

Celebrating our first 50 years

Annual review 2019

CHANGING OXFORD

Fifty years of Oxford Civic Society 1969-2019

By Liz Woolley



OXFORD
CIVIC SOCIETY
AN INDEPENDENT VOICE FOR OXFORD
SINCE 1969



OXFORDSHIRE BLUE PLAQUES BOARD
**OXFORD
PARK & RIDE**
The first enduring P & R
bus scheme in the UK and
model for other cities
was launched here
at Redbridge in
December 1973
OXFORD CIVIC SOCIETY



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CIVIC SOCIETY
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Celebrating our past, seizing the future

2019 will stay long in the memory as the year we celebrated an anniversary by initiating a burst of new activities. Ian Green, the Chairman, looks back on a momentous year.

In 2019 we celebrated five decades as an independent voice for Oxford. It was an important milestone and an opportunity to take stock of what we have achieved (some of it shown in the timeline below) and where we need to direct our energies in the future.

Taking stock was straightforward – we commissioned eminent local historian Liz Woolley to produce a **report on our first half century** in the context of a changing Oxford. Her excellent report *Changing Oxford** provides a detailed insight into our past and an assessment of what we have achieved. We also published a summary of her work as *All our futures**.



To mark the anniversary we launched a series of three **public debates** in the Town Hall. These debates – on Green Belt policies, on the Oxford-Cambridge Expressway and on curbing pollution – attracted large and appreciative audiences. The presentations and question and answer sessions identified varied perceptions of these key issues which will inform further discussion. So successful were the debates that the Executive Committee has decided to continue them, with two debates each year. The next debate (in the form of a panel discussion) will focus on a vision for tourism in Oxford.

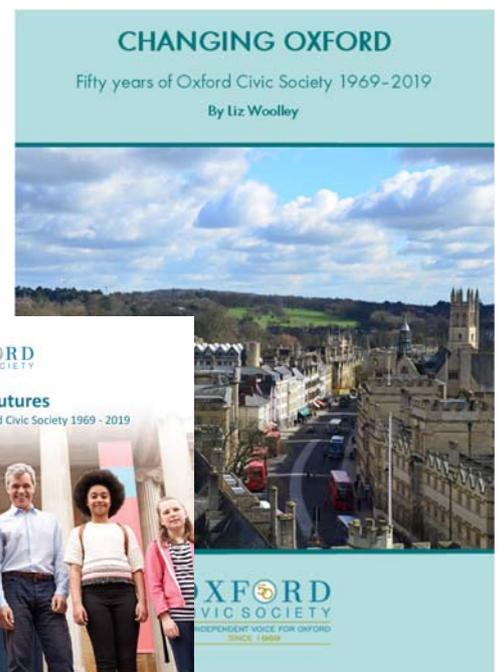
In November we sponsored a **Blue Plaque at Redbridge Park & Ride** marking the first enduring scheme in the UK (it was started in 1973). Perhaps the Society's greatest influence in the last 50 years has been on transport and we can proudly claim that Park & Ride was our suggested solution to the city's traffic problems. Oxford's scheme has provided a model for other cities across the globe.

But the year was only partly about celebrating the anniversary. It was also about continuing to broaden the scope of our work. We

consolidated our capacity to contribute to addressing the **climate emergency** by forming partnerships with other climate-change action groups. This was reflected in the special November 16-page edition of *Visions* which set out what a civic society and its members can do.

We also increased our engagement in activities concerned with **inclusivity**. Despite the county's prosperity Oxford is ranked the second most unequal city in the UK and (as is well known) housing affordability is also a critical long-term issue. As a member of the **Oxford Strategic Partnership** we are contributing to the formation of an **Inclusive Economy Commission** which will identify interventions to tackle inequalities, which partners from the public, private and community sectors across the county can support and deliver. There are opportunities to build on this work to create a more cohesive society and balanced economy and we will continue to support this.

For many of our working groups 2019 was 'business as usual' and in the following pages you can read about our continuing contribution to transport planning, strategic development planning, housing policy and Oxclean. The **Programme Group** gave us a bumper series of walks, talks and visits attracting record participation. The **Communications Group** excelled itself with the



1969

The Society is launched to fight proposals to build 8 miles of urban motorway that would have destroyed much of central Oxford.

1970

We publish *Let's LIVE in Oxford*, arguing that better solutions to traffic must be found. We propose what came to be known as 'Park & Ride' schemes.

1970

A Working Group is set up to look at street lighting. Over the next 20 years it will influence the style of lighting in central Oxford, St Giles and Old Headington.

1970s

The programme of walks, talks and visits begins. It has been running ever since, giving members a real insight into our city's rich heritage.

Planning for quality

The Planning Group kept up its oversight of all planning applications. Gillian Coates reports on the team's work.

The Planning Group aims to uphold the quality of new development in the city by offering comments to inform the City Council's planning decisions. In 2019, the Council received just under 3,000 applications. The Group selected about **950** (32% of the total) for **scrutiny** because of their potential impact on the public domain or threat to neighbours' quality of life.

We submitted **comments on 150 applications** (or 16% of those we scrutinized) and it is clear from informal feedback and some outcomes that the planning officers valued our comments. Proposals for **domestic extensions** were the most numerous of these – there seems to be a growing trend for the demolition of garages and garden sheds to make way for more living space. Coming a close second were applications for **Houses in Multiple Occupation**, primarily located in the east of the city.

We gave particular attention to applications for the development of **commercial and retail premises** given the proposed city centre strategy. This aspires to a high-level vision for development and appropriate re-use of existing buildings.

Applications from the **universities and colleges** required fewer comments because we had usually already attended pre-application briefings and discussed our views with the body concerned. For example, this year Pembroke (for the McGowin Library) and Brasenose (for the Frewin Hall site) colleges consulted us on the form and function of their proposals.

One element of growth that has concerned us is the increase in applications from developers to create **student accommodation** blocks which are unconnected with the Oxford universities. The provision of such accommodation theoretically releases private landlord accommodation to the rental market.

We would like to see such new developments providing affordable rented flats for those working in the city who have little chance of getting on the housing ladder. The provision of such accommodation would regenerate areas of the city and create more sustainable communities.



Plans for student flats over Cowley Road Tesco were approved

"We're very lucky to have Oxford Civic Society; it's like a local Town and Country Planning Association. It makes a hugely valuable and pro-active contribution to strategic planning and policy-making and the City now see it as one of the first ports of call when it comes to these issues."

Bob Price, former Leader of the City Council, quoted in *Changing Oxford* by Liz Woolley

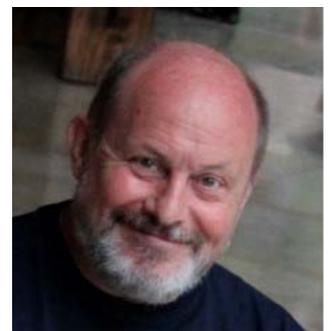
Chairman's overview - continued

commemorative publications in addition to our four websites and interesting editions of *Visions* and member bulletins. We continued to support the **Museum of Oxford**, the **Blue Plaques Board** and the **Ashmolean Museum's** One World Festival.

Everything that has been achieved in 2019 has been thanks to the enthusiasm of our volunteers and activists who often refer to the pleasure and satisfaction they get from their involvement. As Chairman I'd like to thank them for their unstinting commitment in 2019. I'd also like to thank you, the members at large, for continuing to support us in many ways. With your continuing support we are confident that 2020 will be another fruitful year.

If you are reading this but are not a member please contact me for membership details: chairman@oxcivicsoc.org.uk. We would be delighted to welcome you on board!

* *Changing Oxford* can be freely downloaded from our website www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk. *All our futures* is available at our meetings price £3 or from 15 Lime Walk, Oxford OX3 7AB (£5 incl p&p).



1972

The City publishes its *Balanced transport policy*, heavily influenced by our ideas on traffic management. This is still the basis for Oxford's transport policy today.

1976

We comment on the County's Structure plan, the first of many comments on county strategy.

1977

Our first Chairman, James Stevens Curl, publishes *The erosion of Oxford*, a seminal work highlighting the destruction of heritage assets and the poor quality of much new development.

1980s

We help to save many historic houses from demolition, including shop fronts in Woodstock Road and property on St Giles.

Transport: addressing the problems

The Transport Group welcomed several major initiatives in 2019, some of them a response to climate change and concerns about pollution. Andrew Pritchard reflects.

2019 was notable for the declaration of Climate Emergencies by both City and County Councils, as well as central government. In response to these the Society issued a themed edition of *Visions* in November called *What can we do about climate change?* and examined possible responses in some detail. With almost one-third of the UK's emissions arising from transport, changes in transport habits can make major contributions to reducing them. Closely allied to emissions and pollution are congestion and the provision of parking at both ends of journeys.

We therefore welcomed the City's proposals for **zero-emission zones** (ZEZs), though the initial ZEZ Green Zone should really be called a Low Emission Zone (LEZ) as there are many exceptions. The area included is small and is likely to have little effect initially. We await the results of modelling for the wider Red Zone proposed for 2021/22.

We commented on the joint proposals by the City and County Councils to reduce traffic in the city centre which have been consulted on as **Connecting Oxford**. These involve more bus gates on several roads to reduce car access, similar to those in the High Street and Castle Street. The exact location of the new gates has still to be decided and the results of traffic modelling are awaited. Demand reduction by a Workplace Parking Levy is also being considered, though this is initially being proposed only for the eastern part of the city.

The adoption of such measures should go some way to reducing car congestion but the issue of **buses creating congestion** has not been addressed. It is significant that congestion played a part in the withdrawal of the X90 London coach service and the threat to the same company's **Pick-me-up** service.

What might be called **people congestion** (too many people in the city centre for the available pavement widths in many places) was partly addressed by the Phil Jones Associates' **City Centre Transport and Public Realm report** plans for one-way loops for east-west traffic, with wider pavements and two-way cycle lanes, but these ideas have not been pursued. The principal problems arise from groups of tourists and the lack of space around many bus stops in the centre of the city.

We contributed to a survey, published by the City's Scrutiny Committee, which made recommendations for better **management of tourism**. This is now being recognised as a problem that needs to be addressed and aims to increase the city's financial return from our many visitors. We support a study into the feasibility of a **cable car** for tourists from Redbridge Park & Ride to the city centre, including impacts on congestion on this route. As the year ended we were helping to plan a major **debate on tourism management**.

We had meetings with the County's cycling officer and await publication of his **Local Cycling and Walking Plan** for Oxford. We also made known our views on the proposed changes to the **Botley Road**, which offer some limited improvements for cyclists, though not on the narrowest parts.

Outside the City we await details of the planning justification for the proposed **Oxford-Cambridge Expressway** before deciding whether we can support it. We were pleased to hear that the next stage of the parallel **East-West Rail** project has now been given the go-ahead by government.

Meanwhile we are contributing to the emerging **City Centre Strategy**, and the **Local Transport and Connection Plan 5** (LTCP5). We are discussing with the **University's Transport Studies Unit** possible research topics that could provide useful background data for both these plans.



1985

We plant 20 black poplars in Port Meadow and six more in later years.

1996

We campaign vigorously for the 'return to the public of one of Oxford's jewels', namely the site of the castle and old prison. It was later sensitively redeveloped.

1999

The Blue Plaques Board is set up with our support to honour distinguished people, places and events in the county's history. It has since unveiled over 100 plaques.

1999

We welcome the closure of the High Street to daytime traffic and the pedestrianisation of Cornmarket Street. These are key aspects of the 'balanced transport policy'.

Housing policy: grappling with the issues

The Housing Policy Group, set up in 2016, is still learning about the complexities of this field as Peter Thompson reports.

The Group's aim is to increase the Society's understanding of the issues relating to housing in Oxford and its region in order to make a better-informed contribution to both local and national debate. The context is the crisis in **affordability of housing**, whether purchased or rented, especially as that affects workers who provide vital services to the local community and economy.

Oxford carries the dubious privilege of being the second least-affordable city in the UK in terms of accommodation. But many of the factors influencing house prices and rents are associated with planning, the planning system and transport issues. Thus, there is close and overlapping activity between the Housing Policy, Oxfordshire Futures, Planning and Transport Groups.

Some of the factors contributing to Oxford's housing crisis are: its desirability as a place to work, study and live; housing as an attractive investment commodity; the emergence of short-term online letting; anomalies in land valuation and taxation; inequality of wealth; the fragmentation and inade-



quacy of planning authority across the city region; the exclusion of transport planning from regional development planning; the reliance on 'the market' to deliver housing; and environmental sensitivities and the Green Belt. All of these are complex and controversial.

This year we furthered our learning by group exchanges, attendance at relevant events and discussion with councillors who have responsibilities in this field. From this it is becoming evident that local authorities are beginning to explore strategies such as the establishment of **stand-alone development companies** not motivated by shareholder revenue alone and apparently exempt from right-to-buy provisions. There also seems to be increasing commitment to **alternative delivery models for housing**, such as development by Community Land Trusts and self-build, which we support. These represent small but significant efforts to directly address the desperate need for homes which can genuinely be afforded by people like teachers and nurses, and even professors!

We will endeavour to develop our expertise further and contribute to the debates where the opportunities arise.

Oxfordshire Futures: managing growth

The Oxfordshire Futures Group continued to contribute to debate on strategic planning issues. Ian Green reports.

The Group's basic ethos is that appropriate planning of the Oxford city-region is an essential pre-condition to the appropriate planning of the city. In 2019 the Group focused attention on two major issues: the activities of the Oxfordshire Growth Board and the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan.

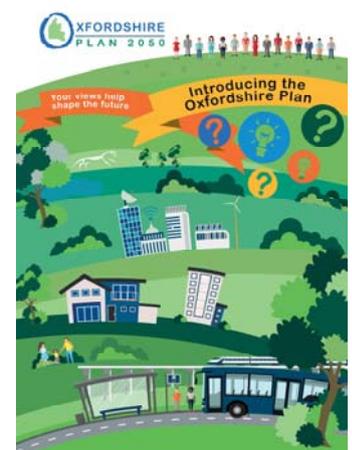
We regularly attended meetings of the **Oxfordshire Growth Board**, submitted written questions and made statements on various issues. We also contributed to the assessment of the Board's role and organisation. The main thrust of our comments was that the Board should be equally concerned with economic growth, environmental management (including climate change responsiveness) and inclusive development. It follows that the name of the Growth Board should be changed to reflect these wider concerns.

The Group has closely followed the formulation of the **Oxfordshire 2050 Plan** and we contributed consultation responses, reports and ideas. In our view, the unprecedented levels of growth need not

threaten rural Oxfordshire nor historic Oxford if high quality strategic planning is achieved.

We welcomed the extended period for preparing the plan as this will facilitate the effective integration of land-use planning with transport planning (including integrated road and rail planning), climate change responsiveness and inclusivity.

Membership of the Group is open to amenity /civic groups from Oxfordshire. Please contact us if you'd like to be involved.



2003

We publish *Visions for Oxford in the 21st century*. It boosted recognition of the Society as an authoritative voice on strategic planning. We comment on local, county and regional plans.

2007

We launch OxClean to change attitudes to litter and engage residents in clearing up the city. Spring Clean has been an annual event ever since, enjoyed by over 1,000 people a year.

2009

The Streets for People project is set up to change thinking about what streets are for. Its first success is simplifying procedures for holding street parties.

2009

Streets for People persuades the County Council to lower speed limits to 20mph in residential streets. Oxford was one of the pioneers of 20mph and the idea has now spread to other cities.

A programme for everyone

The Programme Group attracted record attendance for its biggest-ever series of walks, talks and visits. Terry Bremble looks back on an exceptional year.

This year's celebratory programme comprised **28 events** – six walks, eight visits, 11 talks and three public debates, the latter expertly managed by our President, Sir Clive Booth. The programme was designed to have something to appeal to everyone, from visits to high-tech industry to walks through unique nature reserves and talks on subjects ranging from archaeology to building. Over **1,200 places** were taken at the events.

Local historian **Liz Woolley** was the speaker at our AGM, summarising her study of the Society's 50-year history. Our very first Chairman, **Professor James Stevens Curl**, spoke about modern architecture while **Professor William Whyte** asked if heaven is rather like North Oxford. We also enjoyed talks from local builders and ecologists among others.

The three **public debates** in the Town Hall drew large and enthusiastic audiences to consider Green Belt policies, the proposed Expressway to Cambridge and cutting pollution. So successful were these that we hope to run more in future.

Visits and walks took us to Worcester College gardens and the new Nazrin Shah building, the BMW factory, the Science Park, historic Wantage, the Culham Science Centre, Newman College in Littlemore and Nuffield College's fascinating art collection. We walked and cruised the ancient water boundaries of the city and explored the arboretum on our doorstep – Headington Hill Park.

As the year ended we were deeply saddened to learn of the death of **Alan Hobbs**, a member of the Group for many years, who ran our 'box office'. He is sorely missed.

Fusion science at the Culham Science Centre which we visited in March

Photo courtesy of Clive Booth



OxClean: still inspiring

OxClean goes from strength to strength and continues to inspire other communities. Natasha Robinson reports.



OxClean **Spring Clean** in March had a brilliant turnout, with over 1,000 volunteers taking part in 94 groups. Between them they collected over six tonnes of litter from our streets, parks, waterways, allotments and public spaces and

cleared several grotspots. We believe this annual event is changing attitudes to litter, helped no doubt by greater public awareness of what damage plastic waste can do.

This year increasing numbers of schools and community groups have been asking for our support to carry out litter clearance all year round. We are grateful to the Lord Mayor for providing us

with 40 new litter picker tools to help meet demand. Early indications are that the numbers of participants in the 2020 Leap Into Action Spring Clean will be the largest ever.

We are also pleased to be supporting the Abingdon version of OxClean, called AbiBinit which is now in its second year.

Rosanne Bostock has been the driving force behind OxClean since it started in 2007. Rosanne retired to the back benches this year though continues as an adviser. We presented her with a glass platter as a mark of our appreciation for all she has done for Oxford and the Society.



2012

We work with the City Council to identify street clutter and some is removed. We later support the installation of the Wayfinding signage.

2014

Following a series of high-level debates we publish *Oxford Futures*, an influential report that argues for joined-up planning across the city region.

2014

With the Ramblers and Pedestrians Association, we launch a website describing Oxford walks, encouraging people to enjoy the city on foot.

2015

We comment on the emerging plans for Barton Park, arguing that the new estate should not be isolated from the city by the A40. Our involvement lasts for many years.

Blue Plaques in 2019

2019 turned out to be a bumper year for new plaques with no fewer than nine unveiled. Eda Forbes, Secretary of the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board, reports.



Chiang Yee (1903–1971), **artist and writer**, author of the *Silent Traveller in Oxford*. Bombed out of his London flat in 1940, he knocked on the door of 28 Southmoor Road, was taken in by the Keene family and stayed for 15 years.

Joan Murray, née Clarke (1917–1996), **cryptanalyst**, at 7 Larkfields, Headington

Quarry. She played a crucial part at Bletchley Park working on Alan Turing's élite team to crack the German Enigma codes.

Dame Margery Perham (1891–1982), **historian**, at 5 Rawlinson Road. A specialist on the history of colonial governance, especially in Africa, she was a key adviser on decolonisation and first woman Fellow of Nuffield College. **Ethel Bellamy** (1881–1960), **astronomer and pioneering seismologist**, shares a plaque at 2 Winchester Road with her uncle **Frank Bellamy** (1863–1936), **astronomer and philatelist**. As townspeople employed by the University Observatory, they photographed a million stars for the international project called the Astrographic Catalogue.

Chassar Moir (1900–1977), first Nuffield Professor of **Obstetrics and Gynaecology**, at 11 Chadlington Road. He is renowned for

his development of the drug ergometrine (1932), saving countless lives in childbirth. **Patrick Steptoe** (1913–1988), pioneer of IVF, at 52 West End, Witney. His unflagging research resulted in the birth of Louise Brown, the first 'test tube baby', in 1978. At the Old Rectory, Drayton St Leonard, **Robin Cavendish** (1930–1994), **responaut**. Struck down by polio at the age of 28, he pioneered the respirator wheelchair and devoted his life to improving the prospects of severely disabled people.

Britannia Inn, Headington, where Oxford United Football Club was founded in 1893. The club began modestly as Headington FC at a meeting called by local doctor, Robert Hitchings, and the Revd John Scott - Tucker, vicar of St. Andrew's. It entered a new professional phase as Oxford United in 1960.

Oxford Park & Ride at Redbridge. After earlier temporary P&R experiments locally and elsewhere, the Oxford scheme launched in December 1973 at Redbridge was the first in the country to endure and flourish, much credit due to the visionary outlook of the Society.



Unveiling the Blue Plaque at Redbridge Park & Ride was a proud moment for the Society

On message

The Communications team had a busy year supporting the anniversary programme. Hilary Bradley reflects.



We heralded the anniversary year with a new logo and print materials and a new look for our newsletter, *Visions*. In November we issued a 16-page themed edition of *Visions* asking the question: what can a civic society do to mitigate the threat of climate change? Members' feedback was very positive.

It was a great pleasure to work with local historian Liz Woolley to publish (online) her history of the Society,

Changing Oxford, and with Archetype to produce the illustrated summary, *All our futures*.

We ran our **four websites** as usual, bringing the design of our main site into line with the new look, sent out many **e-bulletins** and ran our **Twitter accounts** to keep members informed.

New volunteers joined the group, bringing us more capacity to work with the press and to use new media. The result has been more **media coverage** than usual and a short **video** for our website and YouTube. This captures Peter Headicar's comments on the history of the Park & Ride service* (Peter is our special transport adviser and is shown on the right of the photo above).

* View the video here: www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/blue-plaque-for-redbridge-pr/

2016

We run a high-level seminar on the development of the West End of the city centre. We are still involved in shaping the future of this major central area.

2017

We help to sponsor the Ashmolean Museum's One World Festival, highlighting the ethnic and cultural diversity of the city.

2019

We comment on the County's 'joint spatial plan' which we argued for in *Oxford Futures*. We are still helping to steer this plan, now known as *Oxfordshire 2050*.

2019

The launch of a series of public debates marks our 50th anniversary. We sponsor a Blue Plaque to the first Park & Ride scheme at Redbridge, coming full circle from where we began in 1969.

Money matters in 2019

2019 was another busy year as our Treasurer, Richard Dodd, reports.

As planned, both income and expenditure were exceptionally high in 2019, with the net result of a **deficit of £4,886** for the year.

Individual membership income was higher than in 2018 and was boosted by additional donations of £260. Corporate membership income was boosted by an exceptional long-term payment of £1,000 and by advance payments for 2020.

We marked the Society's anniversary with new print materials and by the completion of two major projects. The *All our futures* brochure was published at a cost of £2,532 net of sales, while the first series of public debates resulted in net income of £1,231.

Although the programme of visits and walks generated a net income this was offset by a substantial increase in the cost of the programme of talks. This increase was mainly due to the relatively high number of talks, which are provided as a community service and continue to be well supported.

We maintained our financial support of both OxClean and the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques scheme. We also gave financial support for the redevelopment of the Museum of Oxford, to Low Carbon Oxford North, to the Oxford to Didcot GWR anniversary celebration, and sponsored the Redbridge Park & Ride Blue Plaque. Other key items of both income and expenditure were broadly similar to 2018.

In order to ensure that our range of activities can be sustained, we will **increase membership fees** from 2021. We also welcome **donations, gifts in kind, legacies and sponsorship** for our publications and events. *Thank you to all our members for your continuing support.*

Income

Total - £17,525
(£12,860 in 2018)

- Subscriptions/
donations £10,346
- Walks/visits £3,105
- Gift Aid £1,239
- Projects £2,491
- Other £344

Assets

£30,334
(£35,220 in 2018)

Expenditure

Total - £22,411
(£15,560 in 2018)

- Newsletter £3,886
- Walks/visits £1,887
- Talks £2,733
- Website £276
- OxClean £709
- Corporate events £1,181
- Blue Plaques £506
- Donations and subscriptions
£4,022
- Projects £4,182
- Other £3,028

Deficit £4,886
(£2,699 in 2018)

Assets and reserves policy

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

How the public benefit

As a charity we are obliged to show that the public benefits from our work. We hope that this review has given an insight into activities and campaigns that are improving the quality of life for people who live and work in Oxford.



A cruise round Oxford's ancient water boundaries led by local historian Mark Davies was one of many events greatly enjoyed by members
Photo courtesy of Roger Grosvenor

About us / contacts

OCS is a society for people who care about Oxford, want to enjoy it fully and help shape its future.

Our aim is an ever-improving quality of life in Oxford by working to influence planning, transport, the environment and community issues. New members are always welcome.

We are run by an Executive Committee whose members are elected at the AGM. Its members are listed on the website.

President: Sir Clive Booth

Chairman: Ian Green

Vice Chairman: Gillian Coates

Hon Secretary: Vernon Porter

Hon Treasurer: Richard Dodd

Oxford Civic Society

67 Cunliffe Close, Oxford OX2 7BJ

Tel: 075 05 756 692 | info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk

oxcivicsoc.org.uk | oxclean.org.uk

oxfordfutures.org.uk | oxfordwalks.org.uk

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