

March 2021

Number 148

Optimism is the key for 2021



An exceptionally wet winter led to floods in many parts of Oxford, as here on Christ Church meadow

Despite the terrible toll the pandemic has taken on the nation, the Society has grounds for optimism as our Vice Chairman explains.

This New Year is a good time for reflection and perhaps even optimism. Who would have imagined we would once again be in lockdown as a result of Covid -19 but this time threatened by mutant manifestations of the virus? But this is not a *déjà vu* moment, things are different from the first lockdown in March 2020. All our efforts have not been in vain but there is a prevailing sense of tiredness and a lack of conforming to advice and rules. This winter the streets are quiet but not empty. The universities, shops, pubs, cinemas, restaurants are all closed, there is less traffic in the city and parking in residential streets is now possible. But the light is visible at the end of this long tunnel and we all hope that, by the summer, most of us will have had the vaccine. Then life as we dimly remember it can slowly begin again.

Despite the challenges Covid -19 has brought, the work of the Society has not diminished in this period, rather we have responded by changing our methods – holding meetings online and replacing walks and visits with an increase in virtual talks and webinars. This year we are planning a

further series of webinars – look out for further information in due course.

Video-conferencing has enabled our Executive Officers and Groups to continue to meet and discuss key issues and respond to the various consultations from both the Government and City and County Councils. We have to be on our toes to keep up with the proposals and ensure that our input and responses reflect our members' views.

We have even increased our networking, holding regular meetings with the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Planning and Resources at the University of Oxford and the Director of Estates at Oxford Brookes University and we have participated in many more pre-consultation meetings with developers. Our participation ensures that the interests of the community at large are conveyed and in many cases we have influenced the size and shape of developments.

There are many important decisions to make in the coming months and the Society will ensure that we are a voice that is heard by those making decisions that will impact on life in the city and its environs and the communities who live and work in and around Oxford.

Optimism is the key (continued)



The Society on High

The pandemic has accelerated the trend towards more online shopping and the traditional high street is under threat as never before. The collapse of businesses, large and small, has left many empty shop units in Oxford as elsewhere.

We have taken advantage of this unwelcome situation to set up a temporary display at 115 High Street, next door to the OUP bookshop. Our thanks go to Lincoln College (one of our corporate members) which has made the shop window available to us free of charge, and to Cluttons who facilitated the project.

This double-width frontage gave us quite a challenge, with six metres of space to fill. Luckily, Christmas was in the offing so, alongside our exhibition banners, we added a silver Christmas tree (since removed!) and piles of wrapped parcels, each carrying a slogan that sets out our stall.

We hope the display will help raise awareness of what we do and even encourage new people to join our cause. Please tell us what you think of it! And if you would like to join the creative team please get in touch with us (see back page for addresses). We need to keep it like Oxford, constantly changing!

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This issue of *Visions* addresses a number of major topics that are currently exercising our working groups. I wonder how many of us have read the Oxford Local Plan? Its 265 pages make both interesting and worrying reading: we know many are concerned about the plans for new housing developments in the Green Belt area surrounding the City. Additionally, the Government White Paper has caused much adverse reaction and some members will recall the lively webinar we held to discuss our response to the public consultation. It remains essential that the Society continues to engage with the policy makers and local councillors to influence the outcomes which could both enhance and negatively impact on Oxford.

The elephant in the room is the **Devolution White Paper**, announced in 2020 but currently postponed. The prospect of a single unitary county council approach would see the abolition of the City and District Councils and remove local decision making. **This must not happen.** It is unclear when the White Paper will emerge.

As members will note from the above and the content of this issue, there is a lot of work ahead, work which the Society passionately undertakes. Your views are welcome and appreciated (as evinced by our recent Members' Survey) and remember we are always looking for new volunteers to join our groups, and of course, new members to join our ranks.

Gillian Coates

Vice Chairman



Please join us for the online AGM Thursday 18 March

Our AGM will once again be held online and will be a short business meeting with no speaker but with time for more discussion. See the back page for the agenda.

The annual review of 2020 has been mailed with this newsletter and is on the website. The meeting link will be sent to members by e-bulletin. Have we got your email address?

Joining up the dots ...

Andrew Pritchard reports

The Transport Group argues it's time to consider some of the many planning and transport initiatives together.

In our response to the Growth Board's **Oxfordshire Strategic Vision** consultation we were generally sympathetic to the Board's 11 Guiding Principles. But we were surprised that none of them were explicitly about transport, which is a key part of any planning. We believe that the vision should be promoting 'accessibility', which implies reducing the need to travel, rather than 'connectivity', which implies higher speeds and volumes of travel between places and ignores personal attributes such as car availability, income and physical mobility, which may prevent individuals from benefiting from improvements in transport connectivity.

We are planning a series of **debates** on strategic planning and transport, which we hope will contribute to public discussion of the issues – watch out for e-bulletins with the details.

Zero Emissions Zone (ZEZ): how to learn from it?



A pop-up charging point on trial. ZEZs will encourage the trend towards electric vehicles

Photo courtesy of the Oxford Mail

This experimental zone in the city centre should really be called a Low Emissions Zone since there are many permitted exceptions in the initial version and traffic restrictions will not apply throughout the full 24 hours. The Pilot Zone covers only a few streets that have no through traffic and few

residents. We therefore doubt whether results from its introduction will give much of a guide to how the wider Green Zone will work, though it may provide trial data for the operation of detection and charging systems.

The **Green Zone** is designed to prevent traffic travelling through the city centre from any direction and we are surprised that its introduction is planned only a few months after the introduction of the Pilot Zone, so that there will be little chance to learn from experience. It is important that data will be collected before and after its introduction to assess the effects. We also have concerns that the charging system is inequitable, favouring those who are most able to pay.

But the introduction of the Green ZEZ at the same time as bus gates is likely to result in confusion. We have strongly put forward the idea that transport issues such as the ZEZ, Connecting Oxford and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods need to be considered together. We need a comprehensive transport plan for the Oxford City region, rather than a series of separate initiatives as at present.

We also suggested that the introduction of the ZEZ could be used to bring forward proposals for **freight consolidation**, so that goods are delivered in central Oxford by emissions-free electric vans and freight cycles, operating from one or more peripheral locations to which they were delivered by HGVs. Oxford University is in favour of this, but it has so far found little interest from the authorities.

Street Design Guide

Together with other organisations such as the Urban Design Group we are very critical of the recently published Street Design Guide, prepared by consultants for the County Council. This is very much car-centred and ignores a number of other recent publications by planning authorities.

OxClean update

Our OxClean Spring Clean, usually held in March, has been delayed due to lockdown restrictions.

We have decided to delay the Spring Clean until we have more information about permitted outdoor and group activities. Please keep an eye on our e-bulletins and the OxClean website for updates – www.oxclean.org.uk

Meanwhile, there is much to be done to protect our communities from damage caused by litter. If you wish to continue to collect litter in the area where you exercise, you might consider buying your own litter picker as sadly we can't currently lend you equipment due to lockdown restrictions.

You can contact us on info@oxclean.org.uk for more advice about what you need and areas that you might visit.

But do stay safe when you are out, complying with [government guidance](#) and avoiding risks on fast roads or flooded areas near rivers.

Many thanks from the OxClean team!



Managing change for good

Gillian Coates reports

The Planning Group is involved in some major projects which will have a big impact on the city and its environs. Proposed planning 'reform' will affect the whole nation.

Within the city, we have recently been involved in discussions on the redevelopment of the **Clarendon Centre** and **Castle Hill House**, and we are participating in a Working Group which is developing a Masterplan for the revitalisation of the **Covered Market**. The report will be submitted to the City Council in October. In many cases our involvement in projects at an early stage has led to change which positively impacts on developments.

Managing change in the Green Belt

We are aware of and support the concerns of our membership and the community in respect of the erosion of the Green Belt surrounding the city. Some areas within the Green Belt have been designated in the Oxford Local Plan for permitted development. It seems we are locked into some development but location, type, size and shape are important and there must be proper consultation with all stakeholders.

Already we are seeing a number of plans for the creation of new and large housing estates, primarily to the north and east of the city. We have had pre-application meetings with developers to discuss plans for **Hill View Farm**, Old Marston; **St Frideswide Farm**, Cutteslowe; **Thornhill Park**, Risinghurst and the **Boundary Brook/Wick Farm** development at Barton.

Over time the St Frideswide Farm site will have two developments, immediately adjacent to each other and likely sharing access roads, one development coming under Oxford, the other under the control of Cherwell District.



The proposed St Frideswide Farm development is off the Banbury Road between Cutteslowe and Water Eaton. It will comprise over 100 new homes. Image courtesy of Savills

In our pre-consultation discussions, it appears there is no joined up thinking between the authorities. Such oversight will affect myriad aspects of the development and can lead to the loss of any benefit from economies of scale and infrastructure provision.

The planning 'reform' that will change town centres

In the November issue of *Visions* we expressed our grave reservations about the Government White Paper on planning. This was condemned by the majority of commentators as badly-timed and not fit for purpose. Now another proposed planning 'reform' follows hot on the heels of the White Paper.

This new proposal will extend national **permitted development right** (PDR) for change of use from commercial, business and service use class to residential use. It will mean, in effect, that the owner of an empty shop unit or office can turn it into a dwelling without going through the usual procedures.

The aim is understandable given the serious impact Covid-19 has had on the economy and consequently on the occupancy of high street premises. Repopulating town centres could bring them back to life and could enhance business with residents shopping locally. Living in the centre could also negate the need for cars, reducing traffic and consequently improving air quality. If the accommodation was affordable, it would make a commendable contribution for those who can't now anticipate being a home owner.

However, a number of proposals in the Paper are in our view unacceptable, namely:

- *deregulation can lead to unscrupulous developments* and exploitation of loopholes in legislation, potentially leading to poor quality accommodation;
- *changes to the consultation period* (effectively a reduction) will exclude effective engagement with the local community;
- *a broadening of PDR for land and properties within conservation areas* risks undermining the whole basis of conservation areas.

We have responded to the consultation (which closed on 28 January) expressing our reservations. We were pleased to see that our views are shared by Civic Voice, the umbrella group for 270+ civic societies. We once again await the outcome.

See our comments at www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/ocs-objects-to-planning-free-for-all/

Can anything change the housing market?

Peter Thompson reports

The pandemic appears to have had little effect on the local housing market.

A recent check on Rightmove and Zoopla reveals that the average price of a house here is now about £550,000, an increase of about 8-10% in the last year. About 700 transactions took place and around 900 homes are now up for sale.

On the face of it, and despite Covid-19, the market seems buoyant. The number of transactions and of properties for sale suggest not only that there are plenty of properties available, but that they are affordable – to some, at least.



*The former Nielsen offices in Risinghurst have been redeveloped as apartments, part of the Thornhill Park development
Photo courtesy of the Shaviram Group*

But the statistics hide a lot of detail; many cheaper homes are restricted to retirement-age purchasers and the figures include mobile homes and boats. First-time buyers in Oxford would need a household income of nearly £70,000 to 'get on the housing ladder', according to Zoopla. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), used in the preparation of the current Local Plans of Oxfordshire's five planning authorities assessed the income of 76% of the county's households as less than £60,000.

So the problem is as much one of wealth disparity as of new housing supply. Oxford's housing problems are complex: solving them is not just a local matter of building a lot more homes, but involves national policy on market regulation and reliance, local government funding and authority, and equitable taxation, at the least.

Meanwhile, the government's approach to the issues appears to be stimulation of the supply side of the housing market, by relaxation of planning constraints and proposals for wholesale reform of the planning system. The former includes widening permitted development rights and evident relaxation of Green Belt protections, raising the spectre of a raft of very sub-standard accommodation and yet more degradation of design. The Planning Group has responded to the latest proposal for 'reform' of the system (see page 4).

In any event, Oxford's, and the country's housing problems are not going to be solved anytime soon.

Blue Plaques in times of plague

Eda Forbes reports on the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board

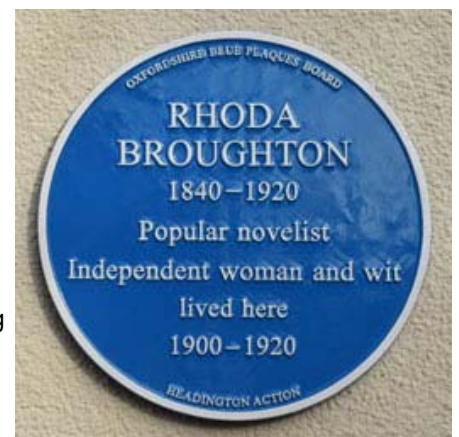
Three plaques were installed in 2020 despite the limitations imposed by Covid restrictions.

Eight plaques were planned last year and five of them have been held over for possibly better prospects of proper ceremonies this year. We decided, however, to install two plaques without ceremonies because they were especially associated with the centenary of women being admitted to full membership of Oxford University in October 1920.

These were **Annie Rogers (1856-1937)**, a ceaseless campaigner for women's full membership of Oxford University, at 35 St Giles (Armed Forces Recruitment Office); and **Ivy Williams (1877-1966)**, the first woman to be called to the Bar (Inner Temple), university teacher and benefactor of town and gown, at 12 King Edward Street (an Oriol College property).

We also erected a plaque for a third woman, **Rhoda Broughton (1840 - 1920)**, whose popular novels had paved the way for changing attitudes to women's rights. Her plaque was installed at River View, Headington Hill. A select 'group of six' gathered there on 21 October, including the Chair of Headington Action which had made a substantial donation towards the plaque.

Our thanks to the Society for its continuing financial support.



Beneath our wheels

Juliet Blackburn makes a case

Many road surfaces in the historic centre of Oxford are in poor shape and need major improvement if Oxford is to live up to its heritage status.

Some city centre streets are in a shocking state, not only a blight on our city but a danger to cyclists and pedestrians. If various traffic-reduction schemes succeed, there may be less motorised traffic using these historic streets in future but we still need road surfaces that look appropriate in their historic context, are safe for cyclists and pedestrians, and last well.



Merton Street – uneven cobbles, tarmac infill and yellow lines make for a visual mess and a danger to users

Photo courtesy of the author

Surrounded by wonderful buildings, **Merton Street** is a great tourist attraction. However the street surface is a mess and is unsuitable for all who use it. It could be both attractive and practical. My suggestion would be to put a new small stone surface (smoother than cobbles) with flat stones down each side for cyclists as there is in part of Alfred Street.

Beaumont Street is heavily used as a through route by different types of traffic. It has been 'half-resurfaced' recently, but this work should be finished. Since it is not part of the ancient walled city, it probably need not have a historic road surface.

Broad Street may become car-free in the future which will improve it as a through route for cyclists and provide more space

for groups of tourists. It should be considered for long-term surface improvement, allowing for controlled access for deliveries to businesses and colleges.

There are other narrow streets in central Oxford (eg **Queen's Lane**) where the surfaces need to be improved for pedestrians and cyclists.

We need a new focus on road surfaces as a key part of the public realm. Quality surfaces that are practical for the transport that will be using them in the next 50 years will enhance our city and make it safer.

A problem with our system of financing public works is that it operates on a short-term basis with dribs of money throughout one year. The fact that a capital project might last for 50 years rather than five years doesn't really enter the planning of infrastructure projects. In the long run a proper job will actually cost less and last longer. It is difficult to see how to get round this.

One approach might be a public/private partnership, perhaps involving the colleges and other local landlords, with donations from those who care about what Oxford looks like. Maybe we should have a local lottery to help pay for longer-term work? A tax on tourists might provide funds too. Should historic Oxford become a World Heritage Site? Such a status might release funds and provide opportunities to learn how other historic cities operate. Many historic European cities have superb block-paved streets and piazzas.

We have already fought many battles – for example for dropped kerbs and against gates blocking cyclists – and have won some of them. But there is much more to be done. What do you think? Comments to info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk

OCS Calendar

'Cut out and keep'

Online talks

March – July 2021

Thursday 11 March 8pm

Managing Oxford in challenging times with Gordon Mitchell

Thursday 18 March 6.30pm

AGM – see back page

Tuesday 20 April 8pm

A history of the Church through its buildings with Allan Doig

Wednesday 5 May 8pm

The University of Oxford's development plans with David Prout

Tuesday 18 May 8pm

Finding Nemon – a distinguished Oxford sculptor with Aurelia Young



Tuesday 8 June 8pm

How Oxford can achieve net zero CO₂ emissions with Professor Nick Eyre

Thursday 1 July 8pm

RSPB Otmoor - "an incredible wetland oasis" with David Wilding

Webinars on a strategy for the Oxford city region – watch out for announcements in our e-bulletin about this planned series of panel discussions



Programme April – July 2021

Talks online – all welcome

Talks are free, just tune in – and please help us to recruit new members by telling your friends

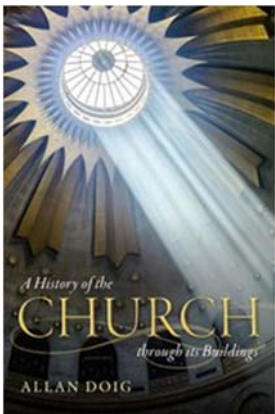
We are assuming that talks will need to continue online, via Zoom, during the spring and early summer months. Walks, visits and in-person talks will resume eventually, we hope in the late summer/autumn.

We will give you a link to each talk in the members' e-bulletin, shortly before the talk takes place, or go to our website. Register for the talk and we'll send an email with a link to it. (Non-members can email events@oxcivicsoc.org.uk to request the link.)

When you join the talk we'll explain the procedure for asking questions. Talks will usually be recorded and you can watch them afterwards via our website. Note, the audience is not visible during the talk.

A history of the Church through its buildings

Tuesday 20 April 8pm



In his newly published book, **Allan Doig** (Emeritus Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall) takes us to meet people who lived through momentous religious changes in the very spaces where the story of the Church took shape. Their stories become embedded in the very fabric itself and – as the fabric is modified through time – the architecture becomes the standing history of passing waves of humanity. Examples with strong Oxford connections will be explored in the talk.

The University of Oxford's development plans

Wednesday 5 May 8pm

David Prout (Pro-Vice Chancellor for Planning and Resources) will give an overview of the University's plans, both in the city and in the Cherwell District Council area. He will also touch on the impact on the University of the Covid pandemic and the University's actions to cope with it.



Finding Nemon – a distinguished Oxford sculptor

Tuesday 18 May 8pm

The renowned sculptor Oscar Nemon created busts of many world figures and was befriended by Churchill in the years following the Second World War. **Aurelia Young** will recount the story of her father's life and his work, latterly at Boar's Hill.



How Oxford can achieve net zero CO₂ emissions

Tuesday 8 June 8pm

National and local government commitments to net zero CO₂ emissions have major implications for energy, transport and heating. **Professor Nick Eyre**, recently appointed as Scientific Adviser to Oxford City Council, will consider what needs to be done locally, what progress is being made and what more needs to be done.



RSPB Otmoor - "an incredible wetland oasis"

Thursday 1 July 8pm

Otmoor is one of Oxfordshire's greatest conservation success stories. Discover from **David Wilding**, the Otmoor Reserve Site Manager, how the RSPB has "transformed boring arable fields into an incredible wetland oasis in the heart of England". Former wheat fields are now home to an impressive range of wetland species including bittern, marsh harrier and drumming snipe.

Webinars – see page 6



Please join us for the AGM!

Vernon Porter issues a warm welcome

Our 52nd AGM will be held online and will be a short business meeting followed by a chance to ask questions or raise issues about Oxford or the Society.

We will send out a link to the meeting shortly before it takes place – so please save the date!

Thursday 18 March at 6.30pm

Please have this agenda with you along with the Annual Review of 2020 which was mailed with this newsletter. The Review is our report to members.

Copies of the minutes of the 2020 AGM and the full accounts for 2020 are available on the website or from me:

Vernon Porter, Hon Secretary, email: info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk
67 Cunliffe Close, Oxford OX2 7BJ

Agenda

- 1 President's welcome
- 2 Apologies for absence
- 3 Minutes of AGM held on 17 June 2020
- 4 Matters arising from the minutes
- 5 Annual report
- 6 Accounts for 2020
- 7 Vote of thanks to retiring Officers and Trustees
- 8 Election of Officers for 2021-22
- 9 Election of Committee Members for 2021-22
- 10 Any other business of which notice has been given
- 11 Open discussion

The Holly legacy

We continue to liaise with Oxford Pedestrians Association and the local Ramblers to develop ideas for the investment of Keith Holly's generous legacy. If you have thoughts on this there is still time to contact us: info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk



Mailing Visions

We're pleased to say that *Visions* is now being mailed in a paper envelope, having been mailed in a plastic wrapper for some time to save weight and hence postage. More environmentally-friendly solutions were very expensive.

But now the Royal Mail is doing the right thing and has lowered postal rates for items mailed out in paper, while increasing them for plastic.

So we all benefit – please recycle the envelope!

Have you changed your subs payment?

Some members are still paying us at the old subscription rate. From this January subs are £15 for a single membership and £25 for two people living at the same address.

If you have yet to take action, please cancel or amend your old standing order or ideally take out a direct debit. If we don't hear from you we will assume you wish to cancel your membership – but we'd really prefer you to stay!

Many thanks from Liz Grosvenor!

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

Membership costs £15 (£25 for two people at the same address) with concessions for students and residents' associations. Corporate rates on application. You can join online or contact Liz Grosvenor at membership@oxcivicsoc.org.uk

Oxford Civic Society

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Letters to the Editor and photos can be sent to Hilary Bradley newsletter@oxcivicsoc.org.uk or by post to the above address.

Visions is published in March, July and November ISSN 2051-137X

We are a registered charity No. 1116739

