PART 1 – MAIN TEXT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oxford Town Hall is a building that has an important place in several distinct and important traditions. At the specific level of the city of Oxford, the current buildings represent the fourth generation of municipal offices to have occupied this central location immediately to the south of Carfax, the crossroads at the heart of the medieval town and modern city. As such the Town Hall is the physical embodiment of continuous urban government on the same site since 1229 – and of Oxford’s civil administration stretching back several centuries even before that. On a wider level the present Town Hall was built in 1893–7 as part of the national wave for constructing ever more grand and impressive municipal buildings. The complex designed for Oxford was one of the best works of the architect Henry T Hare, for whom town halls and libraries became a true trademark. Here his flamboyant and finely detailed design responded brilliantly to the awkwardly shaped, sloping city centre location. The two main facades onto St Aldates and Blue Boar Street are both of very high quality, although the St Aldates elevation is clearly dominant. The rear sides of the complex are barely seen and, in common with many other town halls, libraries and other equivalent buildings, they are characterised by plain, strictly functional walls.

The interior spaces can be similarly divided into the magnificent and the mundane. The former category includes several sequences of rooms of almost processional design, reflecting their original (though not necessarily current) uses. The most important civic suites open off a common approach via the entrance foyer off St Aldates, grand stairs and upper landing. The latter gives access to the extraordinarily decorative Main Hall, the corridor to the Council Chamber and associated rooms, the Assembly Room (a medieval/Tudor-style great hall in miniature, though still an imposing space), and the panelled sobriety of the Court complex. These rooms all lie at first floor level. The Court complex is also accessible directly from the Police Station and its cells, entered off Blue Boar Street and spread over the ground floor and basement. These levels also contain council offices and storage. Unsurprisingly these areas are much more restrained in their architectural treatment and ornament, though the council offices retain many attractive original features such as doors, windows and fireplaces.

The final element of the late Victorian municipal buildings has always had an element of separation from the Town Hall, though this is now somewhat blurred. The plot on the corner of St Aldates and Blue Boar Street was designed as the city’s first Public Library, with reading rooms on a raised ground floor accessible from an entrance stair on the corner. The Reference Library lay on the first floor, and storage was provided in the basement. The library moved to a new home in the Westgate Centre in 1973, and the old library was converted into the Museum of Oxford, opened in 1975. The new museum was housed on the ground floor and basement, so that the old Reference
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Library became part of the Town Hall complex. It can still be entered from the Museum foyer via a staircase that also provides access to a caretaker’s flat, but to all intents and purposes it is managed and used as part of the Town Hall’s public rooms.

Oxford Town Hall is generally in good condition, though there is a backlog of repair and maintenance work to deal with. The buildings are, after all, little more than a century old. Nevertheless they make an important contribution to a city that is internationally famous for its rich stock of historic buildings, the oldest of which date back almost a millennium. Unfortunately buildings designed for urban administration and prestige of the late Victorian era do not always provide the level of facilities and access that are expected in and by 21st-century society. Such is the case with Oxford’s Town Hall. Though generally recognised as a grand structure appropriate for its prime purpose, it is also known for its access difficulties, as well as a relatively poor audience profile and take-up (especially in the Museum of Oxford). A significant area of the building is either under-used or not used at all, especially in the basements and, to a lesser extent, the ground floor.

The Town Hall therefore presents many challenges for Oxford City Council, its owner, in devising appropriate ways of managing and maintaining the structure. The Town Hall is a Grade II* Listed Building, and also lies within a Conservation Area. These designations both recognise and protect not only the building’s own historic and architectural significance, but also those of its urban surroundings. There is also the potential for important archaeological remains to survive below ground. It seems clear that the Town Hall will need some alterations, and perhaps quite extensive development, if it is to have a fully sustainable economic future. The process of planning and implementing such changes while preserving the significance of the site and its setting will not be an easy one. It will require care, discussion, consultation, and above all full consideration of the conservation needs of the built fabric. This extends to the interiors just as much as the facades, and encompasses fixtures, fittings, and some at least of the contents (eg the civic plate). Oxford City Council therefore commissioned this Conservation Management Plan as a vital step in this process.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 A CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR OXFORD TOWN HALL

Conservation planning is increasingly understood to be crucial to the beneficial use and guardianship of important historic structures and estates. Conservation Management Plans are designed to describe a place and define its significance. They then go on to assess the vulnerability both of the place and its significance. Finally they establish conservation policies to ensure the long-term protection of the place, and the retention and enhancement of its significance. The Management element of the Plan provides or suggests a framework for implementing the Conservation Policies.

The Conservation Management Plan for Oxford Town Hall has been be devised in accordance with the parameters and guidance laid down in the Heritage Lottery

Prepared by the Keevill Heritage Consultancy for Oxford City Council

The objectives of the Conservation Management Plan are to:

- **Understand the site** by drawing together information including documents and physical evidence in order to present an overall description of the place through time. This has been the subject of extensive research, and the results are presented in section 3 (with further detail in the appended Gazetteer).
- **Assess its significance** both generally and for its principal components. Significance is expressed and justified hierarchically, as explained in section 4.
- **Define issues** affecting the significance of the site and buildings, or which have the potential to affect them in future, and **develop conservation and management policies** to ensure significance is retained in future management, use and/or alteration. These include management and use issues now and for the future, actual or potential conflicting pressures for use of the various parts of the building, condition and safety, gaps in current knowledge of the building and its site, interpretation, and other matters. These elements are in Section 5.

Oxford City Council has commissioned this Conservation Management Plan in parallel with an Access Plan and an Audience Development Plan. The teams working on these three documents have collaborated closely throughout, and the results of each study have informed the development of the others.

The aim of this Conservation Management Plan is to help retain the significance of Oxford Town Hall, not least because there is – and is always likely to be – a need for routine management, maintenance and repair of the site, while there may be larger developments as well. Any such work needs to be informed by the best possible understanding of the Town Hall’s historic development, significance and sensitivity. While the principal rooms of the Town Hall are currently very well used throughout the year, there are many other areas that are either under-used or not in use at all. Oxford City Council is addressing these issues, and the Conservation Management Plan is a fundamental tool in this process. It will be used to support any applications for grant aid, eg to the Heritage Lottery Fund for grant aid. It should also be a valuable support in applications for Listed Building Consent for any alterations that may be required in the future, eg to improve access to and around the building.

Oxford City Council wishes to improve the Town Hall

- to enhance its spaces, as a civic and cultural amenity for the people of Oxford;
- to improve physical and intellectual access; and
- to provide additional revenue generation to offset running costs.

While the Town Hall is a working building for the council’s administration, it is also very much a public space and a venue for popular events. It was designed to serve these dual functions from its very beginning. In January 2004 the architects Berman Guedes Stretton were contracted to carry out a feasibility study and provide outline architectural concepts as a first step towards achieving the improvements sought by the City Council. Their study was completed and published in April 2004 and in
summary identified what potential physical changes could be made to the building, and a range of options for new, cultural, community and commercial use.

This Conservation Management Plan (along with parallel Audience Development and Action Plans) has been commissioned as an independent review of the Town Hall’s significance, and related vulnerability issues. It refers to and assesses the potential impact of the proposals outlined in the Berman Guedes Stretton feasibility study, and supersedes the latter as far as conservation, management and development planning are concerned. The design concepts of the feasibility study remain broadly in place. The Access and Audience Development Plans should be referred to for summary and full descriptions of their findings.

2.2 THE STUDY AREA

Oxford Town Hall is located at the very heart of the city centre, immediately to the south of the Carfax crossroads between High Street, St Aldates, Cornmarket and Queen Street. Although the Town Hall’s postal address is given as Blue Boar Street, the principal façade in fact fronts onto St Aldates rather than this relatively minor road running east from it. In many senses the Town Hall can be seen as the pivotal point between Town and Gown, with the commercial centre lying mainly to its north and west and the University to its south, east and north-east.

The Conservation Management Plan fully covers all Victorian elements of the Town Hall, and the historical development of the site it occupies. This includes a late medieval cellar at its north-east corner. The 1932 extension at the junction of St Aldates and High Street is only treated in a summary fashion, as it is not key to the significance of the Town Hall. The 1996 extension on Blue Boar Street – Ebor House – is only mentioned in passing, once again because it has no direct relevance to the significance of the site. The Plan also covers major architectural features, fixtures and fittings such as windows, doors, decorative plasterwork, sculpture, fireplaces, overmantels, and furniture. In contrast no consideration has been given to more modern furniture etc, or ephemeral materials with little or no direct relationship to the building or its designed functions. The Town Hall contains a good collection of artworks, for instance, but most of these are incidental to the building. The civic plate stored in the medieval cellar or on display in the Town Hall, by contrast, is extremely important and has been included.
2.3 NATURE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

As the name implies, a Conservation Management Plan is essentially concerned with the protection of our fragile cultural, historic and natural resources so that they can be sustained into the future. Plans are usually specific to a site or place and seek to explain why it is significant and whether there are any threats to it or where the significance might be vulnerable. It must be emphasised, however, that this is not a Condition Survey, though extensive reference has been made to existing Condition Survey of the Town Hall by Dickinson Associates dated June 2003. We have also referred to the current Access Audit, also by Dickinson Associates and dated February 2003. The Conservation Management Plan does not provide detailed instructions on how the place should be looked after. Rather it is to intended to determine what is important about the site and why. It then establishes policies for retaining and where relevant enhancing significance into the future, and a suggested structure for management and implementation.

2.4 CONSULTATION PROCESS

The Conservation Management Plan has involved extensive internal consultation with key officers of Oxford City Council. These have included Jane Lubbock (Facilities Manager), Edith Gollnast (Historic Buildings and Conservation Officer), Brian Durham (City Archaeologist) and Ian Gordon (Estates and Buildings Manager). Bob Hill, project manager for the Town Hall development concept, has also been an important point of contact, consultation and advice. The draft report was circulated to a number of external consultees, and comments were received from English Heritage, the Victorian Society, and the Victorian Group of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society. We are most grateful for their help and predominantly positive comments. Where necessary the text has been corrected or amended to take account of their advice.

2.5 AUTHORSHIP

The research for the Oxford Town Hall Conservation Management Plan has been carried out by Graham Keevill, Catherine Underwood and Kirsty Warren during 2005-6. The text has been written by Graham Keevill, where relevant drawing on the sources listed in the bibliography. There has been close collaboration with the teams working on the Access and Audience Development Plans (Jane Toplis Associates and ABL Cultural Consulting respectively), as the three reports have been developed in parallel. All three teams have attended joint steering group meetings, as well as making joint site visits. This has maximised efficiency both for the consultants and City Council staff. The final document was printed in August 2006.
3 DESCRIPTION

3.1 GEOLGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

Oxford developed above the 61 m (200 ft) contour towards the southern end of the Summertown-Radley gravel terrace, at the confluence of the river Thames and one of its main tributaries, the Cherwell. The area had been an important routeway for millennia before the foundation of the city, but the most important features had been the Roman road to the east between Alchester and Dorchester on Thames, and the several fords to the west at Ferry Hinksey and (further out) at Swinford Bridge. The braided channels of the river which snake around the west, south and east sides of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval city may have acted as a deterrent to early settlement (see below), but eventually they were to represent significant advantages. They offered defensive capability, power, and of course a constant supply of water. Even so the channels were always an inhibitor of growth, particularly to the south and west where the floodplains were useful as a natural resource but presented a difficult environment for building without intensive preparatory works.

3.2 PREHISTORIC, ROMAN AND EARLY SAXON REMAINS IN OXFORD

There have been occasional discoveries of archaeological material from the prehistoric, Roman and early Saxon periods in Oxford, although remarkably little has been recovered from the area within the Saxon and medieval defences. A cluster of Neolithic finds from the Christ Church area has been taken as evidence for a settlement site there, but prehistoric material is otherwise largely confined to areas such as Port Meadow, University Parks and the Science Area adjoining the latter. Bronze Age barrows have been identified at each of these sites, while a Beaker burial has been excavated at the Hamel (St Thomas’s Street). Later prehistoric and Roman archaeology is similarly distributed in the extra-mural area, although the Roman pottery industry provides an important regional context for the city and its environs in this period.

Post-Roman/early Saxon material has been equally hard to find, and there is virtually no evidence yet for a settlement of this period. By the 8th century, however, it seems that much (perhaps all) of what became Oxford was part of a royal estate with a centre at Headington. The reputed foundation of a monastery on or near the present cathedral site in c 727 by St Frideswide is generally accepted as the starting point for historic Oxford. The first certain reference to the foundation only occurs in 1004 (in a context suggestive of a well-established site), but 9th-century burials have been found in Tom Quad at Christ Church. There is still little evidence for a settlement to go with St Frideswide’s, although the approach from the south was being developed with artificial causeways and embankments apparently from the middle of the 8th century onwards (Dodd 2003).

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1 All dates and centuries are AD unless otherwise stated from this point in the text onwards.
3.3 **THE LATER SAXON BURH: DEFENCE AND SETTLEMENT**

The upper reaches of the Thames were disputed territory, with Mercia and Wessex vying for control during the 8th and 9th centuries. Mercia ruled for much of this time, but Wessex had taken control of its historic rival by 911. That was the year in which Edward the Elder took control of Oxford, which was then included in the system of fortified towns known as *burhs*. These had been established by Alfred and developed by his son Edward. Some were newly created settlements but others like Oxford were already in existence. It is not known whether Alfred or Edward built Oxford’s defences; the latter is generally credited with the internal street layout, but this would have been secondary anyway apart from the main arterial routes such as St Aldates and its northward extension, Cornmarket.

The original Anglo-Saxon defences comprised an earthen bank with timber revetment, subsequently clad in stone, and an external ditch. The circuit is reasonably well understood, especially on the north side of the city. The north-west corner of the ditch has been found south of George Street, although the remainder of the west side was lost under the new Norman castle’s moat. The exact line of the east side is unknown, but is generally thought to run in between Catte Street and medieval School Street (ie the west side of Radcliffe Square). This would take the bank and ditch under the Old Schools Quadrangle (Bodleian Library) and the Radcliffe Camera. The Sheldonian Theatre lies over the north circuit close to its north-west corner. The two churches of St Michael probably mark the positions of the north and south gates, and the Saxo-Norman tower of St Michael at Northgate is the earliest surviving building in the city. The east gate probably lay where the church of St Mary the Virgin now stands, while construction of the Norman castle destroyed the Anglo-Saxon west gate. In effect the latter replaced the west gate, dominating this side of the urban area. The town itself is characterised in the archaeological record by the cellar-pits of what must have been substantial houses, and the pits where rubbish was thrown away. The
frontages in the planned layout of streets became intensively developed - Oxford was an undoubted success of Anglo-Saxon town planning.

The beginning of the 11th century saw major problems visited on Oxford as a result of renewed activity from the Danelaw. There was a massacre of Danes at the city in 1002, but in 1009 Oxford was sacked and burnt, no doubt at least partly in revenge. The output of the city’s mint was disrupted, although royal councils were still held there. These events provide the background to a significant extension of the Anglo-Saxon defences within the late Saxon period, though again the exact construction date is not known. The entire eastern suburb was encompassed in this extension, and the change in alignment at the Smith Gate (eg the head of Catte Street) marks the start of the new circuit.

3.4 THE MEDIEVAL DEFENCES AND CITY

3.4.1 General developments

The late Saxon defences remained largely unchanged into the 13th century, but, from 1226 onwards, Oxford received a series of murage grants. It is generally assumed that this provided the impetus (and finance) to replace the old stone-faced rampart with a new free-standing stone wall incorporating bastions (half-round towers projecting from the outer face) at intervals. These were especially prevalent on the long northern stretch of the circuit which faced out onto the least defensible landward approach. The routes in from the other sides were protected by the various watercourses with associated gates and drawbridges. Many of the bastions have been demolished over the years, but their positions are known and several have been excavated. One of these, in the Clarendon Quadrangle immediately to the north of the Bodleian Library’s Old Schools Quadrangle, was excavated in the late 19th century (one of Oxford’s first modern archaeological excavations). There have also been a number of sections excavated across the Anglo-Saxon and medieval defences.

The medieval city was dominated by the University and a variety of religious foundations. The eastern half of the intra-mural area was largely controlled by the University, individual colleges and academic halls (licensed lodging houses for students). The religious foundations - especially the abbeys and friaries - formed a near-continuous arc around the outside of the western half of the defences, only interrupted by the parish of St Thomas. Therefore, intra-mural private and commercial growth was largely restricted to the area between Cornmarket and the castle. Not surprisingly, non-monastic extra-mural areas also saw considerable expansion, not least because they were not liable to the various duties and fees levied within the walls. The parish of St Thomas was the scene of notable growth from the 12th century onwards, at least initially encouraged by Oseney Abbey, while another important suburb grew up at about the same time to the north of the extra-mural street which now forms George Street and Broad Street. There had been further expansion to the east of this, towards Holywell, by 1500.
3.4.2 Medieval tenements on the Town Hall site

The Town Hall site lies within south-east ward of medieval Oxford a few yards back from Carfax, and formed part of a substantial rectangular block of tenements. This block had its principal frontages on St Aldates, High Street, Jury Lane (no longer extant) and St Edward or Vine Hall Street. The north end of the latter survives as Alfred Street. Most tenements were long and narrow, with a common rear boundary running parallel to St Aldates, a little to the east of the centre of the block. High Street and St Aldates meet at a slight angle, and the alignment of the former as much as the latter influenced development of properties fronting onto St Aldates throughout the medieval period and subsequently. Certainly the High Street frontage at least was intensively developed throughout the medieval period, and St Aldates slightly less so (this is reflected in the broader frontages that survived into the 19th century). The rear areas of the properties, meanwhile, were used initially for gardens and rubbish disposal. Later many of these rear (backland) areas became developed in their own right, accessible via narrow lanes leading off the frontages. Some of these lanes (eg Kemp Hall Passage, running from High Street through to Blue Boar Street) still survive today, having become important and evocative elements of Oxford’s townscape.

This area was an important part of the Jewish quarter, which lay in the St Martin’s and All Saints parishes until the Jews were expelled from the town in 1290. The
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synagogue lay a short distance away to the south of the medieval Guildhall² (VCH 1979, 26-7). Indeed the site of the latter had belonged to a Jew (Moses, son of Isaac; Salter 1960, 226) until it was either sold or given to the town’s municipal authorities by King Henry III in 1229 (ibid, and VCH 1979, 24 and 63). As the published survey of medieval Oxford shows, several properties to the south of the Guildhall were also owned by Jews in the 13th century (Salter 1960, 226-7). The former Jewish presence was recognised for a long time afterwards in the name Jury Lane, known as Little Jewry in 1330 (Salter 1960, 223). This side road off the east side of St Aldates had been subsumed by Christ Church around 1550, when Blue Boar Street was also created (ibid, 264; Hiller and Wilkinson 1998, 147).

The property immediately to the south of the Guildhall was also associated with the Jewish community in various ways. Henry III granted the property to an Oxford Jew, David, and his family on 9 May 1228. This had been owned by Aubrey le Converse (ie a converted Jew), son of Isaac. At some point between 1228 and 1245 ownership seems to have passed to the Domus Conversorum in London, a house for converted Jews (VCH 1978, 331), and subsequent tenants paid rents to the Domus. By the end of the 14th century this property was known as Carys Inn (Salter 1960, 226-7). The city obtained the lease of the tenement in 1541, gaining the freehold as well in 1562, and extended the Guildhall over the former Inn (ibid, 227; VCH 1978, 331). Perhaps the Domus was converted rather than replaced (see VCH 1978, 331), as Hurst drew it in the 19th century.³

The area around Carfax was also very much the commercial heart of the medieval town. The shambles (market area with stalls) lay at the west end of High Street, which had been know as Butchers’ Street in the early 13th century because of their premises on its south side (VCH 1978, 27). St Aldates was known as Fish Street during the medieval period, reflecting its use by fishmongers for their stalls (Salter 1960, 225; VCH 1978, 27). The west front of the Guildhall itself had been adapted to this purpose when stalls for selling dried fish were built along its frontage (Sturdy 2004, fig 30a – see the above illustration). There were also many inns on the High Street and St Aldates

² The first Guildhall seems to have been on Queen Street opposite St Martin’s church (VCH 1978, 24), but the St Aldates site maintained its primacy from 1229 onwards.
³ Though the copy in the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies includes the note “from an old picture in [the] Bodleian [Library]” – perhaps Hurst copied this.
frontages, a fact still apparent on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps and indeed in the present townscape. The medieval property immediately to the north of the 13th-century Guildhall called Knaphall (or Knapp Hall) was occupied by Adam the vintner (wine seller) in 1229. Knaphall was also known as the Falcon by 1493 (when it was sold to Thomas Scow fishmonger), and was later called the Castle Inn (Salter 1960, 225-6). The very fine 14th or 15th-century vaulted cellar of Knapp Hall still survives under the north-west corner of the Town Hall. The cellar lies at a notably skewed angle to the St Aldates frontage, reflecting as much the influence of the first few properties running back from the south side of High Street. The old Guildhall was also raised over vaulted cellars, and these were also rented out as taverns at various times during the medieval period (ibid, 226). Sadly these cellars were demolished when a new Town Hall was built in 1751 (Sturdy 2004, fig 32a – see above left).

3.5 THE TOWN HALL OF 1751, AND OTHER BUILDINGS ON THE SITE

While the University continued to dominate life in Oxford during the 16th and 17th centuries, civil government and urban administration were gradually becoming more important. The facilities in the old Guildhall, extended by the 16th-century acquisition of the Domus Conversorum, were arranged around a courtyard. The original hall – often referred to as the upper hall, in contrast to the lower hall of the Domus – ran eastwards at a slight angle from St Aldates to form the north side of the courtyard. This range was rebuilt in 1615 (VCH 1978, 331-2). Despite this the upper and lower halls struggled to meet the needs of the town corporation, and moves to replace them with a new, purpose-built town hall accelerated in the early 18th century. Funds of around £1300 were contributed by six local dignitaries – county justices of the peace Thomas Rowney, James and Philip Herbert, Frances Carter, Benjamin Sweet and Sir John Smith. Plans for a new hall were drawn up in 1746, but initially it looked as though the cost of providing the new building would stall the project. Thomas Rowney had died in 1727, but his son (also Thomas) cleared the path by underwriting all further costs – around £1000 – in 1751. The old halls were promptly demolished (the drawing on the left shows work in progress, with the medieval interior and cellars of the upper hall exposed), and construction of the new Town Hall took place during 1751-2. It was opened with due ceremony – a Venison Feast – in 1753 (ibid, 332).

Isaac Ware (1704-66) was the architect of the new Town Hall. He had served his apprenticeship under the architect Thomas Ripley, an official of the Royal Works,
from 1721-8. Ripley may have influenced Ware’s early appointments with the same body, for instance as Clerk of Works at Windsor Castle from 14 October 1729 and at Greenwich on 28 May 1736. Ware had close connections with the influential Lord Burlington. He published a number of important books on classical, especially Italian architecture, and Oxford Town Hall was among his most important commissions (Colvin 1995, 1020-2). His builder was John Townesend III, the third generation in charge of an important Oxford family business that had carried out numerous important contracts for the University (eg by John Townesend II at Corpus Christi College, and himself in various parts of the Bodleian Library complex; ibid, 982-4).

The Town Hall of 1751 stretched along the St Aldates frontage, with a symmetrical Italianate façade in three parts. The central bay under a pediment was flanked by a further bay to either side (see upper photograph, right). Each bay featured three openings on both the ground and first floors. The ground floor was an open corn market hidden from the street by a continuous arcade, with an oblong hall above it at first floor level. This room was of good proportions, about 130ft long and 30ft wide (c. 39.62m x 9.14m). A row of pillars divided it into two court rooms; the pillars were replaced by sliding partitions in 1790. There was a grand jury room to the north of the hall. The main staircase to the latter rose from the centre of the corn market’s east wall, projecting into the courtyard behind it. The council offices built in 1615 on the north side of the courtyard remained in use (see lower photograph, right), while Nixon’s School occupied the south side. The school had been founded in 1659 for the education of sons of city freemen (VCH 1978, 332; Norbury 2001, 135), and its buildings were of good quality (though small). The chief constable’s house lay on the east side of the courtyard. The buildings to the south of Nixon’s School as far as Blue Boar Street – houses, shops, stables, sheds and a billiards room – were still in private tenancy, on land belonging to St Frideswide’s (ie Christ Church).

3.6 THE NEW MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS OF 1893-7

3.6.1 Cramped and inconvenient: problems with the old Town Hall

Further changes were made in and around the Town Hall complex during the middle decades of the 19th century. In 1854 a public library opened in the ground floor, Oxford thus becoming the ninth public library provider in England (Dewe 1981, 111). At about the same time a new Town Clerk’s or Receiver’s office was added to the

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4 Richard Piddington and Robert Tawney were his co-contractors.
The Post Office in particular needed more room, and in 1873 the Oxford architect Henry Tollitt prepared plans for expanded postal facilities. In fact a new central Post Office was built on the west side of St Aldates instead, to E G Rivers’s design, and this opened in 1880. The space thus vacated at the south end of the ground floor must have provided some respite, and nothing further happened over the next few years. The inadequacy of the Town Hall was drawing public comment, however, not least as the national movement to build grand new municipal buildings as symbols of civic pride was already well under way by the 1870s-80s (Cunningham 1981). A letter published in the *Oxford Times* on 14 June 1884 specifically described the library as being ‘sadly behind the day’. This criticism was reflected in the civic authorities’ own discussions – in 1886 the City Building Improvement Committee decried the library and public reading room as ‘a disgrace to an enlightened and progressive city’, while the Town Hall was ‘ill-shaped and not convenient’ – the above photograph shows the council chamber. In 1887 it was suggested that city representatives should tour various other cities to inspect their new municipal buildings. This duly happened in September 1889, with Nottingham, Wakefield, Bolton and Manchester being visited (Norbury 2001, 135-6). The latter in particular must have been an interesting and instructive experience, as Manchester’s city centre is still a standing testament to the massive scale of urban development that took place in the Victorian era.

The year 1889 was to prove momentous for other reasons as well. Oxford’s city authorities still lacked meaningful power in the middle of the 19th century, even though it had been established formally by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. The University was still the dominant force in the city, and past scandals over civic corruption were still in the public memory. Civic authority gradually increased, however, as it accrued responsibilities in such areas as Paving (what we would now refer to as townscape, or public amenity space) and, especially, public health and services. The crucial breakthrough occurred in November 1889, when Oxford was

north end of the Town Hall over the Knapp Hall cellar, while a new covered Cornmarket was built behind (east of) the chief constable’s house in 1861-3, to the design of Samuel Lipscomb Seckham. He had already developed the Park Town area of North Oxford. This photograph (left) shows the interior of his Cornmarket, in an interesting Gothic revival mixture of Saxon-Norman and Romanesque styles.

These additions and improvements prolonged the life of Ware’s Town Hall, but space continued to be at a premium.

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confirmed as a county borough. This would be the trigger for the wholesale redevelopment of the Town Hall and its surrounding buildings in the 1890s. The ground for this had been cleared – figuratively if not literally speaking just yet – over the previous few years as the leases and freeholds on neighbouring properties were acquired. The old St Frideswide (Christ Church) rents on Blue Boar Street were vital in this respect, as they provided a much more extensive site than before. This extract (right) from the Ordnance Survey 1st edition map of 1876 shows the disposition of the various 17th and 18th-century buildings around the Town Hall Yard as well as the private properties to the south.

3.6.2 Towards a new Town Hall complex: 1891-3

A further important event occurred during the autumn of 1889 – municipal elections – and the fate of the city’s Town Hall was very much a live issue. The Conservatives were reluctant to support redevelopment, especially if the cost would fall on the local ratepayers – their electorate – but they seem to have misjudged the public mood. The Liberals, by contrast, were enthusiastic supporters of embryonic proposals for new municipal buildings. The election on 1 November 1889 went resoundingly in the Liberals’ favour. Their leader, Alderman Robert Buckell, pressed forward with the proposals in the following month; crucially, he was supported – now and throughout – by Alderman Walter Gray, a leading Conservative and four times mayor between 1888 and 1901.5

Progress was slow at first despite this enthusiasm, and confirmation of the decision to rebuild rather than adapt the existing structures was only forthcoming in June 1891, when a sum of £600 was set aside for an architectural design competition. The project budget was set at £50,000, which the Liberals believed could be financed without the need for a direct levy on the rates. The design competition was to be in two stages, starting with outline ‘sketch’ proposals. Around 390 applications for the site plan and instructions were received, and in due course 137 entries came in. The six best designs were then chosen to go ahead to the second stage, with the architects being awarded £100 each to develop full designs in plan and elevation. Apart from the budget, another stipulation was that the town clerk’s/receiver’s office – not long completed – was to be retained (the elevation drawing, right, was prepared in 1891), and this influenced the

5 The remainder of this description is largely derived from Wendy Norbury’s 2001 paper, with various other sources used as appropriate.
final designs to a greater or lesser degree. A tower, by contrast, was not necessarily required. This seems odd given that such features (especially clock towers) were a recurrent theme in Victorian and Edwardian town halls, but of course Oxford was already famed for its “dreaming spires”, and the city authorities may have felt that competing with them was pointless. In fact two of the chosen finalists did include towers in their designs, set centrally on the St Aldates façade. These were Ernest Runtz and Perkin & Cheston (see Dewe 1981, figs 45 and 46 respectively). Perhaps tellingly, neither was chosen. That honour went instead to a relatively new architect, but one who would make a particular name for work on public libraries and town halls – Henry T Hare (1860-1921). His chosen design, published in Building News on 8 July 1892, is reproduced below.

3.6.3 Construction and celebration: 1893-7

There was general agreement among everyone concerned with the development that the Town Hall site was a difficult one, awkwardly shaped and tightly constrained by the existing pattern of roads, neighbouring properties and alleyways. It was not a small site, however, and light would be a problem in its interior. All the finalists had struggled to some degree with these problems, and it was acknowledged that none of them had entirely succeeded in dealing with them. Hare’s design dealt with the issues of space and functional requirements quite ingeniously, however, and fully in three dimensions. In essence he created four distinct functional zones, operating across a basement level and two further storeys, with a third in one limited area only. The four zones provided:

- The council chambers and associated offices, fronting onto St Aldates and lying behind the impressive elevation described in section 3.7.2 below;
- the Main Hall (or Great Hall), behind and set at an angle to the council chambers to reflect the Blue Boar Street alignment, though this change of alignment is
cruelly hidden from view by the use of a wedge-shaped ‘ante-chamber’ at the entrance to the Hall;

- The Public Library on the corner of St Aldates and Blue Boar Street; and
- The Court Rooms immediately to the north of the Library, with the associated Police Station and cells below and to the east, this complex being accessed through a secondary, but still impressive façade on Blue Boar Street.

There were two vital linking spaces in Hare’s design:

- the great entrance complex of foyer, staircase and the magnificently decorated upper foyer – these linked the council offices, the Great Hall and the Court Rooms; and
- the Drill Corridor, running back from the Blue Boar Street entrance and linking the Police Station, cells and Court Rooms with the council offices.

Although the Public Library could be linked with the council offices, the design allowed the library rooms to operate completely independently of the remainder. This is reflected in the slightly different levels used at the basement and ground floor levels.

The lowest tender for the work, supplied by Mr John S Chappell of Pimlico (and eventually agreed at £65,883 – well over the original budget of £50,000), was selected. Not surprisingly the first stage of work involved the demolition of all the existing buildings on the site. There is little to record any regret at the passing of the old Town Hall, or of Nixon’s School, though it seems that the School’s gatehouse was ‘recycled’ – there is a record of it being taken down and re-erected on the Woodstock Road in North Oxford (see section 3.7.1). Of course temporary facilities had to be established elsewhere in the city centre for the library, the Cornmarket and for the councillors (see Norbury 2001, especially 145-9). Hare drew up a plan showing what was to be removed (see right), and work began on 15 May 1893. Early examples of archaeological surveys and excavations went hand in hand with this process, leading to some interesting discoveries. These are described further in section 3.7.1.

Progress must have been astonishingly rapid, because the foundation stone for the new buildings was laid on 6 July 1893 (see photograph, right). As usual this was an occasion for great public excitement, and civic pomp and ceremony. The date chosen was that of the royal wedding of HRH the Duke of York to Princess Victoria Mary of Teck. The Mayor, Thomas Lucas, laid the stone using a silver trowel presented for the occasion by the architect; the trowel is still on display in the Town Hall today. The dedication stone was a massive block of Clipsham stone weighing half a ton, and it bore the name of the mayor, architect and the

Prepared by the Keevill Heritage Consultancy for Oxford City Council
builder. Unfortunately the latter was soon to become an embarrassment, as Chappell filed for bankruptcy on 19 October 1893 with liabilities of £220,000. Fortunately the contract was soon re-let to John Parnell and Son (of Rugby), who had built Keble College, the Union Debating Hall, Non-Collegiate Delegacy, and Mansfield and Manchester Colleges. Chappell’s name was unceremoniously removed from the Town Hall foundation stone!

The new contractors made good progress, and displayed a high standard of craftsmanship. Hare’s choice of materials was excellent as well, with the Clipsham stone (from Rutland) being a very hard-wearing type well suited to the St Aldates elevation (left). Bath stone was used extensively on the interior, while the rubble used on the Blue Boar Street frontage was more local, having been supplied by Mr Tolley of Bladon (near Woodstock, a few miles to the north of Oxford). William Aumonier of London provided the external sculptural details, while Frederick Schenck did the same in the gallery of the Main Hall. Colleyweston slate (from Northamptonshire) was used on the roof, though unusually this seems to have been laid poorly and had to be replaced during the 20th century. The best stones (eg Hopton Wood stone, Black Birdseye marble and Frosterley marble) were reserved for fine internal details such as balustrades, pillars and dado rails. The use of Art Nouveau-style fixtures and fittings in Hare’s typically detailed designs is characteristic of his work, and can also be seen in his town hall at Harrogate and library at Wolverhampton. Off-white/cream and red-brown glazed bricks were used extensively in the basement, cells, light wells and other lesser spaces. Steel was used to give added strength in the roofs, floors and elsewhere in the structure, while the most up to date heating, ventilation and lighting were also installed. This was, after all, a thoroughly modern building even if its architectural language was somewhat antique (see section 3.7.2).

Progress was so good that parts of the library were opened in 1895–6. The newspaper room was first, on 11 November 1895, followed by the lending library and ladies’ room on 16 December of the same year. The reference library soon followed, on 3 February 1896 (Dewe 1981, 116). These events appear to have passed with little ceremony, but with work elsewhere progressing well, in April 1896 preparations for a grand opening started. Unfortunately 1897 was Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee year, so the monarch herself was unable to perform the ceremony. The Prince of Wales accepted the invitation in her stead, however, and local excitement grew steadily through the rest of 1896 and into the next year – a fact reflected in coverage by the local newspapers.
The grand opening took place on 12 May 1897, and was the occasion for enormous celebrations throughout the city. A royal visit was very much a major even then as now, and this was a day for open civic pride in what had been achieved over just a few years. A public holiday was called, and the town was decorated in great style – royal insignia and the queen’s initials were much in evidence. Some 1,359 guests were crammed inside the Main Hall for the opening ceremony, having to wait for one and a half hours for the prince himself to arrive (below). In the meanwhile they were entertained with various solos performed on the magnificent new Willis organ (which is still in place). The prince then dined at Christ Church before returning to the Town Hall for further celebrations in the evening. It seems that some undergraduates joined in a little too enthusiastically, and following scuffles with the police a number of the students received an early – and presumably unwanted – experience of the new cells. The Oxford Magazine had published an oddly prescient piece in praise of the cells on the opening day, comparing their “spotless, sanitary, roomy cells with electric lighting” favourably with the “cupboard which is frequently both in college and in lodgings considered fit for the undergraduate” (Norbury 2001, 155).

One less than welcome element of completion was the cost. Councillors had originally set a budget limit of £50,000, but this was comfortably exceeded by Parnell and Son’s tender of £54,573 – and this excluded fees due to others such as Hare. The final bill was a massive £94,116 (Norbury 2001, 155-6). Such an overrun on budget was not especially unusual on large building projects of the day – indeed it is not uncommon even today.
3.6.4 Subsequent use of Oxford Town Hall

The properties immediately to the north of the Town Hall on the junction between the St Aldates and High Street frontages were bought up in the early 20th century, and this site was redeveloped in the early 1930s. The architects were Ashley and Newman (Howell, in Whiting 1993, 74). Work involved a reduction in the depth of the High Street frontage, with the elevation of the new building being well back from the medieval alignment. This seems to have been done at least partly to ease the sharp junction for vehicular traffic. Unfortunately this rebuilding involved the demolition of the mid-19th-century town clerk’s office, though the old Knapp Hall cellar was retained, becoming the civic plate store (see photograph above).

Various parts of the Town Hall complex have changed their roles since the end of the 19th century. The Police Station closed in 1930, and parts of it have been used for office space or storage at various times since then. Other elements – mainly the cells – remain vacant. Even though the Library facilities had been designed with due care, problems soon seem to have arisen, not least over space and the available books (both were felt to be inadequate). In 1927 E E Skuce, the chief librarian, ‘presided over a major reorganisation of all the library departments’ (Dewe 1981, 118), but pressure on space continued to be a problem. Eventually the library function passed from the city to the county council, and Oxford received a new Central Library in April 1973 as part of the Westgate development (Dewe 1981, 119). The space vacated in the Town Hall was soon filled with the creation of the Museum of Oxford, which opened in 1975 (VCH 1978, 332) and still occupies the basement and ground floors at thesouth-west corner of the building. The Reference Library on the first floor was not incorporated in the new museum, however, but it is very well used for meetings and various other functions. The court finally ceased to operate when the new Crown Court building was opened in 1985. Like the Old Reference Library, the various rooms in the court complex continue to be popular for a variety of functions, and they are rarely out of use. The Court Room itself was famously used as the venue for the trial scenes in the film A Fish Called Wanda.
3.7 OXFORD TOWN HALL: DESCRIPTION

3.7.1 Past archaeological discoveries on and around the Town Hall site

The following table provides a brief summary of information regarding archaeological discoveries and remains within, and significant ones immediately adjacent to the Oxford Town Hall site. This has been compiled from information held by Oxford City Council (Urban Archaeological Database – OUAD; see map extract,6 above) and English Heritage (National Monuments Record – NMR). The unique identification number used in these databases is given in the first two columns (not all items are common to the two sources), while the remaining ones provide brief information on each reference. All entries relating to the Town Hall site itself have been included in the first part of the table, along with the most relevant ones from adjacent locations. There are many references in both databases to discoveries along the High Street, but few of these are directly relevant to the Town Hall and so they have been omitted unless they are thought to be important for the current study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUAD</th>
<th>NMR</th>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
<td>338345</td>
<td>Excavation</td>
<td>1894, for construction of the Town Hall. Various finds were recovered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>314, 457</td>
<td>1087075</td>
<td>Boreholes, excavation</td>
<td>1995, Ebor House – medieval and later remains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1024</td>
<td>338367</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Knapp Hall medieval cellar at north end of Town Hall, now civic plate room</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 The base map is reproduced from the Ordnance Survey map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty’s Stationery Office (HMSO), and is Crown Copyright. Oxford City Council Mapping Services Agreement DOXF002.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUAD</th>
<th>NMR</th>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1278</td>
<td></td>
<td>Artefact</td>
<td>Stone slab, possibly part of an altar, found in the 19th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1284</td>
<td></td>
<td>Demolition</td>
<td>Gatehouse of Nixon’s School, said to have been relocated to 94 Woodstock Road, north Oxford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1327</td>
<td></td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>1893, 1-3 Queen Street, medieval cellars – these extended under St Aldates into the Town Hall site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1411</td>
<td>338345</td>
<td>Excavation</td>
<td>1894, for Town Hall (see 148) – a glass bead was found “about 11ft” (3.35m) below current surface level on a metalled road surface overlying natural gravel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1412</td>
<td></td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>1893, by Hurst, 3-4 St Aldates, in advance of demolition to make way for Town Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>338358</td>
<td></td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>1st site of Oxford’s Dominican Friary, early 13th century, before this moved to a site just outside the city wall – site then passed to the Domus Conversorum (see section 3.4.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selected neighbouring sites/discoveries

| 121 | 338375 | Excavation | 1938-9, 117-8 St Aldates – a possible late Saxon carved stone fragment was found, along with medieval and later finds, also a cess pit |
| 146 | 338231 | Artefact | Medieval pottery found/reported in 1949 “in Blue Boar Street” – location given is in Kemp Hall Passage |
| 551 | 654097 | Observation | Watching brief, 7 St Aldates, 1980 – evidence for early metalled road surfaces found |
| 573 |     | Observation | Watching brief, Chequers Inn, 1984 – existing cellar had been dug out by 2m, exposing a foundation |
| 618 | 654990 | Observation | Watching brief, Blue Boar Street, 1974 – no further information |
| 621 |     | Observation | Watching brief, St Aldates, 1977 – “original red clay topsoil was seen lying on natural gravel about 1.95m below the modern street level” |
| 904 |     | Demolition | 1896-7, in Carter’s/Wheatsheaf Passage |
| 1421 | 338279 | Excavation | 1896-8, in Blue Boar Street – exposed skeletons probably from St Edward’s churchyard, and foundation walls perhaps of the church |

Other relevant entries

| 34, 59, 827 | 338279, 338285 | Buildings | Penniless Bench (338279), a covered seat against the wall of St Martin Carfax (338285) – the medieval church was rebuilt 1820, and demolished 1896 except for the tower |
| 202 | 338272 | Demolition | Carfax Conduit, built 1610 to provide piped water from Hinksey to the city centre, removed 1789 (re-erected/survives in Nuneham Park) |
| 859 | 338366 | Building | Kemp Hall, built c 1637, in 19th century used as a police station |
The archaeological potential of the Town Hall site is an interesting question in its own right. Virtually the whole of the site is either covered with basements, or lightwells that are sunk to an approximately equivalent level to the basement floors. In many urban situations one would expect such features to have removed all but the bottom parts of deeply-sunk features such as wells. In fact it would have been difficult, perhaps even impossible, to appraise the potential for the survival of archaeological deposits under the Town Hall prior the research for this document. This is because there was no accurate information available about the levels of the basement floors. Levels were given on existing survey drawings, but these were set against an arbitrary benchmark rather than Ordnance Datum (or OD, often known as sea level). A limited but valuable level survey was therefore commissioned as part of the Conservation Plan process, providing accurate OD levels for various areas of the basements. Further consideration of this data and its implications is provided in sections 4.4, 5.5 and 5.8.

### 3.7.2 The Town Hall of 1893-7: summary description of the buildings

Detailed descriptions of the interiors, rooms and courtyard light wells will be found in the gazetteer. The following paragraphs provide a more summary description of the building as a whole, concentrating on the principal facades fronting onto St Aldates and Blue Boar Street (below left and right respectively). Some consideration is also given to associated townscape features such as Kemp Hall Passage.

Oxford Town Hall is a very fine late Victorian building occupying a premier location in the city centre, at the junction between St Aldates and the High Street. These form the western and northern boundaries of the site respectively. Blue Boar Street is the southern limit, while Kemp Hall Passage runs along the east side of the site. The Town Hall occupies the whole of the St Aldates frontage (above left) as far south as
Blue Boar Street, and this is clearly the principal façade architecturally, with the main entrance set centrally within the three-storey Victorian elevation. The entrance to the Oxford Museum is on the corner with Blue Boar Street. The elevation to the latter street is also impressive but differently handled (right-hand photograph at bottom of previous page), reflecting the varying functions the building was designed for. The High Street frontage is occupied by a 1930s extension of the Town Hall, while a modern (1996) extension lies at the south-east corner or the site on Blue Boar Street.

The building’s design responds well to the challenges presented by the somewhat irregular site dictated by the angled street junctions. The Victorian part of the St Aldates frontage is wholly symmetrical, with the central three bays containing the main entrance flanked by a further two bays on either side. The entire elevation is richly decorated in Elizabethan-Jacobean style, the dominant theme for the building as a whole (though the somewhat Art Nouveau/Arts and Crafts style of many windows sits a little uncomfortably with this). The Assembly Room, Council Chamber and former Reference Library (left) on the first floor lie on and to the rear of this front, accessed from the impressively decorated main foyer and magnificent Grand Staircase. The Jacobean-style panel work is a particular feature here. All of these rooms and spaces are parallel with or perpendicular to St Aldates.

The Blue Boar Street frontage is more restrained, but is no less impressive for this. The entrance leading onto the Drill Corridor is given strong emphasis by the triple arches fronting its recess, drawing the eye clearly to this part of the building. The Drill Corridor itself runs back perpendicularly from the street for the whole depth of the building, and effectively divides the Blue Boar street elements from those of the St Aldates frontage. The Blue Boar Street part of the hall housed a police station with cells, and the Court Room with Judge’s and Jury Rooms. The Main Hall (left) lies to the rear of the court and police rooms, separated from them by an open light well (one of several contained within the Town Hall). The Main Hall is accessed at first floor level via the main entrance and lobby off St Aldates, but it maintains the angle of Blue Boar Street and so lies at 90 degrees to the Drill Corridor beneath its west end.

Though the building is of three storeys, all the principal rooms (ie Main Hall, Council Chamber, Assembly Room, Court Room and former Reference Library) are open to
the ceiling from first-floor level. The whole building (including the 1932 extension) sits on basements. These are sub-divided into many individual rooms.

3.7.3 Condition of the buildings

Oxford Town Hall is generally in good condition, though inevitably there are areas requiring some attention. The Dickinson Associates condition survey of 2003 goes into considerable detail regarding these, though there appear to be few significant or major structural problems. The bulk of the report consists of a spreadsheet detailing specific issues such as blocked gutters, water leaks and resultant damp problems. Nevertheless a substantial backlog of maintenance and repair work has accumulated, with a current estimated value c £1 million. The greater part of this relates to a few major capital projects such as replacement of the Main Hall ventilation system (£200,000), redecoration of the same room (£200,000 – the current colour scheme is about 15 years old) and refurbishment of the former print room (£250,000). Other large sums include £50,000 for external repair and redecoration, noted as being a cost recurring every five years.

3.7.4 Ecology and wildlife

There is little or no natural interest to Oxford Town Hall. There are no associated green spaces, and such open ground as there is on the site consists of narrow corridors (eg Kemp Hall Passage) and the internal light wells that are such a feature of Hare’s design. There are no obvious lichens or mosses of interest, and indeed the masonry is generally kept clean as a matter of routine maintenance (see section 3.7.3). Bats may be present, especially in the light wells, and they are a protected species. This can have an effect on building works if roosts are present, preventing construction during that part of the year when they are in active use. Otherwise various common birds are to be seen on occasion, especially pigeons. These latter are an all but ubiquitous problem in the modern townscape, and they are certainly so at Oxford Town Hall. Their guano – a potential source of disease – accumulates in some quantities in all the internal light wells, and has to be cleaned away regularly for health and safety reasons, and because it causes an unsightly mess.

4 SIGNIFICANCE

4.1 THE CONCEPT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This section assesses the significance of the Conservation Plan study area. Firstly the background of statutory and other protection is examined. Then the Key Significance Values of the site are described; these are aspects of the place which can be recognised by specialist and popular audiences alike, and may include intangible concepts which are difficult to define scientifically, but which can be appreciated in spite of this. Finally the significance of the site is examined at various stages in its history from the pre-monastic landscape to the present day. Significance may lie in one or more categories such as architecture, archaeology, landscape, collections,
ecology, society and associated personalities. A number of factors have been used in defining significance such as rarity, date/periods present, condition, extent, group value, user value and fragility. Many of these relate to guidelines currently in use for the evaluation of sites and monuments at national and regional levels.

Dictionaries define significance as the “consequence of importance”, and more specifically “having or expressing a meaning” (Collins Concise Dictionary). For most of us ‘importance’ and ‘meaning’ are relative. The buildings and interiors of the Oxford Town Hall complex have importance and meaning(s) that are perceived by, and can be expressed in, a variety of ways to a variety of audiences. For the purposes of Conservation Plans, however, the significance of an entity must be established according to clearly defined criteria, and should be arrived at as objectively as possible. This requires substantial knowledge of, and research into, one or many subject areas. In the case of Oxford Town Hall, the most obvious and relevant are the history, architecture and archaeology of its buildings. There are a number of secondary areas that also need to be considered, such as the people associated with, and the collections contained within the building. These are not so crucial to it, but they do have important historic connections with the Town Hall (and its predecessors) and therefore merit some consideration.

Significance is essentially a hierarchical concept, using ascending levels of value. These follow guidelines established by James Semple Kerr (The Conservation Plan, 1996) and adopted by the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage and others. The levels of significance are:

- **Exceptional** – important at national to international levels, reflected in the statutory designations of Scheduled Monuments, Listed Buildings and equivalent nationally graded sites (including those of ecological value).
- **Considerable** – important at regional level or sometimes higher.
- **Some**, of local to regional significance, often for group value (eg a vernacular architectural feature).
- **Little**, of limited heritage or other value.
- **Negative or intrusive** features, ie those that actually detract from the value of a site. A modern corrugated iron shed adjacent to an important medieval building might be a good example.

A low designation of significance does not necessarily imply that a feature is expendable. Furthermore there are many instances where parts or aspects of the place may be susceptible to enhancement or reduction of significance as currently perceived, especially where there is a lack of information or understanding at the moment. Instances of this are highlighted in the following text.

### 4.2 DESIGNATION: THE BACKGROUND TO SIGNIFICANCE

Designation provides an important reference point because a site can only be granted protection (especially at the levels of Scheduled Monument, Listed Building or Site of Special Scientific Interest) if it meets certain criteria. All of these relate to importance in some way, usually at a national level. Statutorily protected sites are therefore inherently among the most significant examples of a type; they may even be unique. Scheduled Monuments in particular must be of national importance by definition if
they are to be so designated. All these protective measures, however, are subject-specific. In most cases there is only one recognised grade of importance usually at a national level. The grading system for Listed Buildings does take this into account by providing a three-tier hierarchy, with Grade I being the most important, Grade II* next, and Grade II last; even here, however, all Listed Buildings (including Grade II) are considered to be of national importance. The assessment of significance undertaken for a Conservation Plan has the advantage of being able to use all relevant criteria across many specialist disciplines rather than concentrating on one of them.

Oxford Town Hall is a Grade II* Listed Building, having recently (6 September 2005) been upgraded to this level from its previous Grade II status. The building had been listed at this level in 1954, and the revision was sought by Oxford City Council in 2003, partly because it was felt that Victorian architecture and buildings were not as well appreciated in the 1950s as they are in the 21st century. The City Council’s submission to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport requesting a review of the original designation highlighted the quality both of the exterior design and the many exceptional (and well preserved) interiors. The success of the submission, and the re-grading, clearly reflects the importance of the Town Hall (placing it among the top 6% of historic buildings in England), as well as the more widespread and greater appreciation of Victorian architecture. The evaluation of importance in the new List schedule is worth quoting in full.

Oxford’s Town Hall of 1897, designed by the notable architect H T Hare in an Elizabethan-Jacobean Revival style, incorporated a wide range of municipal and judicial functions, all accommodated within a single building set prominently in the centre of the city. Both outwardly in its architectural form, and especially internally with its high-quality materials, fixtures and fittings, civic pride and aspirations were expressed in an architecturally impressive manner that survives very well.

The Town Hall is also within Oxford’s Central (City and University) Conservation Area. This provides an added level of recognition of (and protection for) the building. It also recognises the significance of the wider urban setting, for the Town Hall occupies a classic site for a major civic building, close to the central cross-roads at Carfax. This has been an important location since the foundation of the late Saxon burh in the late 9th or early 10th century, and perhaps even before then.

4.3 STATEMENT OF KEY SIGNIFICANCE FACTORS

Oxford Town Hall is of exceptional significance as a physical expression of civic pride in the city and its administration. This formerly extended beyond the city limits into the county borough as well. Britain’s great town halls are a peculiarly Victorian phenomenon (Cunningham 1981), with their construction often being accompanied by a strong sense of competition between towns and cities regionally and nationally. The municipal buildings here in Oxford were a relatively late example, though plenty more were to be built after its completion in 1897 (ibid, especially appendix III for a

7 The Victorian Group of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society made a parallel request for a review of the listing in 2004.
full chronological list from 1820-1914). This was probably an advantage in at least three ways.

1. It gave the city authorities the opportunity to visit several completed and successful town halls and libraries, a chance they took advantage of in September 1889 by visiting the municipal buildings in Bolton, Manchester, Nottingham and Wakefield.

2. It allowed for a greater freedom of architectural expression, as the design of town halls and other civic buildings had by this time developed away from Classical architecture toward a much more free adaptation of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Renaissance styles. Again, the architect Henry Hare took full advantage of this in designing Oxford Town Hall.

3. The new buildings were able to take full advantage of new developments in the provision of facilities such as electricity and air ventilation. This was a thoroughly up to date building.

The Town Hall is also of exceptional significance as the latest in a centuries-old tradition of civic buildings occupying this site (or parts of it). This started with the early 13th-century Guildhall, continued through its later medieval and post-medieval extension and adaptation and on to Isaac Ware’s classical town hall of 1751. These successive generations of buildings had gradually grown in scale, a process that culminated in the great scale of Hare’s buildings.

The collection of civic plate stored in the Plate Room (Knapp Hall crypt) provides a solid and precious (in every sense) link with the long heritage of both civic buildings and dignitaries. The collection is recognised as being among the most impressive of its kind in Britain. Some of the pieces are Victorian, especially the gold chains and badges of the Lord Mayor (1883) and Sheriff (1896-7), but many other items (maces, staffs, cups etc) are of 17th and 18th-century origin. Other interesting civic items are to be found elsewhere in the Town Hall, such as the ceremonial trowel used at the foundation-laying in 1893 (Main Hall foyer) and the dedicatory plaque in the entrance foyer. The collection is of exceptional significance, as are many of the individual items within it. The material in the Plate Room is accessible to the public by prior arrangement, but currently it is only reachable via a long flight of steep steps. The crypt is therefore completely inaccessible to the vast majority of people with physical or sensory disabilities. This is an undoubted negative influence. While admirably secure, therefore, this is a poor location for access to this fine collection.

The Plate Room itself is a very fine survival of medieval architecture in a city that is internationally famous for the magnificence of its medieval and later buildings. The crypt is one of the best examples of this type in the city, and though now divorced from its original building (Knapp Hall), it is nevertheless a powerful reminder of this part of the city centre’s historic development and tenement pattern as it existed through to the 18th century and beyond. The Victorian Town Hall, of course, is an excellent example of civic architecture of its time, with a magnificent main frontage onto St Aldates. The Blue Boar Street frontage is more restrained and, deliberately, very different from the main frontage. This partly reflects the different functions of the various internal components behind the facades. Irrespective of these differences, the Blue Boar Street frontage is immensely pleasing in its own right. The principal internal spaces such as the foyer, stairs, landing, Main Hall, Assembly Rooms etc, are all of exceptional decorative quality and proportions individually, but the processional

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layout and sequencing that was so carefully, even brilliantly conceived by Hare raises
the ensemble to the very heights of architectural design and ornament. The Town Hall
is undoubtedly of **exceptional significance** for the architecture, constructional quality
and detailing of its buildings.

At the time of its design and construction, the architectural splendour of the Town
Hall was to a considerable extent the city authorities’ direct response (if not open
challenge) to the University’s long dominance of the city’s built environment. The
architect Jackson had designed a series of major collegiate buildings during the
middle and latter decades of the 19th century, but Hare’s design was at least the equal
of them. The St Aldates frontage in particular is a clear statement of civic importance
on this most visible of sites close to the heart of the city, and many of the interiors are
also clearly intended to stand out in an Oxford that is full of magnificent rooms. The
Main Hall is especially impressive in this context, but the Assembly Room – in many
ways a medieval-style a great hall in miniature – is just as impressive. Oxford’s
‘Town v Gown’ tension may sometimes be overstated, but here it seems to take
architectural form. This is of **considerable significance** as an example of the symbolic
power of buildings.

The fixtures and fittings are very much a part of the overall effect of the buildings. In
some cases these elements are absolutely fundamental to the spaces containing them,
e.g. the panelling, benches and principal seats of the Council Chamber (below left), the
Courtroom, and their attendant chambers (in the former case for the mayor and
committees, and in the latter for the judge, jury and barristers). Some of these rooms
are still very much in active use (especially those associated with the civil
administration), but the court complex has not served its original purpose for some
years. That does not mean that the rooms are disused – far from it. They are some of
the most sought-after areas for meetings and functions in the whole building. Other
chambers also have important fixtures and fittings. These include the grand Willis
organ in the Town Hall (above right), a very fine instrument of considerable renown
which featured prominently in the Town Hall’s opening ceremony. Elsewhere the
panelling, ceilings and elegant features such fireplaces in rooms such as the Assembly
Room and Old Reference Library are truly magnificent. Without doubt, though, the
Main Hall and the landing in front of it are the **piece de resistance** of the whole
building, an almost overwhelming display of virtuosity in marble, stained glass and
gilding topped off by F E E Schenck’s allegorical sculptures. Once more, both
individually and collectively, the fixtures and fittings of the Town Hall are of
exceptional significance, not least because they survive virtually untouched throughout the building.

Having said that, there are a number of areas where original fixtures and fittings are under-appreciated and underused, at least partly due to the changing function of the parent room in question. This is particularly so in the Old Reference Library, where the original bookcases survive intact but hidden behind screens and heavy curtains across the east side of the room (left). These make the room seem smaller than it really is, and add somewhat to the dark atmosphere of the room (which is actually well provided for with both natural and artificial light). It is probably appropriate to keep the shelves screened for security and protective reasons, but it is unfortunate that they cannot be better appreciated by visitors. A similar concern perhaps applies, albeit on a much lower scale, to the musicians’ gallery in the Assembly Room (left). This is an important feature and, though still used on an occasional basis, it could surely have a higher profile and/or greater use.

Finally there are large areas of the building, especially at basement and to a lesser extent ground floor level, that are either completely unused except for storage, or dramatically under-used. The police station with its impressive – and indeed oppressive – cells (bottom left), and the extensive basements, are particular cases in point. While there are issues of accessibility, security and safety over the use of some of these spaces, there is little doubt that they represent something of a lost opportunity at the moment. There is potential for enhancement of significance in these areas by increasing and improving their use both qualitatively and quantitatively without compromising their historic or architectural significance (which is lower than the main civic/public spaces anyway).
4.4 THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE TOWN HALL SITE

The accurate levels information obtained during this project has been extremely useful and valuable in making an initial appraisal of the Town Hall’s archaeological potential. Current surface levels slope by about 2 metres from north (ie at the junction of St Aldates and High Street) to south at Blue Boar Street. The latter is fairly level along its length, at least as far as the Town Hall court/police station frontage is concerned. The surface level at the very centre of the Carfax crossroads is 65.5m above Ordnance Datum (OD), the same as it is on the road outside 137 High Street. St Aldates is virtually level from the crossroads as far as the entrance into the 1930s extension on the north-west corner of the Town Hall. The level at the junction between St Aldates & Blue Boar Street is 63.1m OD.  

While there has been little direct archaeological work on the Town Hall (apart from some important observations made at the time of its construction), there are several important reference points giving depth information in the immediate vicinity. For instance there is a reference from 1894 excavations in St Aldates associated with the Town Hall to archaeological deposits surviving to a depth of c 4m below the current road surface level opposite the north end of the Town Hall (OUAD ref 1411). Interconnecting medieval cellars are known to cross under St Aldates between 1-3 Queen

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8 These levels are taken from current Ordnance Survey mapping.
Street and the Town Hall Plate Room (Knapp Hall crypt) immediately to the north of this find spot (Dodd 2003, fig 5.17), presumably at about the same depth as the Plate Room floor. Archaeological deposits have been recorded to a depth of about 1.95m at the junction between St Aldates and Blue Boar Street (OUAD ref 621). Finally excavations in 1995 in advance of the development of Ebor House on the south-east corner of the Town Hall exposed features such as pits cutting down to levels of well below 60m OD. The surface of the untouched natural gravel seems to have lain just below the same depth (Hiller and Wilkinson 1998, fig 2). This suggests a depth of archaeological deposits in excess of 3m below current ground level at this point.

As the above plan shows, there are several distinct levels in the Town Hall basements, reflecting Hare’s ingenious response to the challenges both of the site’s topography, and the brief to provide for many and varied functions within the building. The floor of the Plate Room – very much an isolated entity in terms of the rest of the basements – lies at 60.85m OD. The basement floors under the council rooms immediately to the south of this lie at around 62.51m OD, ie 1.7m higher than the Plate Room. The basement levels under the Main Hall and the Library/Museum of Oxford complex are largely consistent at around 61.9m OD, still more than 1m higher than the Plate Room. The levels given for the Police Station cells are 63.05m OD. This seems exceptionally high. In all cases the actual depth of impact will obviously have been somewhat deeper than the floor levels suggest. If nothing else, thickness of the floors and working/setting-out room below must be taken into account.

Even so, at face value there is significantly more potential for archaeological remains to survive under the Town Hall basements than one might expect. It is always possible, of course, that construction of the Town Hall had a greater (deeper) impact than the basement levels alone would suggest, and the reference to archaeological material being found at a depth of 4m below street level in St Aldates might imply this. By definition excavation must have been taken to that depth for the discovery to have been made. Despite this it would seem illogical for the builders to have dug the whole site down by 1m-1.7m deeper than necessary only to have to raise the levels again. There must, therefore, be at least the potential for preservation of archaeological remains under the Town Hall. Such remains could be important on the St Aldates frontage in particular, where elements of the medieval guildhall crypt (and perhaps other cellars) might survive. Admittedly the construction of the 1751 Town Hall may already have destroyed this (the contemporary illustrations suggest but do not prove this).

4.5 SIGNIFICANCE BY PERIOD

The following paragraphs provide a brief chronological summary of the importance of the Town Hall site throughout the development of Oxford. It starts from prehistoric times and moves forward to the present day.

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9 The levels given here and on the plan have been rounded up or down to the nearest centimetre for ease of reference. The values provided by Oxford City Council are exact to a millimetre, but this level of accuracy is unnecessary for the immediate considerations of this document.
4.5.1 Prehistoric to Anglo-Saxon

No features or monuments of prehistoric or Roman date are known from the Town Hall or its immediate vicinity, although a Roman coin has been found in the Carfax area (see section 3.7.1). The area of the city centre does not appear to have been used in any formal sense during these times, which are therefore of little significance for the historic development of the Town Hall site.

Early-middle Anglo-Saxon material is equally scarce, though mid-Saxon activity is known on Grandpont/St Aldates (Dodd 2003), so there is perhaps more potential for discoveries relating to this period. A possible late Saxon altar fragment found in the 19th century on the site of the 1930s extension to the north of the Town Hall is the only direct evidence so far for activity on the site in this period, but St Aldates itself was established at this time, so there is potential for further discoveries either on or near the Town Hall site. Deeply-cut cellar pits on street frontages are a feature of the late Saxon burh, and might have been present on the Town Hall site. They are likely to have been affected (perhaps destroyed) by medieval stone-built crypts. The Anglo-Saxon period (especially burghal aspects) is of some significance for the Town Hall site, and there may be potential for enhancement of significance if further discoveries are made in the future.

4.5.2 The medieval Guildhall and adjacent properties

The complex medieval development of the area now covered by the Town Hall reflects the growing prosperity and importance of the city as a whole, and the university within it. The major street frontages were highly sought after, and the proximity to the central Carfax cross-roads would have made the Town Hall site a prime location. This is reflected by the congregation of the city’s Jewry here, at least until the move against them in the 13th century. Not surprisingly the potential of the site is reflected in the one surviving (Knapp Happ) crypt, and the several documented, major medieval buildings and their associated tenements. The Guildhall and Domus Conversorum were especially important, while the nearby monastery of St Frideswide all but inevitably exerted a strong influence, especially on the southern part of the site. The extensive documentation available for the properties, much of it available in published form through the Survey of Oxford, serves to emphasise the quality and importance of the site. The medieval historical development is therefore of at least considerable significance because of Oxford’s regional role. It is arguably of exceptional significance in the context of national studies of medieval urban development, and for the specific matter of research into the Jewry. As noted above the medieval archaeology of the site may have greater potential than one might expect but significance cannot be determined in this area without further investigation.

4.5.3 The development of the post-medieval Town Hall and adjacent properties

The continuity of municipal use represented by Isaac Ware’s Town Hall of 1751 has already been alluded to. Surviving illustrations and photographs of the building itself show that it was a good example of Italianate classical design. Ware and his builder, John Townesend III, had an even more limited and awkwardly-shaped site to deal
with than would be the case at the end of the 19th century, not least because they had to work around existing structures such as Nixon’s School. The building was of considerable significance in its own right.

4.5.4 New Municipal Buildings fitting for modern Oxford – the 1890s

The latest photographs taken just before the demolition of Ware’s town hall suggest that the ashlar masonry of its St Aldates elevation had suffered considerable erosion by the 1890s, perhaps due to lack of maintenance (see photograph, below). Certainly the civic authorities felt that it was outdated and inconvenient for the needs of modern municipal governance. The decision to tear it down and build a magnificent new set of buildings could not be, and was not, taken lightly – not least because it would inevitably be expensive. The foresight and determination to build something of lasting architectural, social and administrative value was of considerable significance, not least as there was a degree of civic competitiveness involved. In Oxford’s case this was not only a matter of affirming the city’s pre-eminence in Oxfordshire and Berkshire; it was also an area where the city needed to hold its own with the architectural splendour of Oxford University. The exceptional significance of the new Town Hall built between 1893-7 has been fully explored in section 4.3 and does not need further exploration here.

4.5.5 Subsequent development and use of Oxford Town Hall - 20th/21st century

In common with the vast majority of historic buildings in active use, Oxford Town Hall has seen many changes since it opened in 1897. Paramount among these was the removal of the public library function to new purpose-built modern facilities in the Westgate Centre in 1973. While this was a sad loss in some ways, the Victorian library facilities had become inadequate long before the 1970s. Many important
design features of the library remain, such as the fine mosaic panels over doorways such as that into the former reading room. The Old Reference Library, meanwhile, retains its original bookcases along the east side of the room. These reminders of the past use of this part of the building are of **considerable significance**.

The basement and ground floor rooms of the old library were converted for use by the new Museum of Oxford, which opened in 1975. The museum is well used for educational visits but is otherwise under-appreciated by both city and county dwellers, and by the millions of international visitors who flock to Oxford. This has a **negative influence** on the museum’s future, although it must be admitted that this function is not necessarily core to the Town Hall.

The courts and police station were closed in the 1980s, again because new, purpose-built facilities had been established elsewhere in the city. The court rooms are still very much in use, albeit not for their original purpose, and they are of **considerable significance** both for their range of uses and for their economic value. Some rooms in the police station are in office/social welfare use, but the cells are disused except for storage. They are maintained in good condition, however, and are of **considerable significance** as examples of late Victorian planning for public justice in largely original condition.

### 4.6 ASSOCIATED PERSONALITIES

Oxford’s municipal buildings – the successive Guild and town halls – have had an obvious and fundamental association with a long line of mayors and other civic dignitaries down the ages. These people have mostly been important on the local and regional political and administrative stages (Oxford was a county borough for many years). These people are of **some significance** personally and for their connection with the civic buildings.

Robert Buckell and Walter Gray were the two aldermen who were most closely associated with the construction of the new Municipal Buildings (as they were then described) in 1893-7. Representing the then-dominant Liberal and Conservative parties respectively, they are prime examples of the public servants who had the vision, ambition and ability to see through major programmes of public works across the entire country. As such they are of **considerable significance** not only in the context of the Town Hall but also for the subject of Victorian municipal development.

The architect Henry Hare designed the Town Hall and several other buildings in Oxford, such as the fine commercial premises (now the HSBC bank) on the opposing (north-west) corner of the Carfax cross-roads. The Town Hall was among his first major commissions, and the assured way in which he handled a difficult brief and site is all the more remarkable for this. He went on to considerable esteem, especially in the field of municipal buildings (eg the directly contemporary Stafford County Buildings, 1893-5, Wolverhampton Central Library, also on a prominent corner site, 1898-1902, and several others). While not of the highest rank, he is certainly an architect of **considerable significance**, and his involvement at Oxford Town Hall is of the same status. The contributions of the various craftsmen who were responsible for various aspects of the internal and external ornament, whether they be celebrated...
individuals (eg Aumonier and Schenck) or anonymous artisans, mark them as of considerable significance as well.

Hare, of course, was not the first architect with a clear, documented connection with Oxford Town Hall. The classical predecessor to Hare’s buildings had been designed by Isaac Ware, a middle-ranking architect of his day who served in the offices of the Royal Works and published a number of important books on classical buildings. His fine Italianate Town Hall of 1751 was built by a local contractor John Townesend, the third generation of his family operating in and around Oxford city and university. These were individuals of considerable significance in their own right and for their contribution to the history of the Town Hall.

4.7 COLLECTIONS

Oxford’s collection of civic plate in the Plate Room (Knapp Hall crypt) has already been mentioned as a Key Significance Factor. Other collections include

- the city’s civic awards (city in bloom etc) housed in small display case in the entrance foyer;
- various small displays of armaments etc in various parts of the building, eg the landings between the Main Hall and Assembly Room;
- paintings, prints and other artworks, including an exceptional sequence of mayoral portraits and a fine collection of the work of the Oxfordshire painter William Turner (1789-1862);
- civic records, records of court cases; and, as a very distinct group,
- the collections on display in the Museum of Oxford.

While many of these are interesting in their own right, few of them have fundamental connections with the Town Hall in the way that the civic plate does. The artworks might be seen as important in that major municipal buildings often had paintings commissioned specifically for or associated with them, and the mayoral portraits dating from the 16th to the 20th centuries in the Council Chamber, Assembly Room and elsewhere are good examples of this. Indeed they include portraits of Aldermen Buckell and Gray (see above). There are also a number of royal portraits (eg King James II in the entrance foyer). Individually and collectively these paintings are of considerable significance. Elsewhere one finds various Oxford scenes and other paintings, often of fine quality but usually with little direct relevance to the Town Hall as such. These, and other items such as the civic awards, are of some significance. Some items could be seen as potentially negative influences, eg the administrative papers stored in the town hall basements, and old court papers (surely confidential) in the police station cells. They create management and maintenance issues, and could be fire hazards.

The collections on display at the Museum of Oxford would merit the preparation of a conservation document in their own right, but this area is outside of the remit of this Plan. This is not least because most of the artefacts and materials on display come from the collections of the Oxfordshire County Museums Service, and are on loan to the Museum of Oxford. While the collections are therefore of considerable significance, they are not considered further in this document.
5  ISSUES AND POLICIES

5.1  INTRODUCTION

Historic monuments can seem to be invulnerable to damaging changes because of the protective legislation and planning guidance attached to them, as well as through the care they receive at the hands of local authorities, and national bodies such as English Heritage. Oxford Town Hall is well protected through its status as a Listed Building, within a Conservation Area. Statutory designations and non-statutory controls, however, often do not reflect the full depth of a place’s importance to the people who live near it, work there or visit it. A feeling of deep attachment and civic pride is commonly found in historic cities like Oxford, where local (and wider) appreciation (whether implicit or explicit) of the historic environment can be as important as any official protection. Furthermore statutory and planning controls are often seen as negative and over-restrictive instruments, and the authorities that administer them can seem remote and unsympathetic to the needs of and pressures on those who live within a particular historic environment.

In fact the historic environment can be susceptible to threats from many different sources, not least because historic buildings are often multi-faceted entities with various types and levels of significance relating to them. Some threats are likely to be externally derived (eg atmospheric pollution or acts of wilful vandalism) and others may relate to existing or new management arrangements. A view that ‘we know everything there is to know’ about any site, whether on the part of its managers or the general/visiting public, is common but rarely justified, and can represent the greatest threat of all. Furthermore until quite recently the general under-valuation of Victorian buildings like Oxford Town Hall represented one of the greatest threats to them (Earl 1999, fig 20 and 80-1). This section of the Conservation Management Plan therefore examines the ways in which the building and its significance either are or could be at risk of damage. The analysis is undertaken in a series of categories that relate directly to the assessment of significance in the previous section, in order to identify the threats (vulnerability issues) and establish conservation policies for dealing with them.

This Conservation Plan, once adopted, will be important in helping the owners and managers of the site area to look after it for the benefit of current and future generations of users and visitors. The Plan can be used as a basis for decision-making on conservation, maintenance and research in many areas. It would be an integral part of applications for grant aid where this is necessary, eg for access and interpretation schemes. The Plan should not be seen as a static document, however, not least because actions arising from it should render some – perhaps many – of the policies obsolete. The Plan should therefore be reviewed on a regular basis, ideally at no more than five-year intervals. It may be appropriate to tie this review system in to the cycle of five-yearly condition surveys (see section 5.3, below).

Policy A1: Oxford City Council will use the adopted Conservation Management Plan to assist them in looking after the historic environment of Oxford Town Hall. It is hoped that it will also be of use for the City Council’s consultees and partners in decision making, such as English Heritage. Management decisions will be taken in
accordance with the principals and policies set out in the Plan, which will be subject to periodic review in the future at intervals of approximately five years.

5.2 BACKGROUND TO THE SITE

5.2.1 Ownership, management and use

Oxford Town Hall is owned and managed by Oxford City Council. The name of the municipal authority may change, but this relationship has been in place since the construction of the building and indeed before then. There is no need or desire for any change for as long as the city retains its status as an independent unitary authority.

Policy B1: Oxford City Council will continue to own and manage the Town Hall.

Parts of the Town Hall lend themselves well to a variety of public and/or commercial uses. The Main Hall, for instance, is used for concerts, festivals (eg Oxford Folk Festival and Oxford Beer Festival), large public meetings, seminars, presentations, and a wide variety of other functions. Many of the other larger civic and court rooms are also popular for meetings and events. This keeps the rooms in active use while bringing a regular and valuable income stream to the city council. There is potential for extending the area available for such functions into under-used parts of the ground floor and basement. The city council recognises this, and is already addressing the issue in the area immediately under the Great Hall. The wider issue of redevelopment is dealt with in the following section.

Policy B2: Oxford City Council will continue to let rooms out for appropriate public use, and may extend this into currently under-used areas as and when opportunities arise.

It must be recognised, of course, that the Town Hall is an extremely valuable heritage asset that needs appropriate treatment and behaviour from all users. Some catering and similar functions have the capacity to cause adverse effects on the building and its fabric, albeit largely of a temporary and removable/cleanable nature (eg food and drink spillages etc). There is also a constant potential for unwitting but potentially serious damage to historic timberwork and decorative finished through the use of pins, tape and other media to put up temporary notices, advertising, posters, price lists and similar paraphernalia. While it is difficult if not impossible to stop this, it is vital that advice should be given to prospective and actual users regarding what is and is not acceptable to the city council. This is especially important as the Town Hall is a Listed Building, and is thus subject to statutory controls over such matters (though the types of material just mentioned clearly would not constitute a permanent alteration). In some cases it may be appropriate for the City Council to insist that people renting and using rooms/facilities should supply free-standing screens onto which notices can be pinned/stuck.

Policy B3: Oxford City Council will continue to issue written guidance to people booking rooms at the Town Hall on appropriate uses of and behaviour within the
hired areas, including a short summary of Listed Building requirements and advice on proper respect for the building, fixtures and fittings.

5.2.2 A review of the Berman Guedes Stretton feasibility study.

At the beginning of 2004 Oxford City Council commissioned the architects Berman Guedes Stretton to carry out a feasibility study for possible redevelopment of Oxford Town Hall. The study focussed strongly on

- Creating new public entrances and routes through the Town Hall;
- Expanding footfall;
- Increasing the real estate value of the existing spaces;
- Releasing historical spaces not currently accessible to the public;
- Introducing exciting new facilities into these spaces; and
- Improving the facilities for important existing functions.

The draft report was submitted in April 2004. Oxford City Council has consulted widely on the exciting vision it presented for improved and extended accessibility, with better functionality and enhanced value (financial and otherwise). It is not the part of this Plan to comment on any of those aspects directly or otherwise, but it is important to review its potential impact on the significance of the Town Hall as an issue in its own right. Such a review by definition cannot be in detail, as the feasibility study itself only (and properly) provided outline conceptual designs; therefore there is no detail to comment on. Even so there are some areas where conservation issues are obvious, and others where there appear to be few if any such issues, even at concept stage. It is also important to recognise, as the architects explicitly do, that ‘the development of detail proposals … will require a full conservation strategy, to be conceived simultaneously’ (Feasibility Study section 2.1.2). That is a policy in its own right, but does not need re-stating now.

The feasibility study presents a positive outlook for the Town Hall’s future, but perhaps inevitably the proposals have some potentially intrusive aspects. For instance, the existing lightwells would be used in a variety of ways, many of them both innovative and of practical benefit for accessibility. Equally, however, this involves the insertion of quite substantial new structures such as lifts, staircases and roofs. The study emphasises that these would ‘stand proud of the existing fabric as far as possible, so as to clearly identify the distinction between old and new’ (ibid). This is generally accepted as an appropriate conservation-based approach to the historic environment. The report continues:

One advantage of the proposed interventions is that features such as the window in the Panel Room on the first floor, the stained glass window of the law court foyer and the impressive, ornate windows of the Council Chamber and main landing become visible from new positions. These features, with their unique qualities, would be revealed to the public in a way not previously possible. (ibid)

This is true, but by the same token the structures needed to create these new vantage points will be physically and visually intrusive. For the most part this is not a real problem as the features are in generally inaccessible lightwells that are barely visible at the moment from public areas at least. There may be some concerns, however, about the extent to which proposed structures in Lightwells B and C would be visible
through windows in the Museum basement, Panel Room and Main Hall foyer. The latter two in particular are very fine features, though the Panel Room windows are high up in the west wall and do not provide any significant vistas from inside the room. This is not to say that the proposals are wrong, or poorly thought out, but they will need more detailed conservation review as and when design progresses.

The proposal to create a new Civic Hub in the ground-floor entrance foyer off St Aldates does not seem especially controversial at first sight, but it has the potential to be so. The design (BGS study, part 5) describes ‘opening up’ the rear of the foyer behind the grand staircase up to the Main Hall, and suggests that the existing toilets there could be relocated to the basement. There are practical considerations regarding the latter proposal, but there is no particularly strong reason to resist the removal of the toilets either historically or on conservation grounds, so long as due care and attention is paid to historic fabric. Neither is the desire to open up the rear of this space into the Drill Hall Corridor by punching holes through the latter’s south wall necessarily unacceptable. The loss of historic fabric would be regrettable, but the corridor wall is plain, albeit of good quality polychrome glazed brick. It does not help the corridor’s cause that the polychrome bricks are currently overpainted with a nondescript cream paint scheme. If this were the only impact on the corridor, the loss of fabric would be easily mitigated with record photographs, and a conservation benefit could accrue if the proposals also saw the careful removal of the paint from the brickwork. A short ramp is also shown at the west end of the corridor. While this could also involve a degree of physical and visual impact on historic fabric, it is unlikely to be at a significant level. These are not the only losses, however, and other proposals (eg for the Cultural Hub), if all implemented, could see the corridor so traduced that it would look more like an open colonnade on both sides. While this could have real benefits for accessibility and use of adjacent rooms/spaces, it would involve an unfortunate loss of original fabric. In this instance, however, the polychrome effect of the brick masonry has already suffered from overpainting.

The proposals for the interface between the existing entrance foyer and the area behind the staircase is a far greater cause for concern, and the potential for controversy. The staircase is currently flanked on either side by screen walls, each with a central doorway. The screen walls are ornately decorated in fine style common with the rest of the foyer, and it is clear that these walls were fully designed as part of a single, unified space. The ornament is very fine and of high quality, with good detail down to the doors and their fittings. Removal of these walls would represent a very significant and serious loss of historic fabric and design, and would certainly be regrettable. It will be for others to decide on the acceptability or otherwise of such proposals, but they would represent a retrograde step from a conservation perspective.

The proposed extension of the Museum of Oxford involves some conservation issues, although the use of more of the Town Hall basements is generally unproblematic. The new access arrangements via Lightwell C would involve some loss of historic fabric, but as currently shown this seems to be in a plain, featureless area. The new staircase, lift and ramped bridge in the lightwell, however, could represent an over-heavy use of this space, which is one of the more open and visible lightwells in the building. It is actually quite a pleasant space, and could be of valuable use in its own right. The need to create access points to the various floors off the new staircase, lift and bridge might also involve impacts bordering on the unacceptable in several of the most important

Prepared by the Keevill Heritage Consultancy for Oxford City Council
rooms such as the Old Reference Library. It is accepted, however, that a concept design such as this could not be expected to address such issues in full.

The ‘Events Hall’ (Main Hall) proposals include acoustic and lighting suggestions that cannot be assessed on the basis of the brief summaries in the feasibility study. This is an area where more detailed designs would be needed before any comment could be made. The note regarding the poor state of repair of some mouldings is also difficult to assess, but such matters are more properly dealt with through a system of regular inspections (ie the Condition Surveys commissioned by Oxford City Council – see below), not the feasibility study. The suggestions on access appear to be unremarkable, at least as far as the body of the Hall is concerned, though the accessibility of the balcony will always be a difficult issue to resolve. The insertion of a lift in the north-west corner of Lightwell A may well be a good way of achieving this, subject to detailed design. In general terms this lightwell is among the easier ones from the development perspective, though there are excellent windows in the court corridor looking out onto it, and impact on the cell windows (and use of the cells themselves) will need to be taken into account.

The feasibility study also highlighted the problems of the Main Hall’s ancillary facilities (the backstage area is poorly furnished and difficult for access). The suggestion to break through into the so-called ‘escape stairs’ would raise potentially serious conservation issues, however, as this stair has some very fine detailing (doors, baluster screen etc) at first-floor level. It would be difficult to mitigate any loss of historic fabric here. The Cultural Hub is an exciting concept, but there are some serious issues relating to historic fabric, including the concern raised above about the sheer level of impact on the Drill Hall Corridor. This would be an issue in its own right while also reducing the linkage between the corridor, police station and courts both physically and conceptually. The suggested Police Bar, although an interesting concept, is another development that cannot be commented on adequately at this stage. There is no inherent reason to dismiss it, and the cells are in many ways reminiscent of the small individual rooms that make our few remaining untouched pubs so highly valued. Inevitably it is only in the detail that this feasibility suggestion could be tested adequately.

The Victorian basements are predominantly plain and of relatively little architectural significance. Bringing them into more active use could well enhance not only them but also the whole building, though there will inevitably be matters of access, security and control to deal with. None of these seem insuperable, and conservation should be among the least of the issues in these areas. The exception may be the potential need to strengthen existing ceilings and floors above parts of the basements (especially under the Main Hall), which are believed to be under stress already. Interventions to support the floors will need very careful consideration and design.

Policy B4: Oxford City Council will develop a full conservation strategy to review the appropriateness of any planned changes as and when development proposals arise at Oxford Town Hall, whether through the BGS feasibility study or other initiatives.
5.2.3 Records and disaster planning

All heritage assets are exposed to losses from disasters such as fire and flood, but historic buildings and their contents are particularly vulnerable to such damage. The catastrophic events at Hampton Court Palace, Uppark House and Windsor Castle during the 1980s-90s demonstrated all too vividly the extent of devastation that can occur, both from the fire itself and the measures needed to contain, fight and extinguish it. Indeed buildings and collections can be vulnerable to damage from inappropriate fire safety regimes, protective works and equipment. This can only be dealt with by managing the specific risks and adopting active management arrangements to deal with these safely and with sensitivity. Good fire safety management and protection should be recognised as being good conservation - there should be no conflict between the two strategies. Staff training, operation of a practical disaster plan and close co-ordination and co-operation with the Fire Brigade are essential prerequisites of successful disaster prevention.

Policy B5: The Town Hall management will ensure the protection of the building, and the interior fixtures and fittings integral to the design and function of the building, from fire, lightning, and other safety and security hazards. They will continue to undertake and commission specialist safety audits and risk assessments to best current practice, and ensure that all staff and contractors receive appropriate and adequate induction and on-going training.

The Town Hall has an active fire detection system, with sensors in all major rooms and spaces linked back to a central control point in the entrance foyer area. The sensors are tested regularly, and the entire system is well maintained. The residential presence of a staff member in the flat adjacent to the Old Reference Library is also an important fire safety and security precaution. These measures are all admirable, and it may be assumed that Oxford City Council will continue to refine, update and improve its physical and management systems in line with technological developments in this area.

Policy B6: Oxford City Council will monitor, maintain and when necessary improve its physical and management fire detection and safety systems, consulting relevant professional bodies such as the county/regional fire service as appropriate.

Even under the best management regimes, emergencies and unexpected disasters do occur occasionally. The Town Hall complex is potentially vulnerable to fire damage in spite of the detection systems noted above because of the extensive use of timber in its internal fixtures and fittings (eg Council Chamber, Assembly Room, court rooms etc). The sheer extent of the latter would make comprehensive salvage difficult to achieve, but a disaster plan focuses on priorities in the event of such an occurrence. Such a prioritised, regularly reviewed, and practised disaster/salvage plan will allow the most important movable items to be saved. At the same time, it is clear that the public and staff would have to be evacuated in an emergency. Existing contingency plans cover such eventualities, but it is not clear how often these are practised.

Policy B7: To maintain and disseminate as relevant emergency evacuation and disaster plans for the people, the building and collections.
Considerable damage can be wrought by the actions of emergency services where they have no prior knowledge of major conservation/preservation issues, items of particular value (in the widest sense), management responsibilities, disaster plan contents etc. Regular contact at senior and day-to-day operational levels is very important, and this should be combined with joint planning and training exercises to ensure a secure and safe environment for the building and personnel in the case of an emergency.

*Policy B8: To maintain good working relationships with all local emergency services, including undertaking regular liaison, and joint planning/training exercises as necessary.*

Old council and court papers are stored in various parts of the Town Hall, mainly in the basements and, in the case of court records, in a number of the disused police cells. It is clearly necessary to retain files within the building while they are still in use, and perhaps for a time afterwards (eg to allow for appeals procedures). In other cases, however, it would appear to be inappropriate on a number for levels for papers to remain on site. Plans deposited with the City Engineer, for instance, are a very important source for the architectural history of the city. Old court files, meanwhile, would seem to be highly confidential in nature (criminal and civil casework), while all the material presents management, safety and fire issues. These may be at a relatively low level while access to the basements is very largely limited to City Council staff, but even then matters of (for instance) confidentiality certainly still apply. Any widening of access would see these issues coming more sharply into focus. There may also be questions over the storage conditions the papers are housed in (temperature, humidity, lack of archive-standard storage media etc).

*Policy B9: With the exception of papers in active use, administrative and court papers currently stored in the Town Hall basements should be removed to more appropriate facilities such as the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies or the County Record Office.*

Comprehensive records of the Town Hall and its contents are fundamental tools upon which sound management decisions are dependent. Decisions relating to physical intervention in particular should only be taken on the basis of the detailed understanding that such records provide. Accurate surveys provide an essential repository of information in the unfortunate event of partial or complete loss of any aspect of the building in a disaster. They also provide a more thorough understanding of each element of the building and space around it and enable appropriate and effective research to be undertaken in a systematic fashion to inform future decision-making. Current records of the Town Hall include full floor plans at basement, ground floor, first floor and second floor levels, and cross-sections through the building. These appear to be fully accurate modern surveys except that the spot heights (levels) are taken against an arbitrary benchmark rather than the standard Ordnance Datum (‘sea level’). The archaeological implications of this are noted elsewhere, but accurate OD levels are likely to be important in many other practical areas such as planning connections to external services (eg electricity cables and mains drainage).

*Policy B10: To continue to develop and maintain a comprehensive database (in hard copy and digital formats with appropriate storage locations and environments) of*
accurate architectural records for the interior and exterior of the building and the area surrounding including:

- Site plans, floor/roof and ceiling plans
- Building sections
- Accurate levels information, all properly related to Ordnance Datum, not an arbitrary benchmark as at present;
- Building services layout
- External and internal photographic records; photogrammetric records of each elevation and rectified photographs of all important interior structures
- A fabric typology survey (internal and external) identifying original fabric and subsequent phases of repair/restoration graphically, photographically and in text.

5.3 CONDITION OF THE FABRIC

Oxford Town Hall is generally very well looked after. The City Council operates a regular system of survey and maintenance, with annual budgets for routine works, and a planned programme of larger projects. A Condition Survey system is in operation, and this appears to be on a five-yearly review cycle. This is generally accepted as being the standard period in building conservation terms. The current survey dates from 2003 and is extremely detailed. It appears to be comprehensive. The report does not contain a contextual summary of overall condition issues, either on an overall basis or by specific areas, but there are more than one hundred pages of detailed tables (with plans and photographs additional to these) describing and locating specific condition issues. The report does not attempt to define the urgency with which matters need to be addressed, or to prioritise them. It may help the City Council to manage its repair and maintenance programme if future surveys establish levels of urgency and priority, such as

- Urgent, for immediate attention;
- Action needed within (say) six months to two years;
- Action needed within five years, ie before the next survey/review; and
- Desirable actions that do not necessarily need to be dealt with inside five years.

Policy C1: Review the commissioning brief for future Condition Surveys to make them more helpful for conservation/maintenance planning.

It is not possible to review the detailed content of the existing Condition Survey within the context of this study. A rapid appraisal of the document, coupled with visual evidence noted both internally and externally during site visits, suggests that there are relatively few major structural issues regarding the Town Hall’s condition. Some, such as floor/ceiling loads at basement level and above, have already been noted elsewhere. Otherwise the report reflects the fact that the City Council goes to considerable lengths to maintain the building, though perhaps inevitably the high level of repair and maintenance costs for such a large historic building as the Town Hall is an issue. Localised problems such as pointing, mould and uneven floor/surface finishes, are largely cosmetic rather than deep-seated problems. Nevertheless the fact that a backlog of maintenance and repair valued at around £1 million has developed even with such a responsible owner as Oxford City Council highlights the difficulty of looking after this type of building, whether from ratepayers’ money or revenue.
generated by the building itself. The Main Hall alone requires some expensive work, with £200,000 needed for each of the ventilation system and repair/redecoration. At first sight the interior is very impressive visually, but when one looks closely the poor condition of the paintwork is readily apparent (the current colour scheme is c 15 years old). This is especially notable in the balconies, and at the corners of the square columns that support these.

**Policy C2**: Oxford City Council will continue to deal with matters raised by Condition Surveys of Oxford Town Hall through programmes of maintenance and repair. The larger issue of the backlog will need to be dealt with through a special programme of work as and when finance becomes available. This would have to be timetabled to minimise impact on events (and therefore revenue). If other issues of repair and conservation are identified in the future (whether through the condition survey process or otherwise), they will be the subject of specific reports if necessary.

5.4 UNDERSTANDING

5.4.1 A framework for enhancing knowledge of Oxford Town Hall

Oxford Town Hall has been the subject of limited archaeological investigation to date, much of it relating to the construction of the present buildings in 1893-7. The research and analysis of levels carried out for this plan suggests that more may be discovered in the future when opportunities arise for investigation (see sections 4.4 and 5.8). There are many periods in the long history of the site that could benefit from further research, and such work could provide results relevant not only to the development of the Town Hall itself, but also to that of the entire historic centre of Oxford. It is worth establishing a generic policy here that sets overall parameters for any future research. This should apply irrespective of whether the work is

- dedicated (ie deliberately planned and implemented to advance knowledge), or
- opportunistic (ie monitoring externally driven work such as re-development, to ensure that archaeological and historical data can be recovered).

In this section the definition of the Town Hall site is taken to include the library (now the Museum of Oxford) but not the 1930s extension or Ebor House, the modern (1995) extension to the east of the Town Hall on Blue Boar Street (where medieval features such as pits were found during excavations in advance of the development; see sections 3.7.1 and 4.4). For most of the periods when the Town Hall site has been occupied, it cannot be divorced from the rest of the historic town/city in research terms. The existence of Oxford’s Urban Archaeological Database is invaluable in this respect, as it allows easy and rapid access to and comparison of existing archaeological data for the site and its environs. It also contains useful historical and architectural information. Oxford City Council maintains the UAD, which was established with the supported of English Heritage. The UAD is therefore ideally placed to be the starting point for the future improvements in the understanding of the Town Hall site’s development through time.
Policy D1: All future archaeological work on the Oxford Town Hall site should be carried out in line with a carefully formulated archaeological framework in three inter-related stages – database, assessment and strategy.

- **Database** – to establish (and then maintain) baseline archaeological and other information for the site. The Oxford UAD provides this.
- **Assessment** – to decide what the current information means for our understanding of the site.
- **Strategy** – to identify specific gaps in our knowledge and to examine how these might be filled both by targeted research and when opportunistic research possibilities present themselves.

5.4.2 The development of the site through time

The paucity of evidence for prehistoric and Roman activity not just on the Oxford Town Hall site but over most of the city centre has already been described (section 4.5.1). The Anglo-Saxon period, by contrast, has much greater potential if buried remains do survive. Similarly the site has very high potential for medieval and early post-medieval archaeology, with the possibility that substantial structural remains might still survive. This remains to be demonstrated, of course, and it is a classic case of how improved understanding will only come about through investigation (whether with positive or negative results). The extent to which the construction of the Town Hall of 1751 and the subsequent development history of the site has affected earlier archaeological remains is an interesting one in its own right. In the same way this will require further work before any answers emerge.

Policy D2: The development of the Oxford Town Hall site during the Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval periods will be the main focus for future archaeological research, but discoveries relating to either earlier or later periods could also be valuable. It is all but inevitable that historical research will be a vital adjunct to any archaeological work, not least due to the good documentation available for it.

5.5 VULNERABILITY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSITS

The Conservation Plan study, perhaps surprisingly, has shown that archaeological remains could be an issue over most of the Oxford Town Hall site, though it must be emphasized that this is not proven. All periods from the Anglo-Saxon onwards could be represented, with the possibility of good preservation even of structural remains. Furthermore the built fabric of the Town Hall itself contains some archaeological information about Victorian methods of construction and embellishment, as well as subsequent development, repair, alteration, and re-use. This is not simply an academic question, as such matters could easily influence future programmes of development and/or repair. Archaeological remains will not necessarily always warrant permanent preservation in situ, not least because this would make it impossible to enhance our present understanding of the site. Nevertheless they need to be a primary concern when considering any and all proposals for work within the site, at least until the survival or otherwise of such archaeological remains is demonstrated. It may mean that a largely non-intrusive scheme would be appropriate if, for instance, the basements are to be developed to provide extended facilities within the Town Hall. It
is also vital that any work takes full account of the statutory protection afforded to the building, and also recognises the need for carefully co-ordinated management.

Policy E1: Any and all work above or below ground within the Oxford Town Hall site must be planned with great care so as to avoid unnecessary impact, take account of the need to manage the site’s historic environment (see section 5.8), and also allow for enhancement of understanding in line with policies in section 5.4. This policy will continue to be relevant unless it is demonstrated that no archaeological remains do survive below ground on the site. The sensitivity of the building will remain as an issue irrespective of this.

5.6 INTERPRETATION, PRESENTATION AND TOURISM

Oxford is one of England’s most popular tourist destinations, with millions of people every year being attracted by its mixture of history, architecture, learning and culture. The ‘dreaming spires’ are internationally renowned as an immediate symbol of the city. It may be true that many of those visitors are attracted by the University and its colleges, but the city centre is also a considerable draw. There are many excellent non-university buildings to see, and the shopping centre is one of the best in the region. The cultural facilities (museums, libraries, theatres, concert venues etc) are fairly evenly split between ‘town and gown’, and Oxford Town Hall is both the literal and figurative centrepiece of the municipal contribution in this respect. It provides the city’s own museum (as opposed to the commercially-run Oxford Story on Broad Street), as well as one of its biggest and best concert/event venues in the Main Hall.

In some ways, however, the Town Hall may be seen as somewhat ‘on the edge’ of the city’s attractions. Few visitors would make it an automatic port of call at the moment unless they had a specific reason to do so (such as a concert or meeting). The Museum of Oxford in particular suffers relatively low visitor numbers, and this has led to its future being questioned on occasion. Ironically, perhaps, the location is not wholly in the building’s favour despite its centrality. The bulk of the commercial centre lies to the north, east and west of Carfax, and the shops to its south do not form a major draw. Admittedly the Town Hall is between Carfax and Christ Church, and thus on an important destination route, but that does not appear to help. Most people coming to the cathedral and college at Christ Church will have that as a specific target for visiting, and with time likely to be at a premium, they are unlikely to divert into the Town Hall or Museum. The two main entrances are not immediately enticing either, despite their fine architecture and civic ostentation. Both involve steps (see Access, below). The Town Hall entry may seem rather forebidding to many visitors, while the Museum’s is tucked round the corner along Blue Boar Street. If one does not have a specific reason (event etc) to enter the buildings, therefore, there are few immediate reasons for the visitor to be attracted in.

Policy F1: Oxford City Council will continue the process of improving the attractiveness of the Town Hall and Museum of Oxford that has been started with the BGS Feasibility Study.

One way of improving the buildings’ attractiveness would be to increase the level of historic interpretation within and around it, while also perhaps opening up more of the
interiors. The latter was a fundamental aspect of the BGS study. It is possible that archaeological discoveries in the future will provide more (potentially exciting) information that can be passed on to visitors. Even now, however, enough is known of the site’s medieval arrangements to provide some signed interpretation of how the past relates to the present building. The south wall of the Main Hall, and a line taken due west from this to St Aldates, is a historic boundary going back at least to the 13th century, for instance. The position of the old Guildhall and Knapp Hall are easy to identify, while the position and history of the Domus Conversorum would surely be of interest. The various passageways and small open areas around the edges of the Town Hall are very important elements of historic townscape, especially Kemp Hall Passage. Furthermore the relationship of the current Town Hall to its predecessor buildings (the 1751 hall, Nixon’s School, the Cornmarket etc) is also easy to identify and explain. This is especially so as a significant number of photographs of these buildings survive. There is even a record of an arch from the School having been kept and re-erected along the Woodstock Road (it has not been possible to verify this). The Museum of Oxford in particular could make more of the historic development of the whole site, while specific items such as those outlined above could be highlighted in the Town Hall.

Policy F2: Oxford City Council should enhance interpretation and explanation of the site’s historic development with displays and signage in and around the Town Hall and Museum of Oxford.

Oxford City Council provides extensive information about the Town Hall on its website (www.oxford.gov.uk), including an excellent virtual tour of the building (including the Museum). Not surprisingly this is largely based around the main public rooms, though other spaces such as the Plate Room (Knapp Hall crypt) are also covered. The tour is based on a series of chosen locations within each room from which 360-degree views are available. It is also provided on touch-screen computers at the Town Hall and Museum of Oxford. The tour could be enhanced with more historically related information and interpretation as described above. This could also be made available in a specific history/archaeology link on the Town Hall page, or the homepage. The web-based virtual tour is a powerful tool in its own right (ie for remote access and information capacity), but it can also allow potential visitors to preview the site and plan their visit. Equally, careful planning by the web-site designer and client (ie the City Council) can allow them to subtly direct users towards attractions and visitor routes that maximise the benefits and minimise the environmental impacts of visits.

Policy F3: Oxford City Council encourages use of its website, and will examine the potential for enhancing information about the history of the Town Hall there (and on the touch-screen computers in the building).

5.7 ACCESS

Disability issues are very much to the fore in considering the management of historic buildings, as the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 came fully into force in 2004. Oxford City Council commissioned Access Audits for both the Town Hall and Museum of Oxford in 2003. These reports include contextual summaries and
priority rankings. They are consequently easy to understand and use. An Access Plan has been under preparation in parallel with this project. Indeed the teams producing the two reports have worked closely together and discussed areas of mutual concern. Oxford City Council is acting upon the recommendations of the Audits, especially in seeking to provide access from the entrance foyer to the Drill Hall Corridor, and thence into the Museum (which is currently inaccessible).

Currently disabled access is via the entrance into the 1930s extension to the Town Hall on St Aldates. This provides level access across the ground floor as far as the public toilets to the rear of the main entrance foyer. As noted above, Oxford City Council intends to extend this into the Drill Hall Corridor and Museum of Oxford. The Government Office for the South East has granted Listed Building Consent for this work. The City Council’s Conservation Officer has been fully involved in the design of this, as she is on all access issues. A lift provides access from the ground floor to the basement and first floor, and from the lift there is good level access until one reaches the court area. There is a change in level here, addressed by a simple chair lift on the first floor. This is not ideal as it is bulky in a fairly confined space and is not visually sympathetic, but it is better than the more physically intrusive methods that would provide the main alternative means of access. As noted elsewhere the basements are generally under-used at the moment, though improvements are planned in this respect. Accessibility is an integral part of the planning for this. At the moment, however, the significant change in levels means that the most important part of the basement, the Plate Room, will continue to be inaccessible to disabled visitors except via the virtual tour. This situation is unlikely to change, unless new discoveries can be combined with imaginative but sensitive new designs to link the different levels.

Enhanced access throughout the Town Hall and Museum of Oxford was a central tenet of the BGS Feasibility Study, and is likely to be an important part of the City Council’s planning for the future. It is impossible to know at this stage whether the full scheme will progress to implementation, but the vision behind it will continue to be relevant for many years to come.

Policy G1: Oxford City Council will continue to do everything possible to make the Town Hall accessible to all on a socially inclusive basis, commensurate with the historic nature of the building and the need to protect and conserve it.

5.8 PROTECTION

The Town Hall’s status as a listed building has been upgraded recently to II*, and it lies within Oxford city centre’s main Conservation Area. The site therefore appears to be more than adequately covered by statutory designations. Its listed status, in particular, means that no alterations that would materially affect the significance of the building or its setting are likely to be allowed unless there is an overwhelming need for the changes, ie on structural safety grounds. This affects many other areas of the building’s current and potential future uses, such as its accessibility. It does not mean that changes cannot occur; rather, it establishes what amounts to a ‘burden of proof’ that any changes are necessary and justified. This degree of protection is
entirely justified given the exceptional significance of the Town Hall (including the Museum of Oxford part of the building).

Policy H1: Oxford City Council supports the Grade II* listed status of Oxford Town Hall and will continue to encourage early discussion on any proposed changes between its appropriate professional and managerial staff. It will also continue to inform and consult English Heritage at a preliminary stage on proposals and will comply fully with the statutory consent systems covering the building’s listed status, and with reference to its location in a Conservation Area.

Building regulations and normal development control procedures are a separate but important issue. Any new development around the site, or re-development within it, will have to meet the requirements of the building regulations (eg on access, energy use etc). They would also be subject to normal development control procedures, and relevant Planning Policy Guidance (eg PPG16, Planning and Archaeology, 1990, and PPG15, Planning and the Historic Environment, 1994).

The protection of any below-ground archaeology on the site currently falls within the development control process. This is administered by Oxford City Council itself, specifically by the city’s Archaeological Officer, Brian Durham. On the basis of current knowledge of the site, and its potential below-ground archaeological interest, this provides the right degree of protection against vulnerability, and allows the right level of archaeological mitigation to be determined for any below-ground impact. There is potential for conflict of interest given the City Council’s dual role as owner and planning authority, but this does not appear to be an issue in practice. Elsewhere in this report, however, we have highlighted the possibility that parts of the medieval stone-built crypts that are known to have existed on the St Aldate’s frontage (under the Guildhall) or are suspected (ie the Domus Conversorum and perhaps elsewhere) could survive below the Town Hall basements. These are certainly at a higher level than the floor of the surviving Plate Room (formerly Knapp Hall) crypt. If such structural remains do survive, they could be of sufficient importance to merit protection in their own right, eg as a Scheduled (Ancient) Monument. In a directly comparable situation in Southampton, however, English Heritage has refused to recommend Scheduled Monument status for a number of crypts on Lower High Street because they are owned by Southampton City Council and are already protected under the remit of Planning and Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG16), Archaeology and Planning. The same regional office deals with both Southampton and Oxford, and a similar attitude might therefore be taken here. These matters needs to be borne in mind in planning any substantive future projects in the basements.

Policy H2: Oxford City Council will maintain the current protection of archaeological deposits under the Town Hall, and mitigation of impacts on them, through the development control process.

Policy H3: The City Council and English Heritage may need to review archaeological protection procedures if significant remains of medieval cellars are discovered under the St Aldates frontage.

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10 Information from Kevin White of Southampton City Council.
Sub-policy H3.1: As a first step towards determining whether remnants of such crypts do indeed survive below the basement floors, Oxford City Council should consider commissioning an archaeological survey of the basements using ground-probing radar. This is the only non-intrusive geophysical survey method that has the capacity to penetrate solid surfaces and ‘see’ to considerable depth beneath them. The survey could also be valuable in measuring the depth of the basement floors, and in assessing the archaeological and engineering ground conditions beneath them.

5.9 ECOLOGY

Oxford Town Hall is of no apparent ecological interest. The external walls (including those of the lightwells) are largely (and correctly) kept free of vegetation, while mosses and lichens are no more than sparsely present. There is no green space directly associated with the building, all the internal lightwells and linking passages being surfaced in hard materials such as tarmac. The external surfaces along the St Aldates and Blue Boar Street frontages are paved. Bats (which are legally protected species) may be present but this would need to be determined. The only other wildlife known to be present are vermine such as pigeons (and rats?). These need to be discouraged and, whenever necessary, culled.

Policy I1: Determine whether bats are present and devise appropriate policies if they are. Actively discourage vermine such as pigeons and rats. Existing wall and floor surface maintenance regimes to continue.

6 MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Conservation inevitably involves management, both in a generalised sense and also in specific measures towards implementation. This may involve individual policies, or a more over-arching approach to the whole site. In this instance the Conservation Management Plan for Oxford Town Hall recognises that Oxford City Council has a well-established management system which generally operates very well. This is to the benefit of both the building and its many users. The needs of this exceptional historic building are well looked after, not least because the City Council’s Conservation Officer plays a central roll in decision making, while also providing an important link to English Heritage and other statutory consultees. Despite this there are issues that need to be dealt with both in the near future (ie over the next few years) and over the longer term. This Plan cannot provide all the answers to such issues, but the policy framework in section 5 gives the basis for a series of recommended actions. These will need the input of Oxford City Council, English Heritage and others, either singly or in appropriate combinations. The following list therefore provides guidance on the appropriate way forward at the Town Hall, though it is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive. Other initiatives might come forward from unforeseen directions or circumstances, and thus cannot be discounted.

- Oxford City Council will continue to improve the accessibility of the Town Hall and the Museum of Oxford, seeking to make the building as inclusive as possible. This may include physical alterations on site, as well as measures to improve
intellectual access, for instance through interpretative signage within the building and enhancement of the City Council website (including the virtual tour).

- In seeking to improve accessibility, the City Council will have due regard for the suggestions contained in the access audits prepared in 2003, and the Access Plan produced in parallel with this report. Improvements and enhancements will have to be appropriate and proportionate in terms of physical impact on the built fabric, and would not be brought forward if they involved unacceptable loss of or impact on the historic fabric of the building. The City Council’s Conservation Officer will continue to have a crucial role in the control of this process.

- A substantial backlog of repair and maintenance has been built up at Oxford Town Hall, largely through overall budgetary pressures. Many of the specific works that have not been implemented yet are in areas that have relatively little immediacy for the visiting public and other users of the Town Hall (eg external decoration, light well floors, roofs etc). Nevertheless it is interesting that the condition of the building and its decoration was commented on in focus groups and questionnaire responses during the Audience Development Plan process. This must be a cause for concern to Oxford City Council.

- The scale of the maintenance and repair backlog, allied to the ongoing pressure on local government expenditure, means that Oxford City Council is unlikely to implement the full programme of required work as a single project. This might be difficult to achieve anyway due to the practical requirements of the building’s many users. Instead it is likely that the backlog will have to be dealt with piecemeal. If this is to be the case, Oxford City Council should analyse the full schedule of work so that each separate item can be ranked in order of physical priority, cost and practicality. This will allow the overall programme to be spread across a number of financial years and the costs included in annual budgets. If at all possible major capital items (eg redecorating the Main Hall) should be carried out when rooms are likely to be closed anyway, for instance during redevelopment initiatives.

- Inevitably this leads to consideration of the possible redevelopment of Oxford Town Hall. The City Council could have political problems if it goes ahead with a major capital programme of this sort while still having a significant backlog of maintenance and repair. The council is therefore taking a cautious approach to redevelopment that is at once understandable and appropriate from a conservation perspective. Their short, medium and long-term commitment to improving the Town Hall and Museum of Oxford’s accessibility and use is not in doubt. It is likely that an incremental approach to implementation will continue over the next few financial years. The backlog can be worked through, while also carrying out specific improvements such as refurbishment of the former Print Room as gallery space, and the provision of an access lift into the Drill Hall Corridor. The latter will have the considerable benefit of allowing disabled access to the ground floor of the Museum of Oxford.

- The more extensive redevelopment envisaged in the BGS Feasibility Study may be a continued aspiration for Oxford City Council. Several issues will need to be addressed if the plans contained there, or similar proposals, are to be developed further. Some of these matters are relatively routine (eg the business case, funding and sustainability of any proposals). Others are less so, for instance the need to establish what archaeological impact (if any) there might be. The desirability and practicability of providing physical access to the Plate Room might also repay further attention, though this is likely to be a difficult area.
Oxford City Council will continue to manage the maintenance, repair and development of the Town Hall at officer level, while political decisions will of course rest at member level. The current ad hoc project team of officers from the city’s estates, facilities and conservation departments will continue to manage the implementation process. Existing time and project commitments may sometimes make it difficult for the relevant officers to devote sufficient time to the process, in which case they might continue to draw on external support from consultants.

In all work areas Oxford City Council will continue to consult fully with English Heritage and other statutory consultees as necessary in planning and implementing maintenance, repair and development work.

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Extensive use has also been made of files and information held by Oxford City Council and English Heritage.