

# Back to the future

*Annual review 2015*

## The Chairman's summary

**2015 saw us consolidate last year's work on 'Oxford Futures'. This initiative aims to encourage local councils to work jointly to plan the city region's future. We also developed working relationships with many more local bodies, collaborating with them to enhance our mutual effectiveness.**

*Oxford Futures* was the title of a report which we published in 2014 and is now also the name of a group and a dedicated website. The **Oxford Futures Group** recruited some valuable new

members, reflecting increasing recognition of the validity of the principles we have been arguing for – properly-coordinated, detailed planning of both land use and transport infrastructure across the 'functional region' of Oxford. Our new members have also widened the geographic spread of the membership of the group.

The most important event of the year was a **symposium** held at Wolfson College in June which aimed to disseminate the Oxford Futures principles to members of the county's business community. Through our representation on the **Oxford Strategic Partnership**, we were asked to collaborate with the OSP and the **Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership** to

organise this well-attended event, at which Lord Drayson and Alistair Fitt made significant speeches. Apart from its value in developing wider understanding of the issues and our proposals for resolving some of these, the event helped to raise the profile of the Society and its objectives with an important sector of the community.

In collaboration with the **Academy of Urbanism** we are now working towards a high-level **workshop** in March 2016, relating to the redevelopment potential of the large area to the immediate west of the city centre. We believe that the Society can play a vital role as 'honest broker', bringing parties together to discuss strategic planning issues.

Unfortunately, our limited resources precluded our attendance at all the Public Examination hearings associated with the District Councils' emerging **Local Plans**. However, the theme of genuine inter-authority cooperation has been a recurring one, and it is gratifying that the Inspectors conducting the examinations have emphasised this.

We were represented however at most of the hearings of the **Northern Gateway Area Action Plan**, which took place in June and culminated in the adoption of the AAP by Oxford City Council. We raised issues relating to accessibility for pedestrians and cyclists, and transport and traffic effects generally, with which we have ongoing serious concerns.

In fact, involvement in **transport** issues was a substantial part of our efforts in 2015. We made detailed responses to consultations by the County Council on its new **Local Transport Plan (LTP4)**, and to separate consultations on various elements of it.

*Building works were a familiar sight in 2015. Here the multi-storey car park at the Westgate Centre was bulldozed as work started on the creation of the new shopping complex. We made comments on every stage of the plans.*

*Photo courtesy of Not the Abingdon Blog*







## The Chairman's summary (continued)



St Giles – surely we can do better for this magnificent street?

Photo courtesy of Chris Dale

These included: the **Oxford Transport Strategy**, proposals for the improvement of transport in the **A40 corridor** west of Wolvercote, '**Access to Headington**' proposals, and options for improvements to **Botley Road**. At the end of the year, we made an extensive considered response to the design competition for **Oxford station**.

In several of these activities we collaborated with other special interest groups in Oxford while nationally we continued to support **Civic Voice**, the umbrella group for civic societies.

The completion of the re-modelling of **Frideswide Square**, the design of which we had commented on earlier, is undoubtedly a great improvement on the local environment and it seems to have won the qualified approval of most users. This has significance not just for its local effects, but also as a catalyst for similar

improvements at many other locations in the city, such as **St Giles**. Here we are collaborating with the Oxford Pedestrians Association and Cycloxx on ideas for creating the magnificent public space for which there is so much potential.

Members of the Society were, of course, heavily involved with many other initiatives throughout the year, including **OxClean**, the busy programme of **talks, walks and visits** which so many of us have enjoyed, and the **Oxfordshire Blue Plaques**

**Board**. OxClean celebrated the adoption by Keep Britain Tidy of its Spring Clean operation as a national event, and all our other activities have flourished too. Our public face is increasingly dependent on our **website and social media**, and the efforts of our dedicated **Communications Group** are crucial and much appreciated.

I would like to thank profoundly all those who have contributed their time, effort and expertise to achieving this successful year. I would encourage anyone interested to help us build on this success by becoming more closely involved in any of the working groups – or starting a new one!

Peter Thompson  
Chairman



## OxClean – sprucing up the city, inspiring a nation?

**2015 saw our 9th annual Spring Clean and further campaigning to get across the message that litter just isn't acceptable.**

Once again we had an impressive turnout for the **Spring Clean** in March, with

over 70 community groups and almost every LEA primary and secondary school in the city taking part. Together the groups cleared away 7 tonnes of litter (3 tonnes of that recyclables) that had been blighting our city. Some groups cleared a particular 'grot-spot' while others targeted streets, playgrounds, allotments, nature reserves, even roundabouts. **We'd like to thank everyone who contributed to this marvellous achievement.**

The work went on year round to get across the message to **schools** and to the **local authorities**. We continued

inspecting secondary schools and awarded the Shield to **Oxford Academy** which has most impressive grounds and an ethos to match. In Blackbird Leys we supported Windale School, where litter blows into the grounds, by contributing to the costs of a mesh fence. We also persuaded the City Council to install a litterbin in Windale alley.

Has OxClean inspired the nation? Along with the Keep Britain Tidy group, we have been much involved with the **Clean for the Queen** campaign. The aim of this national event is to spruce up the country in time for Her Majesty's official 90th birthday in June 2016. We persuaded the campaign to run the national event at the same time as our Spring Clean when litter is easier to extract from the undergrowth.



Volunteers at Horspath Road estate after the March Spring Clean





## Planning – down your street

**The Planning Group has a wide remit, assessing planning applications large and small.**

Readers might be forgiven for thinking that we are obsessed by the planning applications for headline-catching major projects which are far more numerous in Oxford than in most cities of similar size. Of course, these projects often have serious implications both for the physical appearance of our city and for the effect on people's lives – for example in generating traffic that will add to the congestion and pollution on our crowded roads.

A landmark in 2015 was the first anniversary of the creation of the independent **Design Review Panel**, created by the City Council following the Roger Dudman Way fiasco. The DRP has made a promising start. Developers have submitted their designs for major projects and the evidence suggests that designs have been improved and even withdrawn as a result. We were permitted to attend one such meeting but are lobbying for more transparency in future.

Although assessing planning applications for major projects does take up a

significant proportion of the Group's time, far more numerous are the applications for small **domestic and business projects** which come from every part of the city. We are not just concerned about Conservation Areas, important though they are. Across the city, we looked at over 900 applications for house extensions and new dwellings infilling large gardens, appraising the effects on neighbours as well as down-to-earth matters such as storage of waste and cycles and the effects on on-street car parking. We commented on about 200 such applications.

*A planning success in Little Clarendon Street*



A common concern is the tendency for applicants to try to squeeze too much onto small sites, or to build to an excessive height. This attempt at 'over-development' is not just a characteristic of the major projects. We see our role as to offer the planning department support for resisting such pressures by presenting strong arguments for refusing planning consent.

Applications for conversion of family homes into 'Houses in Multiple Occupation', or 'HMOs' seem to be increasing in number and this is another concern. It is a complex issue where the needs of people who want, or can only afford, a single room, have to be balanced against the shortage of affordable family housing. HMOs are often unwelcome to neighbours who are worried about noise disturbance. Too many HMO applications also fail to provide adequate sanitary and bathing facilities.

If you are concerned about a planning application and would like the Planning Group to investigate, please contact us.

*Clive Booth for the Planning Group*

## Walks, talks and visits: for the love of Oxford – and beyond

**The Programme Group arranged 17 walks, talks and visits on which over 800 places were taken by members.**

**Visits and walks** spanned a wide range of places to offer something for everyone. The tour of the newly-completed Weston Library was sold out, while the walking tour of Grandpont was run three times to meet demand. Keen gardeners were smitten by the gardens of Haseley Court, while a walk through Wytham Woods was an insight into this much-studied ancient woodland. Historic Iffley drew an enthusiastic following, as did Abingdon (St Helen's Church is shown in the photo), while a visit to Oxford's Central Mosque enabled us to appreciate the diversity of our city. There were walks round Fisher Row, historic pubs, Alice's Oxford and 'concrete Oxford'.

University buildings are always popular and this year we visited both St Hugh's College, with its new China Centre, and Merton College which boasts a marvellous new organ in the famed chapel.

**Talks** were equally varied. At the AGM, Nicholas Falk invited us to ponder whether Oxford should have a garden suburb. Bryan Brown told the story of John Henry Brookes, founder of the university that bears his name. William Whyte spoke about once-despised buildings we've come to love, while Alexander Sturgis explained his vision for the Ashmolean Museum.

*Terry Bremble for the Programme Group*





## Transport: of stations, squares and strategy



Amid much transport news this year, we celebrated the opening of **Oxford Parkway** and the remodelled **Frideswide Square**.

After a year's work, **Frideswide Square** was completed. We campaigned for better directions for cyclists and, at **Oxford Parkway** station, for better access for pedestrians and cyclists. This new station brings regular Chiltern Rail services to London Marylebone.

We made detailed comments on the County Council's latest **transport strategy (LTP4)** and welcomed the proposal to develop one Masterplan for the area between the station and the Westgate. Taken with the University's desire to develop at the Osney Mead estate, this could lead to a more effective transport plan for West Central Oxford.

We offered a detailed critique of the six architectural **designs for a new main railway station**. We found that all the ideas offered worse connectivity than the existing station, the plans were architecturally disappointing and that all the 'gateways' faced the wrong way. Electrification of the line to Oxford will not now happen until at least 2019 and work on the station will not start until 2020. We will continue to press for a much better vision for the station and the surrounding area.

As ever we kept many proposals under review, for example the location of the County's proposed outer **Park & Ride sites** (still not chosen) and the City's expansion of the Seacourt P&R into the flood plain, doubling the area.

*Andrew Pritchard for the Transport Group*

## Our finances in 2015

### Figures at a glance

**Income - £15,572**

(£16,378.42 in 2014)

- Subscriptions £10,198
- Programme £3,698
- Gift Aid £1,413
- Other £262

**Expenditure - £13,767**

(£13,820 in 2014)

- Newsletter £2,713
- Programme £2,556
- OxClean £2,092
- Oxford Futures £1,195
- Corporate events £860
- Meetings £701
- Blue Plaques and other costs £3,649

**Surplus £1,805**

(£2,559 in 2014)

**Assets £33,800**

(£32,000 in 2015)

### Our Hon Treasurer, Richard Dodd, reports on another successful year.

An increase in corporate membership offset an uncharacteristic reduction in individual membership, resulting in another year of stable income. Income from the **programme** of walks, talks and visits more than covered costs, with continued high demand for places. We supported **OxClean** through a substantial investment in replacement litter pickers. We continued our financial support of the **Blue Plaques** scheme and the **Oxford Futures** programme, and are now investing in upgrading our **website**.

Our **asset base** has again been strengthened by a year end surplus, and we are seeking ways to put this to best use to serve our community.

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. The full accounts are on the website or please contact me for a copy.

[treasurer@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:treasurer@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)

## Streets ahead

We continued to work for stronger communities, for example using streets in more people-friendly ways.

**Street parties** are a marvellous way to bring neighbours together and we continued to support them. This year we were aware of 33 parties and 22 '**Playing Out**' schemes whereby a road is closed for a few hours on a regular basis to allow children to play safely.

We continued to support local groups developing **Neighbourhood Plans** for Wolvercote, Headington and Summer-town / St Margaret's.

In association with Oxford Pedestrians Association and the local Ramblers, we continued to run our **Walks in Oxford** website, which encourages people to enjoy Oxford on foot.

*Richard Bradley for Streets for People*



## Who's who/Contact us

### Oxford Civic Society

67 Cunliffe Close, OX2 7BJ

075 05 756 692

[info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)

[oxcivicsoc.org.uk](http://oxcivicsoc.org.uk) | [oxclean.org.uk](http://oxclean.org.uk) | [oxstreets.org.uk](http://oxstreets.org.uk)

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

[membership@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:membership@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)

**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*