

# Making a real difference

## Annual review 2014

**2014 was the year in which we set out a challenge to all six local authorities in the county – to work jointly towards 'smarter growth' across Central Oxfordshire.**

Our ideas were set out in the *Oxford Futures* report and the 'call to action' that summarised it. We are delighted to see more local politicians becoming convinced of our arguments.

Elsewhere we attempted to influence key **planning and transport** decisions in the city, from the Westgate Centre to the Barton Park development, with mixed success. We hope we have won the argument that Oxford's new railway station needs to be the focus of a transport interchange.

As ever we ran a very successful **programme** of walks, talks and visits, helping members to more fully appreciate our city.

Our **OxClean** campaign continued, with a well-supported Spring Clean and activities in schools.

With local partners we launched an online guide to **Walks in Oxford**.

*Oxfordshire countryside*  
Photo courtesy of Visit England

### The Chairman's summary

In March we published *Oxford Futures*, a report and call to action based on four seminars we held in 2013. Compiled for us by Dr Nicholas Falk of the URBED design consultancy, the report was launched by the Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, Tim Stevenson, and widely distributed to local and national leaders. *Oxford Futures* sought to sharpen the debate about the city's future by demonstrating the need for properly coordinated planning and transport policies across the whole of Central Oxfordshire.

The report was well received and, we believe, is beginning to influence our leaders, some of whom have grasped that bold steps are needed to address our problems. One recommendation has already been accepted – the City now has a **Design Review Panel** to advise on major projects.

**Time will tell, but the report may be the most important thing the Society has ever done.**

We also raised a debate in our newsletter and the local press on the role of the **Green Belt**. The need for growth in the local economy was questioned by many but our housing need may be more acute than we realised, as the *Strategic Housing Market Assessment* showed. In these circumstances it is surely right to look afresh at the Green Belt, designated 60 years ago.

We were delighted when Nicholas Falk and colleagues won the 2014 **Wolfson Economics Prize** which called for visionary proposals for 21<sup>st</sup> century **Garden Cities**. We helped in the preparation of the final submission which cites our region as a case study. The ideas are being seriously considered in influential quarters. We believe that this is well worthwhile in view of the likely alternatives.

As usual we commented on many specific projects involving **planning and transport issues**, detailed on pages 3 – 4. Some of these were highly contentious, such as the Castle Mill student flats, and hard choices lie ahead.



### Oxford Futures Achieving smarter growth in Central Oxfordshire



[www.oxfordfutures.org.uk](http://www.oxfordfutures.org.uk) | Oxford Civic Society

## The Chairman's summary (continued)



The **Streets for People** team collaborated with local partners to launch a new website, **Walks in Oxford**, to encourage people to enjoy the city on foot. We coordinated our representations on **cycling** issues with Cyclox and Sustrans, to the benefit of all.

**OxClean** was another great success, with a marvellous turn-out for the annual Spring Clean.

Our **Communications** team provided a wealth of information for members through our **newsletters**, three main **websites** and **Twitter** pages. We launched a new [Oxford Futures website](#) to bring into one place everything relating to strategic planning.

We are always grateful for the support of our **members**. They numbered just over 950 and we strive to reach 1,000! We also enjoyed the support of 28 **corporate members**, representing businesses, Colleges and bus companies. Their attendance at our events works to our mutual advantage.

Our growing influence was recognised this year when I was invited to join the steering group of the **Oxford Strategic Partnership**. We look forward to better insights into issues which affect us all and the increased opportunity to contribute to important debates.

More detailed accounts of our activities appear elsewhere, but I cannot conclude without offering a big vote of thanks to **Alastair Lack**, who led our Programme Group so successfully for many years. Our **programme** of walks, lectures and visits is greatly appreciated. We welcome **Terry Bremble**, who has kindly stepped into Alastair's

shoes, and new volunteers who have joined the group.

We must also record our warm thanks to **Ros Weatherall** who inspired and contributed to so many initiatives, from OxClean to Streets for People and member surveys.

The Society is its members and we owe a great debt of gratitude to all our wonderful **volunteers** who take part in special interest groups and run the finance, membership and communications functions. My thanks to you all.

With best wishes for 2015,

*Peter Thompson*  
Chairman



## Money matters in 2014

**We had a successful year, more than covering the costs of supporting both familiar and new activities.**

**Membership** income remained stable with continuing strong support for the **Gift Aid** scheme. The programme of visits was once again well supported, more than covering the costs.

In addition to our ongoing support of the **Blue Plaques Scheme** and **OxClean** we were able to make a further contribution to the **Oxford Futures** programme. A grant secured from Oxford City Council enabled us to promote the new **Oxford Walks** website.



The year end **surplus** was similar to that achieved in 2013, further strengthening our asset base.

Our **assets** are on deposit with the CCLA Interest Fund for Charities. Our policy is to hold in **reserve** sufficient to cover our liabilities and to enable us to take professional advice on planning and other issues as needs arise.

Please contact me if you would like a copy of the full accounts.

**Richard Dodd**

Hon Treasurer

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### The figures in brief

**Income – £16,378**

(£15,099 in 2013)

- Subscriptions £10,359
- Programme £3,978
- Gift Aid £1,396
- Other £645

**Expenditure – £13,820**

(£12,609 in 2013)

- Newsletter £3,286
- Programme £2,962
- Meetings £1,727
- Oxford Futures £1,621
- Membership services £1,014
- Blue Plaques, OxClean and other costs £3,210

**Surplus £2,559** (£2,489 in 2013)

**Assets £32,000** (£29,000 in 2013)



## Planning issues: an epic battle?



Planning cases in Oxford often have a feeling of Goliath triumphing over David. Individuals can feel powerless in the face of large and wealthy organisations. However, the Society works hard to redress the imbalance.

We made several representations relating to the **Westgate Shopping Centre** development and spoke at the planning committee meeting which considered and approved the outline planning application. We criticised the fortress-like facades which do nothing to enhance the neighbouring environment and expressed concerns at the inadequacy of the planned bus routes.

The City Council's proposals for the **Northern Gateway** involve 150% more houses and 80% more employment accommodation than the Local Plan provides for. Such large increases raise serious questions about the density of the accommodation, the ability to provide the facilities necessary for a successful community and the volume of traffic generated. We urged the County Council to resolve the traffic problems by improving the infrastructure **before** work starts.

Another very large development, at **West Way in Botley**, aroused strong local opposition. We added our voice to the protests. The developer appealed against the unanimous decision of the Vale of White Horse planning committee. We will be represented at the appeal hearing in 2015.

Down by the Oxford canal at Jericho, the proposed **boatyard development** illustrated what can happen when a developer pays too much for a site and then claims to be unable to meet the City's target for affordable hous-

ing. This is another project which was unresolved at the turn of the year.

Over 900 comments, overwhelmingly critical, were received by the City in response to the University of Oxford's Environmental Statement on the huge student housing **Castle Mill** development at Port Meadow. Our representations made plain the hard choices to be faced in mitigating the unfortunate effects of these flats.

Perhaps the only benign consequence of the Castle Mill debacle was the City's acceptance of the independent reviewer's recommendation that a **Design Review Panel (DRP)** should be set up. This panel will scrutinise major projects and advise the developers and planners on the suitability of the design. We have been invited to take part in the first annual review of the DRP's work.

The group examined over 900 local planning applications and commented on 170 of them.

*Clive Booth for the Planning Group*

## Walks, talks and visits: appreciating our city

The Programme Group arranged 18 talks, walks and visits on which almost 900 places were taken by our members.

**Talks** remained as popular as ever, whether on the subject of archaeology, railway station design, the building of the front quad at University College or the future of The National Trust - a talk given by Helen Ghosh, the present Director General of the Trust and an Oxford resident. The year ended with two talks, one looking back and one looking forward: Oxford's medieval wall and changing energy shifts in the city. Chairman Peter Thompson adroitly answered a wide variety of questions about the Society in an experimental question and answer session in June.

Our **visits** included a tour of the new buildings at Oxford Brookes (they opened three days before our visit), the modern buildings at St John's College, and summer outings to Windsor Castle and the magnificent new chapel at Ripon College, Cuddesdon (pictured right).

A variety of **walks** provided insight into our city and its history. Alastair Lack led a timely walk on Oxford in the First World War, Mark Davies led a Welsh walk and a canal heritage walk, Philip Stewart reminded us of Boars Hill and Matthew Arnold while Barry Carter explored the fascinating history of Headington Quarry.

*Alastair Lack for the Programme Group*



## Transport: going places?



There were signs this year of big ideas to meet the key transport needs of the region, such as a 'Science Transit' connecting Oxford to its neighbours north and south. Again we tried to influence key decisions.

Our view that there needs to be a **comprehensive scheme** for transport in the whole region appeared to gain ground, as shown by recent presentations for the County by our member Peter Headicar, among others, under the title 'Connecting Oxfordshire'. The presentations

suggested three Mass Transit lines in the city, to improve connectivity and reduce journey times, and 'premium' cycleways. We hope that the emerging Local Transport Plan 4 will include firm proposals on which we will comment.

Our insistence that any new **rail station** should be part of a comprehensive transport hub for bus and rail passengers and cyclists now appears to be accepted. No information appeared to contradict our view that Oxpens may be a cheaper location for the new station. We welcomed the new **Oxford Parkway** station and the possibility that the old Cowley branch line might be re-opened for passenger traffic.

In regular meetings with the **bus** companies, we expressed our concerns over how shoppers and staff will reach the new **Westgate Centre**. Closing Queen Street to all buses was separated from the granting of planning permission. We suggested that a London tube-style map be produced to help bus users get around Oxford and choose where to interchange.

We continued to lament the lack of progress in making Oxford a real 'cycle city'. The reconfigured Frideswide Square will not serve cyclists well.

*Andrew Pritchard, Transport Group Convenor*

## Enhancing our streets and communities

**We supported a number of activities to change the way we think about our neighbourhoods.**

We supported the work of three Oxford groups who are developing Neighbourhood Plans (Wolvercote, Summertown/St Margaret's and Headington). We arranged a well-attended seminar at which a speaker described the challenges of creating a Neighbourhood Plan in Exeter, a project with parallels in Oxford.

Partly arising from the experiences of neighbourhood planning we provided input to Civic Voice's manifesto *Localism for Real*.

We continued to encourage **street parties** as a means to engender community spirit. We also supported those who wished to close their street to traffic for a couple of hours to allow **children to play** safely outside. In 2014 we were aware of 30 street parties and 28 'playing out' road closures.

Working in partnership with the local Ramblers and the Oxford Pedestrians Association we launched a new website, **Walks in Oxford**. This site contains a list of over 70 'interesting' walks that will allow residents and visitors to enjoy the city on foot.



*Richard Bradley, Oxford Streets for People Coordinator*

## OxClean does it again!

**Our year-round campaign for a cleaner Oxford continued.**

Over 90 community groups, many individuals and almost all the LEA schools turned out to support our 8<sup>th</sup> annual **Spring Clean**. Together we collected 1,000 bags of litter and recyclables – over six tonnes.

We continued to press **local authorities** for improvements and worked in **schools**, inspecting their premises and talking to pupils about the litter problem. Cheney School won our OxClean Shield.



### Who's who/Contact us

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President: *Sir Hugo Brunner*

Chairman: *Peter Thompson*

Hon Secretary: *Vernon Porter*

Hon Treasurer: *Richard Dodd*

**Please join us!**

New members are always welcome.

Contact our Membership Secretary:

Liz Grosvenor

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**Oxford Civic Society is a citizens' membership group. Our aim is an ever-improving quality of life in Oxford by working to influence planning, building, environment, public places, travel and community issues.**

*We are a registered charity no. 1116739*