

DRAFT Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal

2.0 Character Statement

*'Few cities contain more magnificent buildings
within a relatively small area than Oxford'*
G. Tyack – Oxford: An Architectural Guide

The historic city centre of Oxford is known the world over for its outstanding townscape and architectural heritage. One of the most celebrated cities in Europe, it is also a major regional commercial centre, and retains the oldest university in the English-speaking world. Its history, buildings, spaces, and landscapes combine to create a unique environment which continues to evolve and thrive.

Towns and cities are continuously evolving to suit the current demands of their occupants, and Oxford is no different. At one time, the historic quads, streets, churches and shops which are so much a part of the city's identity were new and innovative, as much a change in the environment as contemporary design is today.

The conservation area must continue to evolve if it is to thrive. By understanding that which makes it special, we can retain and adapt the best, and enhance the rest.

Significance is broken down by Historic England into four values:

Evidential or Research potential
History or Narrative of development
Aesthetic or Emotional
Communal or Shared identity

Evidential or Research potential

The distinctive urban form of the colleges within the medieval town wall defines much of the pre-20th century conservation area. Within the wall and these enclosures, the medieval archaeology of the city is preserved to a very high degree. As 20th century buildings are replaced, more of this archaeology is being exposed. The colleges occupy land which was formerly fields, or streets and houses, and have been relatively undisturbed since their construction. Previously unknown facets of the city's history have been discovered, including fourteenth century houses, a Saxon track way, early college gardens, and Civil War defensive structures.

More well-known elements have been explored to a greater degree, such as the Saxon burgh and Norman tenement plots, which left a distinctive imprint on the city's street layout and building lines. Within buildings and their grounds, new discoveries are made as refurbishments or alterations occur. Building recordings take place which are added to the Historic Environment Record for future generations to appreciate. The potential for more above and below ground discoveries within the conservation area is exceptional.

History or Narrative of development

The University and its colleges are likely the most internationally well known structures within the conservation area, but are not the oldest aspects of the city. The ford for Oxon was

established around 900 AD, followed by the castle after the Norman invasion. Although not used for military service, the castle established the city as a place for regional commerce, justice, and industry, which continues today in a more isolated part of the city to the west of the main retail area.

The university was first mentioned in the 11th century. The colleges were established around 200 years later, and it is their long-term institutional continuity and replicated built form which makes the conservation area's townscape so distinctive.

The city grew as a centre for education and commerce, becoming a home for scholars of the early conflicting subjects of theology, philosophy, and science. Among many highlights in its early history are the establishment of a Jewish community, the burning of the Oxford Martyrs, and playing host to both Roundheads and Cavaliers during the Civil War.

Despite its now historic appearance, Oxford has long been at the epicentre of technological innovation. The University Science Area grew following the establishment of the museum in the 1850s, and continues to provide world class and cutting edge STEM teaching and research. The home of the motor industry is now in Cowley, but it began in the Morris garage on Longwall Street in the early 20th century, while other motor companies provided employment in garages and showrooms on Park End and Hythe Bridge Streets.

Aesthetic or Emotion

The University and colleges are wealthy and sophisticated and have always employed leading architects. Thanks to their unbroken involvement in the growth of the city, the conservation area is characterised by architecture of international importance worthy of a capital city.

The largely regular street layout of the Saxon burh is well preserved, resulting in the city centre being an easily navigable series of wide main roads and narrower, more intimate streets. These smaller streets are particular to the centre, hosting slim buildings which follow the tenement plots and lined with houses and shops that often have pre-17th century origins.

The saying 'town and gown' is a reference to the comparison between the inward-looking college quads with few openings to the public realm, and the active frontages of the shops and dwellings which largely open directly onto the street. The difference is marked, and is a significant part of the character in many parts of the conservation area.

The use of a limited palette of materials adds to the distinctive Oxford appearance. Historically, these were locally sourced, oolitic limestone and brick or render-filled timber framing. Later building periods preserved this aesthetic by attempting to match the colours and textures while embracing the building styles of the times. What should be simple shop or house elevations are enlivened with deep reveals and articulation, to reflect the high quality details, reveals, grotesques, and orders of the educational buildings.

Arnold's 'dreaming spires' are a key element of Oxford's attractiveness, creating an architectural display that can be appreciated at both street level and from the surrounding landscape.

The setting for these architectural works is the flood plain, parks, and waterways which envelop the city centre, supported by glimpsed views of college gardens and prominent trees within the built environment. The river is an integral part of the city's history, and the 18th

century Oxford Canal, once an important arterial trade route, is now a popular tourist destination.

Communal or Shared identity

The film and television industry has brought Oxford to an even wider audience, and the city welcomes around 7 million visitors each year. The tourist industry which was once mainly for those appreciating architecture has grown to include people following media trails. One of the most recognisable groups of buildings is the magnificent group of University and college buildings and spaces situated between Broad Street and St Mary's Church, which form the visual heart of the conservation area.

The University has educated great philanthropists, politicians, educators, sportsmen and women, scientists, writers, and notables of many other fields from many other countries. It boasts Nobel Prize laureates, the world's largest university press, and a botanical garden. It is intrinsically linked to the identity and appearance of the city, and therefore the conservation area.

While the University is not used by every person in Oxford, the shops, roads, facilities that grew up in part to support it have become the lifeblood of the city. Whether a resident, student, or employee within the city, there is a sense of belonging and laying claim to the influence and heritage which comes from being a part of this internationally significant city.