems of cycle circulation and parking in the centre of a city where the bicycle can play such a significant role. In this regard, we welcome the city's recently adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance on Parking, particularly in its standards for cycles. The requirements are necessarily demanding, and will call for determination on the part of city officers and councillors if they are to be achieved.

Another challenging aspect of the **Westgate Development** is the very difficult problem of the traffic generated by the projected increase in shoppers, and indeed in all the necessary staff.

This will largely have to be absorbed by improved public transport, particularly at peak times when the road network is already at full capacity. There are opportunities here as well as anxieties.

Redesign of the existing structure of Westgate has involved modification amongst other parts to the present **Central Library** building where we hope to see an improved general service, but concern exists for the **Centre for Oxfordshire Studies**, which is such an exemplary department in the facilities it offers for research in family and local history. The County's millennium year could offer the opportunity for a really forward-looking approach to a future home for all the

Oxfordshire records in some well-resourced and central location, close to the other invaluable sources of information in the Bodleian and college libraries.

Westgate is only one element in the regeneration of the whole **West End** quarter of the city. Another milestone last year was the completion of the **Castle** project with the opening by Oxford Preservation Trust of the heritage appreciation centre. It was a courageous and far-sighted decision on their part to take on this responsibility, and they deserve the heartiest congratulations for its success.

Where these two major projects lead, others will follow, and the current consultations on the **Area Action Plan** are timely – offering many opportunities to enhance the city as a whole. We have been very involved in the discussions. What, for example, is the best

long-term use of the **Worcester Street car park**, intended by Lord Nuffield as an imposing western entrance to the inner city: a restored canal basin enlivening the inner reaches of the canal, or a site for a major concert hall and conference centre which the city surely deserves? Many other contenders for this and other under-utilised sites compete for inclusion.

The long term prospects for major improvements to the public transport circulation patterns are exciting, raising the possibility of **the pedestrianisation of Queen Street** (though this is likely to prove more difficult and contentious than is sometimes said), the future of **Gloucester Green Coach Station** and indeed the presence at all of so many long distance coaches within the historic city centre.

Matching all this has been the unveiling of the university's very exciting plans for the



**Proposed new entrance to Westgate centre, with pedestrianised Queen Street, showing restructured Central Library and redesigned Bonn Square**

redevelopment of the **Radcliffe Infirmary** site and the science area – another hugely significant step in the city’s evolution, made possible by the hospital’s move to its new location in Headington. The future of the **Warneford Meadow** and of other local sites has also been the subject of prolonged and continuing negotiation. Traffic problems here are legendary, but we have recently welcomed two significant moves in what has to be the future direction of improving the public transport system and encouraging commuters out of their cars: **two new P+R routes** to the JR (*see Transport Notes, page 5*) and the revival of the county’s scheme to improve bus flows and the environment generally along the London Road. The long-awaited improvements to the **Thornhill** and **Redbridge** sites, creating decent waiting conditions at last, are another welcome step in the battle to meet modern transport challenges.

Let us also recognise the county’s splendid work at the Carfax end of the **High Street**. The paving and de-cluttering here re-establish some of the glories of this magnificent street, easier to appreciate now that camera enforcement will at last reduce the level of unauthorised traffic. We look forward to the imaginative extension of this work in the renowned eastern section.

Yet another milestone in 2006 has been the consultation and work on the production of **Brookes University’s** forward-looking masterplan for the development of their sites, particularly at Headington and Wheatley. Let us hope that their period of piecemeal expansion can now be consolidated into an integrated estate worthy of their established status.

All these major developments are going to make profound changes to the face of Oxford, and there will be much for us to do in helping to refine the details and ensure the happiest outcomes. With the help of all our members, I hope our continuing vigilance will maintain and enhance the very special character of the remarkable city in which we are privileged to live.”

## Gift Aid Scheme

The response rate of almost two-thirds of the membership signing up for the scheme in response to our recent mailing, is very encouraging. We will claim the tax on these subscriptions towards the end of April, so there is still time to send in your Declaration form to the Membership Secretary. *A reminder:* whilst the Declaration is only required once as long as you continue to pay tax, the recovery of 28p for every pound of your subscription will make a valuable contribution to the Society’s funds every year.

*Gordon Balme, Treasurer*

## Report from the Planning Sub-Committee

*Update on applications mentioned in the November 2006 Newsletter report:* Recently a slightly modified plan to convert **The Old School, First Turn, Wolvercote**, into six flats has been proposed, but has not yet been decided.

In January further plans were presented for **1 Lucerne Road**, with slight amendments to reduce the overbearing effect on 1A. These were *refused*. A previously refused application for this address has been taken to appeal, and the outcome is awaited. Exeter College may yet apply to expand **Stapledon House, 214-230 Iffley Road**, but details are awaited. **Warneford Hospital**, and **Warneford Meadow** are still under discussion, but at the **Park Hospital for Children** extensive additions and improvements are now under consideration. In November *permission* was obtained to extend **22 and 35 Meadow Prospect, Wolvercote**, but demolition of **26 Lathbury Road**, thankfully, was *refused*. An application to insert a third flat into the roof space during the redevelopment of **16 Stapleton Road** was *refused* in November, taken to appeal in December, and *rejected* in March 2007. The Appeal Inspector’s Report makes interesting reading on the city’s website (*see [www.oxfordcivicsoc.org.uk](http://www.oxfordcivicsoc.org.uk), Planning link*) – application reference no. **06/01475/FUL**.

Applications made in *November 2006* included one for large extensions to the Press Hall of **Newsquest Oxfordshire, Osney**

**Mead**, *permitted* in January 2007 despite anxieties that they would obtrude on distant views of Oxford. An application was made for **91 Lime Walk, Headington**, for demolition and replacement by eight 3-bed terraced houses, some fronting Lime Walk, others fronting Cecil Sharp Place; this was *withdrawn* in January 2007. At **18 Cherwell Drive**, two rear dormers were proposed, but *refused* in December. Similar alterations to the roof of **21A Gladstone Road** were *permitted* in part. At **344 Iffley Road** a detached 1-bed annexe was proposed, to be accessed from Townsend Square, but was *withdrawn* in December.

Two of the applications upon which we commented in *December* were *refused*: one was for a large side extension and conversion to four flats at **2 Morris Crescent, Headington**, and the other was for enormous advertisements for a Nursery, to be mounted on railings in **Walton Well Road**. Two others were *withdrawn*: one of these was for change of use of a retail shop to restaurant and takeaway, at **14 Windmill Road, Headington**, and the other for land to the rear of **12 Linton Road**, to build a 4-bed detached house with 2 parking spaces. The application to raise the roof of **50 Henley Street** was *permitted*, despite problems this may cause in the middle of a terrace, and an application was also *permitted* to build very large extensions to side and rear of **11 Burchester Avenue, Barton**. An application was made to demolish **45 Davenant Road** and build a block of seven flats, but it has still not been determined.

*January 2007* applications included a terrace of four houses to be built on a disused playground off **Girdlestone Road, Headington**: this has been *approved*; extensive alterations and additions to **17 Bradmore Road**: this was *withdrawn* in February. At **12 Delbush Road**, proposals to extend were made which would have doubled the volume of the existing house; these were *refused* in February. Other applications still to be determined include 4 flats to the rear of **109 and 110 St Mary's Road**, and extensions to **43 Weirs Lane**.

The ten *February* applications to which we objected are still to be decided. The most contentious is for a temporary car park in the centre of the **University Parks** to serve the cricket ground. We have strongly objected to a proposal to demolish **29 Charlbury Road** to make way for three 4- and 5-bed houses, a block of five flats, car parking space and garages.

*Gillian Argyle, Mark Barrington-Ward,  
Kate Joyce, Chris Rayson, David Townsend.*

### Transport Notes

It was with great sadness that we learned of the untimely death of David Edwards, the Transport and Planning Manager for the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust. In this position he had the unenviable task of satisfying the staff and visitors to the hospitals by not reducing parking too much and, conversely, trying to satisfy the residents of Headington by reducing hospital traffic as much as possible. Whatever he did, he was bound to upset some people and it is a tribute to his skill and good humour that he was able to introduce improved public transport links to the hospitals to replace on-site parking. He will be much missed by all who knew him.

One of his last achievements was the introduction of two Park & Ride services to the JR – from Water Eaton (700), and Thornhill (800), the latter financed by the Hospital Trust. These are primarily for staff who no longer qualify for on-site parking permits but are also available to the general public. Operated by RH Transport, they run every 15 minutes, Monday – Friday, from 7 am – 7 pm. The 700, in particular, is a useful link for North Oxford people as it stops in Summertown. Other new hospital links are the restored X13 express service from Abingdon direct to the JR and the 13 service from the city centre to Marston and the JR, starting and finishing at the railway station.

After a long period of gestation and proving, the Oxford Bus Company's 'smartcard' ticketing system, known as The Key, is now available generally. Leaflets are obtainable

on buses and The Key can be bought at the new OBC shop in Debenhams, which has replaced their Gloucester Green office. Although of use only to regular travellers using Zone or Route cards, it should speed up boarding times in peak periods when these users are travelling.

Press date for the last Newsletter was just too early for me to include the news of the 125th birthday of the Oxford Bus Company, the direct descendant of The Oxford and District Tramway Co Ltd, which started its first service from Magdalen Road to the Railway stations on 1 December 1881. We offer our somewhat belated, but sincere congratulations for this long history of service to the people of Oxford.

Not such good news is the decision of Stagecoach to cease operating the last remaining through service between Barton-Headington and Summertown-Kidlington via the city centre: the no. 7 will no longer run after 1 April.

It is good to see that enforcement of the traffic restrictions in the High, Castle Street, George Street and Magdalen Street East is now possible using CCTV evidence. What is not so good is the County Council's decision to allow an unspecified 'period of grace' before actually issuing Penalty Notices to offenders. There has already been nearly 8 years of 'grace' since the Oxford Transport Strategy Central Area Measures came into force in May 1999.

*David Townsend, Transport Secretary*

### **20's Plenty**

National **20's Plenty** Action Day will take place on Wednesday 25 April. Oxford's own campaign for 20mph is '*Life Begins At 20*' (see [www.lifebeginsat20.org.uk](http://www.lifebeginsat20.org.uk)); we will be co-ordinating events across the city to publicise the aims of the campaign.

We hope that people will display a 20mph poster, and encourage friends and neighbours to do the same, possibly even plan a local street event to display 20mph posters, hand out 'flyers' to passers by, or

collect signatures for our petition. Most of all, we'll want '20 NOW' posters to appear in as many parts of the city as possible.

*If you'd like to help in any way no matter how small, do please let us know. We're preparing a short list of locations at which 'strong visual events' can be staged on the day. Any suggestions? Contact Coordinator Paul Cullen, for more information, email: [d\\_paul\\_cullen@ntlworld.com](mailto:d_paul_cullen@ntlworld.com) (01865 426805)*

### **From the Archives ..**

In the past decade of Newsletter comment on leisure facilities within development plans for the Western part of the city, frequent mention is made of a concert hall – a recurring concept in the OCS publication '*Visions for Oxford in the 21st Century*' (2003).

Mark Barrington-Ward notes the need for the large hall “.. which has been talked about for over 50 years”. Two contributors to the third section (*Culture and Recreation*) make plans for a concert hall part of their vision. In Part Two, "*Designing a Better City – a civilized quarter*", Roger Evans shows a plan with a proposed concert hall, and Alan Russell details a new cultural centre. In Part Four, "*Vision of an Exciting City*", Edwin Townsend-Coles works out a complex vision, stating: "Urgently needed is a concert hall dedicated to providing a venue for musicians, choirs and groups of all kinds".

Very recently, the development plans for Oxford Brookes have been published and a concert hall is proposed. Members will be visiting Brookes to review these plans this month.

*Christine Butler, Society Archivist*

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Some stocks of *Visions for Oxford in the 21st Century* remain available (by mail order for £14, including p&p), from: **21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ**. Cheques payable to "Oxford Civic Society", and enclosing your name, address and telephone number (for queries) please. *Editor*

### **Oxfordshire Blue Plaques**

Last September we honoured **novelist Barbara Pym** at Barn Cottage, Finstock, where she lived in her last years. The unveiling was

performed by the Chairman of the Barbara Pym Society, Deirdre Bryan-Brown, and attended by members gathering in Oxford for the annual conference at St Hilda's.

On 25 February we joined the congregation of St Barnabas' Church for the service and blessing of a plaque to **Thomas and Martha Combe** at the base of the tower, a very evocative occasion, and afterwards Dr Jon Whiteley gave an entrancing talk on the couple. Combe was Printer to the University 1838-1872 and he and his wife were great benefactors in and around Jericho. St Barnabas was their most significant gift to the community. They were also major patrons of the Pre-Raphaelites, inviting Millais, Collins and Holman Hunt to live and paint at the Printer's House. In memory of her husband, Martha donated Hunt's *The Light of the World* (for which Thomas Combe had paid 400 guineas) to Keble. The rest of the collection was later bequeathed to the Ashmolean.

Forthcoming plans include a plaque for **Jane Burden**, Pre-Raphaelite Muse, in St Helen's Passage where she was born in 1839. The original dwelling was demolished long ago but we have the kind permission of Hertford to set the plaque on a college wall.

Oxford's manufacturing achievement will be celebrated when we honour **Sir Alec Issigonis**, designer of the Morris Minor and the Mini, and mark the building at Osney Mead where the **first MRI scanner** was made by Oxford Instruments in 1980. The former factory, now the King's Centre, was quite fortuitously chosen in November for the Prime Minister's Royal Society lecture on scientific enterprise.

*Eda Forbes, Secretary, Oxfordshire Blue Plaques*

### **Anti-Litter Campaign in Secondary Schools**

The Anti-Litter Campaign is making steady progress, but we need to expand our efforts to work with Oxford's 28 primary schools. Would some members be willing to help, giving perhaps 2 half days per term?

Initially, this would involve writing a letter

persuading the Headteacher of the need and arranging a meeting to be shown round the school grounds. There follows an initial grading based on first impression, with the results emailed to the school's contact. Thereafter, a termly visit is the opportunity to re-grade.

This summer Hugo Brunner, Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, will present a shield to the winning secondary school. (This is being designed by the sculptor John Milnes in conjunction with groups from the schools. We hope to have another shield for the primary schools, which Hugo Brunner might also present). In addition, all the schools have promised their pupils a day's outing if they win, and we also hope to get TV and newspaper attention.

Litter-picking with fellow OCS members, outside Cherwell School and Barton School on the Headington roundabout, serves to emphasise the knock-on effect and that is partly why the Anti Litter Campaign needs to now embrace the primary schools. *Please would you help? Contact Rosanne Bostock by email [rosannebostock@btinternet.com](mailto:rosannebostock@btinternet.com) or telephone (01865 514579)*

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Members are further reminded of The Oxford Times' "**Cleanest County**" campaign. To report problem areas, visit [www.theoxfordtimes.net](http://www.theoxfordtimes.net) and click on the 'Comment' button – *Editor*

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### **An alternative printing process**

We have recently learned from an OCS member of the services of a local printer using 100% post-consumer recycled paper and card, VOC-free\* soya inks and renewable energy sources powering a print process that requires up to 98% less energy than conventional photocopying. As a trial, we have therefore used this eco-print, alternative model for the production of this issue. Members will appreciate the added benefit of a slight reduction in costs.

We are advised that \*volatile organic compounds are common to conventional printing processes and are linked to pollution, ozone-depletion and asthma.

*Pauline Martin, Editor*

# Letters Page

To contribute, please write to the Editor at the address below, or email [ocsnewsletter@aol.com](mailto:ocsnewsletter@aol.com)

Latest copy deadline for next issue is **Friday 6 July**

From **Peter Strong**, 79 St Bernard's Road, OX2 6EJ; [javelindart@javelindart.free-online.com](mailto:javelindart@javelindart.free-online.com), 01865 553749

## **Heritage And The Developers: The Campaign for a Ruskin Project to be built at The Castle Mill Boatyard, Jericho**

*Oxford Civic Society members will know of the sale by British Waterways of this boatyard to developers who propose to build commonplace residential apartment blocks on the site.*

*They may not be aware, however, that in the best interests of local and national debate, a consortium of civic-minded individuals and organisations was formed in order to present a separate planning application for the site, using as a basis Michael Pickwood's visionary Ruskin project, in contrast to the developer's prosaic proposal.*

*Lending strength and financial help to such a consortium route is the **Guild of St George** (which was founded by John Ruskin in 1871 and is now an educational trust owning, among other things, the Sheffield Museum). The Guild is seriously interested in undertaking a flagship project to carry the name of John Ruskin on into the 21st century. The boatyard site, and the Jericho ambience, possesses for the Guild an ideal combination of apt location and symbolic significance.*

*Reference elsewhere in this newsletter to recent recognition of Thomas and Martha Combe by Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board mentions their patronage of the Pre-Raphaelites. Indeed it was from its origins in the heart of Jericho in the Combes' salon, part of the OUP building, that this movement ultimately became Britain's only home-grown school of art ever to achieve an indisputable international standing. Ruskin was, of course, their renowned champion -- hence the most welcome patronage of the Guild of St George.*

*The Master, Dr. James Dearden, along with the Directors, and Companions of the Guild of St George warmly hope that members of the Oxford Civic Society will continue to support in membership and in effort the consortium's intention to win the Jericho/Ruskin project for Oxford; it exemplifies the kind of architecture in which people would be delighted to live and to experience an enhanced life quality.*

*Please contact me, in order to find out more about the consortium, and the activities it is encouraging through the talents and energies of its associated membership. There is room and need for all forms of skill and dedication.*

*✍*

From **Andrew Milner**, 64 Sunningwell Rd, OX1 4SX; [afm@bodley.ox.ac.uk](mailto:afm@bodley.ox.ac.uk)

## **New Street Furniture**

*I wondered if Oxford Civic Society were aware of the ugly steel pole that has recently been erected in the High Street at the traffic restriction point near All Souls? It is yet another hideous object (put there by the County Council?) that despoils what was once one of the most attractive streets in England. I suppose it is for a CCTV camera to attempt to enforce the traffic restriction.*

*There is another pole at the south end of St Giles, which is equally appalling. What can be done?*

**The Chairman comments:** I hope that, once enforcement of the bus priority route is working effectively, it may be possible to revisit the aesthetics of the necessary apparatus and signage – particularly in the High, where the County are planning the continuation of their environmental and decluttering programme.

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