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The city centre goes west

By Ian Green, Chairman



Part of the Osney Mead area that is due for redevelopment

Photo courtesy of D Collins / Jolt Media

The Society is generally optimistic about the future of our city but the Chairman argues we should all be concerned about the future of the city centre.

Our city centre suffers from traffic congestion on the roads, pedestrian congestion on the pavements, inadequate cycle provision and public transport that competes for road space with increasing volumes of traffic. We lack a clear city centre housing policy while there is also failure to meet demands for office space and the retail offer is in chaos. Tourism is stretching the capacity of the city centre's flagging public realm, cultural offers are not clear to residents or visitors and there are continuing risks to the historic environment. Air pollution is a health risk and there is slow progress to a low carbon economy.

Lack of foresight by the 9th century city founders is a basic problem! The city centre was built on the land between two rivers which have to be crossed if people east, south and west of the centre are to access major commercial, retail and civic administration services and the railway station in the city centre. The problematic consequences of this land-use arrangement have been evident since the mid-19th century when the rate of growth in eastern Oxford picked up.

Further acceleration of population growth to the east, south and west in the early 20th century compounded the problem. The nettle of shifting the main retail and commercial activities to eastern Oxford was considered but not grasped and for a long time the only link between the eastern growth areas and the city centre services was across Magdalen Bridge which channelled traffic along the world-class High Street. Traffic movement is also constrained from the west along Botley Road and especially at the Botley railway bridge, and from the south along Abingdon Road and at Folly Bridge.

Enter the Balanced Transport Policy

From the 1930s and for nearly 30 years road building solutions were sought to relieve the High Street of traffic and to ease access to the city centre services. The grounds for optimism that exist now are based on the 1970s shift from road building as a solution, to traffic management as a solution. The 1973 Balanced Transport Policy aimed to limit congestion and growth of traffic, encourage use of public transport, improve environmental conditions in shopping and residential streets and along main roads. It also aimed to maintain the commercial life of the city, reduce peak demands for transport, particularly journeys to work, improve the mobility of all



Electric minibuses negotiate the historic centre of Ljubljana

groups of travellers, including cyclists and pedestrians, and to control developments to minimise extra transport pressures. The policy introduced Park and Ride schemes with car parks on the city's edge and bus lanes on some radial roads. To reduce traffic flow into the city centre, parking on and off street was controlled and charges set at a level which gave shoppers priority over long-stay commuters. Laudable aims indeed but not enough, as is evident.

The 1973 Balanced Transport Policy is still the basis of the County and City Council transport policies we have today. The most recent city centre transport planning study, the Joint City / County City Centre Movement and Public Realm Study, and the County's Demand Management Studies are essentially efforts to enhance the effectiveness of the 45 year-old Balanced Transport Policy.

The demand management study is considering reducing traffic volumes in the vicinity of the city centre, possibly with further traffic restriction points (like the bus gate in High Street), workplace parking or congestion charging measures. If implemented these could free up road space for Park and Ride services from the west, south and north to operate more efficiently. Options for the City Centre Movement and Public Realm also include a variety of possible one-way bus service loops which free up road space for enhanced two-way segregated cycle ways and wider footpaths. The health benefits of linking the proposed Emissions Zone strategy and the recommendations of these studies are clear.

The western drift of the city centre

But given the array of existing problems, are the measures currently being discussed likely to take us far enough forward? Most scope for new development within the city as a whole is in the city centre, mostly around the main railway station. In the **Oxpens**, the City Council and Nuffield College have formed a joint venture to

develop a mixed-use scheme that could include new homes, retail, leisure, office and R&D space, plus a hotel. Already there is planning consent for 500 student beds on a small piece of the site not owned by the joint venture.

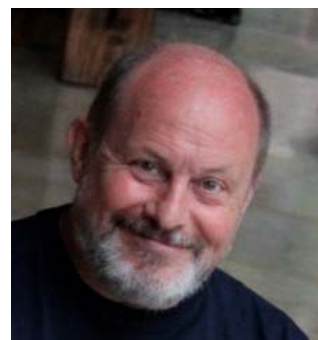
For **Osney Mead**, a 20-year development project will convert a 17-hectare industrial estate into a knowledge park, with laboratories, offices and 600 affordable homes for graduates and university staff. Nuffield College plans for '**Nuffield Island**' and **Worcester Street Car Park** are at an early stage, but proposals are for redevelopment as a mixed-use social science and business quarter to complement the joint venture's plans for Oxpens. A **masterplan** for a redevelopment of the **Oxford station** buildings has been proposed, but is currently unfunded. There are also plans to re-introduce passenger trains on the currently freight-only **Cowley branch line** to East Oxford. Worryingly there is not enough consideration of connections to and from Oxford station or between the significant sites comprising the West End Area redevelopment.

The development of this western section of the city and its integration with the 'old' centre must be included in the demand management and movement studies and emerging policies on higher residential densities and higher buildings. These policies should be integrated with city centre housing, office provision and retail and tourism policy with minimisation of risks to the historic environment and fast progress to a low carbon economy.

All these will be covered by local plan policies in the new **Local Plan 2036**, but what needs to be ensured is a coherent city centre strategy in a section of the Local Plan. It would be helpful if the

Local Plan were robust enough to include future proofing with thorough consideration of alternative means of transport, such as trams and the social and environmental implications of driverless vehicles and road pricing. Would an east-west tram line which complements the proposed bus rapid transit lines better enable access to the westward extending city centre from the east? Could access to the historic city centre be limited to electric powered minibuses, perhaps autonomous as the technology develops?

Nearly 50 years since the Oxford Civic Society was founded to challenge road building in the city centre and to support the Balanced Transport Policy, it is our view that the new Oxford Local Plan needs to include a holistic vision of a world-class 21st century sustainable and inclusive city centre.



CONTENTS

- 1-2 Chairman's commentary
- 3 OCS people / AGM agenda
- 4 Transport
- 5 Planning / Your letters
- 6-7 Programme
- 8 Blue Plaques in 2017

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

If you'd like to comment on any of the articles in the newsletter or to start a debate on something else, please write to Hilary Bradley at newsletter@oxcivicsoc.org.uk

We also welcome photos – of OCS walks and visits and shots of the ever-changing city.

Kate Joyce



It is with deep sadness that we announce the death in January of Kate Joyce. Kate made an immense contribution to the work of the Society, notably as Convenor of the Planning Group, a role she held for over 16 years.

Kate organised the fortnightly group discussions and compiled and submitted comments on unsuitable development proposals to the City Council on behalf of the Society.

She was skilled in bringing balance

and objectivity to the consideration of applications and in achieving consensus across sometimes diverse opinions. Kate never disputed anyone's views, but modified them suitably in her multitude of quiet and effective letters of objection to the Planning Department. She was a highly conscientious Convener, doing much preparation and follow-up work and writing detailed accounts of the Group's activities for this newsletter.

Kate was also a long-serving member of the Executive Committee from the mid-nineties, as was Tony Joyce. To the delight of all, they married in 2008, when Tony was Chairman. Kate continued to accompany Tony to Executive meetings until the last few months, when debilitating illness severely restricted her mobility.

Kate was far from being simply an extremely efficient and well-organised manager; she made every meeting congenial and fun, but shrugged off credit for her achievements. She was the epitome of a caring, compassionate and unassuming contributor, loved and admired by all. Our deepest sympathies go to Tony Joyce.

Derek Parfit

John Ashdown, former City Conservation Officer writes:

The distinguished Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit died in January but few members of the Society will have connected him with our Society. He made a special contribution to our work, serving as convenor of our Street Lighting working group between 1973 and circa 1995, a period when it was a remarkably influential force.

When city centre gas lighting was switched off in 1979, new lighting for the main roads and narrow lanes required a careful choice. Derek worked with the lighting authorities, bringing together the opinions of a mixed group of concerned members in a very positive way. Projects included the design of new lanterns and brackets, the High Street lighting scheme and relighting St Giles. He personally funded experimental brackets and promoted designs which culminated in the final form of the St Giles gothic column heads.

Parfit cared greatly about the detail and appearance of historic Oxford, of which he was also an energetic and successful photographer.



An award for James Stevens Curl

Our congratulations go to Professor James Stevens Curl, the Society's first Chairman, who was recently awarded The British Academy President's Medal, recognising his contributions to the wider study of the history of architecture in Britain and Ireland. The medal is presented to scholars for 'outstanding service to the cause of the humanities'. He is probably best known to members as the author of *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture*, now in its third edition.

All welcome at the AGM

We look forward to welcoming you at the 49th Annual General Meeting of the Society on 21 March in the Magdalen College Auditorium, Longwall Street.

Refreshments from **6:30 pm**.

At **7pm Jayne Woodley**, CEO of Oxfordshire Community Foundation, will speak about 'Making Oxfordshire a better place'. The Foundation aims to inspire local philanthropy and develop community-based solutions to key social issues. It has recently published a thought-provoking report *Oxfordshire uncovered*.



The AGM will follow at **8pm**.

Please bring this agenda along with the **Annual Review 2017** which was mailed with this newsletter. The review is our report to members.

Agenda

1. President's opening remarks
2. Apologies for absence
3. Minutes of Annual General Meeting held on Wednesday 29 March 2017
4. Matters arising from the minutes
5. Chairman's report
6. Treasurer's report and accounts for 2017
7. Reports from Working Groups
8. Vote of thanks to retiring Officers and Trustees
9. Election of Officers for 2018-19
10. Election of Committee Members for 2018-19
11. Any other business of which notice has been given.

Copies of the minutes of the 2017 AGM and the accounts for 2017 are available on the website. Copies are also available from Vernon Porter – see the back page for contact details.

Keeping the city centre moving

Andrew Pritchard, Transport Group

A second stakeholders' workshop on 'City Centre Movement and the Public Realm' gave several of us an opportunity to contribute ideas on buses, bikes and traffic in town.

The workshop presented the results of studies by the City's consultants, Phil Jones Associates. These are intended to inform the City Council's Local Plan to 2036 and the County Council's development of the Oxford Transport Strategy. We were pleased to see the two councils working together.

The work assumed some degree of further demand management of traffic, whether workplace- or congestion-based charging, or more bus gates like the one in High Street, but no changes in the number and types of buses in central Oxford.

The proposals for one-way loops (either two loops based on Castle Street and Oxpens in the west and High Street and Broad Street or South Parks Road in the east, or a single loop around the whole of the city centre, not including the rail station) would mean some streets such as High Street and Holywell Street becoming one way for buses. We welcomed provision for two-way cycling on these streets, but felt that the prospect of 80 buses an hour in Holywell Street was not acceptable. No allowance had been made for 'layover space' for terminating services, with no detailed routing of services and locations of bus stops. We felt that, despite the consultants' efforts, the cost in loss of connectivity, inconvenience to bus users and the severance of east-west routes was too high.

Zero Emission Zone

We noted the boldness of recent proposals to establish ZEZs in the city centre to improve our air quality which is currently below an acceptable standard in many streets. The initial small zone however included a number of streets where pollution was not a problem, though this would be expanded later.

We agreed with the consultants' (Ricardo's) Feasibility and Implementation Study suggesting that the high costs of requiring taxis, cars, buses and light, commercial vehicles to meet zero emissions standards by 2020 were likely to outweigh the benefits. A slower introduction to parallel the likely need for replacement of existing vehicles would be more realistic and acceptable.



Learning from Italian city centres

Juliet Blackburn, Transport Group

On a recent visit to historic Italian cities, Juliet Blackburn was struck by one significant difference – tourists are expected to walk much more. Might such a policy help Oxford?

The five towns I visited were in Northern Italy – Bologna, Ravenna, Ferrara, Parma and Modena. Apart from Ravenna, all are university towns. All have narrow streets and old buildings on a scale similar to the university centre in Oxford. Most of these towns were walled in the Middle Ages and in some cases the walls still stand.



In Ferrara tourists on foot mingle with cyclists but other traffic is banned or severely curtailed

What makes them so similar to central Oxford is the many cyclists, students and tourists.

In all five towns tourist coaches were not permitted to enter the historic town centre. Everyone had to get off the coach and walk. This is generally not a hardship for tourists as it is the only practical way to view the buildings and to see inside them. Moreover, except for cycles, all traffic was banned during business hours, making the town centres more pleasant and safer for those on foot. The only exceptions were small electric vehicles such as those used to collect refuse along the narrow streets.

I don't necessarily think that the Italians manage tourism any better or more efficiently than other nations but they have been coping with tourists for hundreds of years. **And Oxford can and should learn from other cities with similar challenges.**

It is noticeable that Oxford does not manage tourists well, indeed it barely seems to do anything for them. It is simply not acceptable to have 26 coaches parked in St Giles on one day. This does nothing to improve the look of St Giles, one of the historic streets that tourists have surely come to admire?

How tall is a high building?

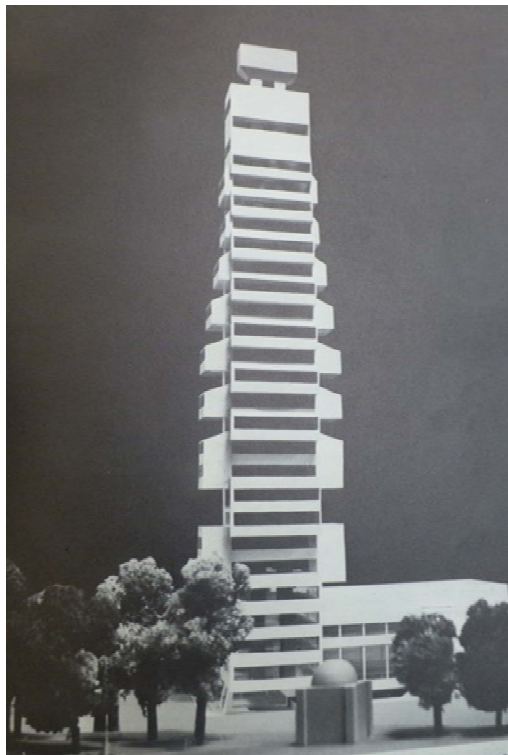
Clive Booth, Planning Group

What do we mean by 'high buildings' in central Oxford? This question is currently exercising the minds of our planners and the Planning Group.

In 1962, the University of Oxford considered proposals for a 25-storey tower for zoology in the University Parks which would have been higher than the spire of St Mary's Church. The proposal was thrown out after a revolt by the University Congregation. There had already been complaints about the bulky engineering building on Banbury Road with its 'butterfly' roof.

Responding to these events, the City Council realised that they needed a policy to protect the famous skyline and their development plan of 1964 was the result. It pointed out that, surrounded by hills, Oxford is one of the few cities that can be seen as a whole from outside and also possesses a unique skyline, a precious national heritage. Moreover, the grouping of buildings in the centre of the city as viewed by the pedestrian – the townscape – is unique in its quality.

The Council resolved both to preserve the landscape (the views of the city from outside) and to allow nothing that would mar the townscape of the city. This meant that any proposed building over 18.2



The proposed 25-storey pagoda-like tower that forced a re-think in the 1960s

metres high within a 1.2 kilometre radius of Carfax could be rejected because of its effect on either the townscape or the landscape.

The 1964 plan outlined six 'view cones', (extended to 12 in 1991) converging on the central area and stated that "no buildings shall be allowed that might interfere with the character of the skyline. This should not preclude such future additions as spires, towers of no great bulk or height ...". The 1991 development plan stressed the importance of long and short views out from the city as well as into it and of protecting the green backcloth of trees.

So far this important policy has had its successes – such as the refusal of the proposed Book Depository on Osney Mead in 2008 – and its failures – such as the Castle Mill development next to Port Meadow.

The Society is deeply involved in the City's latest review of the 'high buildings policy' which will lead to a public consultation in the summer as part of preparing the new Oxford Local Plan: watch this space!

Do please send us your views. See the back page for the Editor's contact details.

With our thanks to Mark Barrington-Ward for inspiring this article

Your letters

Clive Booth's article on the Oxford Design Review Panel in the last issue of *Visions* drew this response from David Edwards, the City's former Director of Housing and Regeneration.

The development planning process in the UK is limited in its capacity to promote good design. As part of planning for growth and regeneration in the city, the City Council approached CABE (Commission for the Built Environment) in 2012 to establish a new independent, impartial, expert, advisory design review panel. There was some months delay as CABE escaped the Government's 'bonfire of quangos'. Subsequently, the Castle Mill review confirmed the desirability of the panel but otherwise the events are coincidental.

The Panel is independent and impartial, appointed and managed by CABE to avoid any external/local conflict of interest. The members are eminent, qualified and accredited by CABE as Built Environment Experts (BEEs). The Oxford Panel is a mix of BEEs, blending national and local knowledge, design and other expertise (conservation/transport/landscape etc). The Panel co-chairs are prize-winning architects (including the only Stirling Prize winner for housing development). CABE aims for consistency and the best skills mix for each review, subject to BEEs' availability and commitments. The remit is

design so it considers environment, conservation, transport or other aspects only in that context.

The Panel applies the well-established formal Design Review process recognised in National Planning Guidance. DR requires that the review sessions are in private and without third parties to allow an open exchange (occasionally developers change their team!) and encourages positive engagement in this voluntary process. The Panel's advice is published, as are the views from amenity groups, interests and the public, when an application goes to the planning committee; the decision process is transparent.

A comprehensive review of ODRP was published after its first year and this evidenced its positive impact. The Panel has been acclaimed nationally and by Government Ministers and other cities. Since establishment every major scheme has gone through this voluntary process, which sends a clear signal before any proposals are submitted that the city cares about design. The Panel does not challenge local interests. We should welcome open, independent, impartial, expert advice from any quarter but the planning decisions are still taken by your elected representatives.

Booking form

Spring /summer 2018 ticketed events

Closing date for applications: **Thursday 29 March**. Please enclose:

- 1 cheque/s payable to Oxford Civic Society, one for each event
- 2 one stamped, addressed envelope for all tickets

Member's name.....

BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE

2nd member's name (if applicable).....

Address.....

.....

Postcode Telephone

Email

Event	No. of tickets	Amount enclosed	Rank ☺
For events at more than one time, please cross out any dates you cannot do or indicate your preference			
Oxford portraits – a tour Thursday 3 May at 2pm Tuesday 8 May at 2pm @£5		
Old Headington – a walk Tuesday 22 May at 2pm@£5		
The Lye Valley – a walk Sunday 3 June at 2.30pm@£5		
300 years of garden history – a walk@£5		
Sydlings Copse – a walk Tuesday 18 September at 2.30pm Please circle as appropriate if you: - need a lift - can offer a lift@£5		
☺ Events are sometimes oversubscribed. If you rank your choices in order of preference we'll try to ensure you get a place on your favourites.			

Note: Tickets are allocated soon after the closing date but if you miss it, it's always worth asking if there are places left. Cheques are banked three weeks after ticket issue; after that no refunds can be given.

Send this completed form to:

Alan Hobbs
66 Southfield Road
Oxford OX4 1PA

OCS Calendar

'Cut out and keep'

March – September 2018

**ticketed events*

Wednesday 21 March 6.30pm for 7pm
Making Oxfordshire a better place, a talk by **Jayne Woodley**, followed by the **AGM**, at Magdalen College Auditorium

Tuesday 10 April 7.30 for 8pm
From conflict to cohesion? Planning in Oxfordshire, a talk by **David Valler** at Magdalen College Auditorium

Saturday 21 April* 10am
Willowbrook Farm, Kidlington, a visit
This event is sold out but please enquire about the waiting list

Thursday 3 May* 2pm
Tuesday 8 May* 2pm

Oxford portraits, a tour led by **Alastair Lack**
Tuesday 22 May* 2pm

Old Headington, a walk round the Conservation Area, led by the Friends of OH

Sunday 3 June* 2.30pm
The Lye Valley, a walk led by **Dr Judy Webb**

Saturday 7 July * 2pm

300 years of garden history, a walk through college gardens with **Michael Pirie**

Tuesday 18 September* 2.30pm

Sydlings Copse, a walk through the nature reserve with **Nicole Clough**

***Contact for booking/tickets only:**

Alan Hobbs
66 Southfield Road, Oxford OX4 1PA
Tel: 01865 248 105

If you have booked but can't attend,
please contact Alan Hobbs.
We always have a waiting list



Programme

Spring and summer 2018

Members-only walks and visits

Tickets are needed for these events: bookings by Thursday 29 March

See the calendar opposite for talks in March and April, advertised in the last issue of *Visions*

Oxford portraits

Thursday 3 May at 2pm

Tuesday 8 May at 2pm

Alastair Lack will guide a visit to the Examination Schools which has a fascinating collection of portraits of distinguished people painted by many famous artists, including Kneller and Tissot. They are displayed in the sumptuous interiors of Sir Thomas Jackson's building. A short walk takes us to University College where he will show us the dining hall portraits which include Arnold Goodman by Sir Graham Sutherland.

Old Headington – the village in the city

Tuesday 22 May at 2pm

Headington is even older than Oxford, as evidenced by a 5th century Saxon burial ground. It was first mentioned in writing in 1004 when a royal charter signed by King Ethelred referred to the "royal residence which is called Headington". Remaining a village until the 18th century, it still has much of its rural charm. A walk through the Conservation Area will be hosted by the Friends of Old Headington.

The Lye Valley – a unique fenland

Sunday 3 June at 2.30pm

The Lye Valley in Headington is an internationally rare habitat, a tufa-forming alkaline spring fen. It is home to some very rare

species of plants, insects, reptiles and other wildlife. This circular walk, led by **Dr Judy Webb**, will allow us to see recent improvements and enjoy late spring flowers such as the common spotted orchid.

The ground can be boggy so good footwear is advisable for the one and a half-hour walk.

300 years of garden history

Saturday 7 July at 2pm

"What can we learn from old guidebooks?" asks **Michael Pirie**, Gardener to Green College. This walk round some of the college gardens of central Oxford will reveal how ideas of gardens have evolved over three centuries.

Sydllings Copse – a wildlife haven

Tuesday 18 September 2.30pm



Tucked away to the north-east of Oxford, Sydllings Copse is a treasure trove for wildlife enthusiasts, once described as one of the richest habitats in middle England. With **Nicole Clough**, BBOWT's Reserves Officer for Oxfordshire, we will take a circular walk lasting about an hour through all of the different habitats. We will hear too about the challenges of managing such a precious place and the threat of developments nearby. Walkers with suitable footwear should find the going easy to moderate.

The Local Plan – what does it mean for you?

A talk and discussion: date to be announced

There will be another consultation this summer on the next stage of the evolving new Local Plan. Members of our working groups have been poring over the detail to offer the Society's view. Now is your chance to learn about our response and have a say.

We hope to run a question and answer session and will announce the details via the email bulletin and on our website. All will be welcome – bring a friend.

The medieval church of St Andrew's in Old Headington



Blue Plaques in 2017

Eda Forbes, Secretary to the Board

The seven plaques unveiled in 2017 celebrated the work of a wide range of Oxfordshire people, from artists to sailors.

Wyttou Perowne D'Arcy Dalton (1893 – 1981), champion and protector of **Public Rights of Way**, at The Limes, Great Milton (shown opposite). His untiring efforts in mapping paths and defending challenges in court were of vital importance to the amenity enjoyed today by walkers and ramblers.

In Summertown, **Alan Villiers (1903–1982)**, **master of square rigged ships**, at 1A Lucerne Road. He was a notable writer and photographer of the last days of sail and captain of Mayflower II on its Atlantic voyage of 1957.

Edward Brooks VC (1883 – 1944) at 16 Windsor Street, Headington. Awarded the Victoria Cross in 1917 for an action of pure derring-do which saved many lives, he was one of only two men in the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry to receive it in WW1. There was a proud family and military presence at the ceremony.

Edmund Bradstock (d. 1607), **benefactor** of Appleford and Sutton Courtenay, at Orchard House, Appleford. He endowed the first school there for the children of the poor. His charity, notably well managed over the centuries, still dispenses educational and other awards.

Sir Terry Frost (1915 – 2003), **abstract artist**, at 2 Old Parr Road, Banbury. Although mainly associated with Cornwall, he lived there from 1963 – 1974 and drew inspiration from the Oxfordshire landscape. His actor and comedian son Stephen Frost unveiled the plaque and raised much laughter.

Percy Manning (1870–1917), antiquarian called **'The man who collected Oxfordshire'**, at 300 Banbury Road, Summertown (shown below). His vast collection of antiquities was bequeathed to the Bodleian, Pitt Rivers and Ashmolean museums.



Raymond and Hope ffennell's enormous gift of **Wytham Woods** to Oxford University in 1942 was recognised on the 75th Anniversary by a Blue Plaque set on a solid oak plinth at the car park entrance to the woods. The 1,000 acres of woodland are a site of Special Scientific Interest and one of the most researched woodlands in the world.

The woods are open to the public but you need a permit to visit – see <https://wythamwoods.web.ox.ac.uk/visit>

OCS is a society for people who care about Oxford, want to enjoy it more fully and help shape its future. Membership costs £10 (£9 by standing order) or £14 for two people at the same address (£12 by standing order).

See the website for how to join, or contact Liz Grosvenor membership@oxcivicsoc.org.uk or join at one of our talks.

Oxford Civic Society

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