

DRAFT Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal

5. Understanding

There can be few cities more exhaustively studied or better documented than Oxford. There is no need therefore to retell the history of the city centre here in detail. Instead, this chapter provides a brief overview of the city's physical location and make-up, and historic development.

Geography

Oxford is a city on the upper reaches of the River Thames, located in a broad valley between its source in the Cotswolds and the NE-SW line of hills formed by Cotswolds and North Wessex Downs. The city is located at the junction of the Thames and its tributary the Cherwell, with higher ground rising to the east and west.

The River Thames explains the origins of the city, and has sustained its life. The settlement began here at a crossing point across the Thames floodplain, which is likely to have been used for thousands of years. The river, and later the canal as well, has been the most significant means of communication for most of this time, providing direct transportation to London and settlements along the way.

Otherwise, the city was isolated from the principal arterial routes of the country until the creation of the M40 in the 1960s. For example, none of the major Roman roads passed through the city (though it is likely that there were more minor ones), and the route selected by Brunel for his Great Western Railway ignored the city in favour of the fastest line between Bristol and London.

Today, improvements in road and rail communication and relatively easy access to Heathrow airport have all contributed to the growth and prosperity of the city.

Geology

The Saxon and Medieval city was laid out on a gravel terrace that forms a dry, south-facing promontory in the cleft above the converging floodplains of the Thames and Cherwell. Despite encroachment to the west, the edge of the terrace still predominantly defines the building line on the southern and eastern sides and gives the city centre its highly distinctive shape. Fig xx illustrates this, and shows how the line of the medieval walls traced the shape of the terrace.

The famous off-white oolitic limestone was quarried locally at Headington. Although this source is now exhausted, the warm tones of this stone are a defining characteristic of the Conservation Area, and one that provides a direct link between the architecture of the city and its locality.

Historical Overview

The city began as a Saxon settlement around 900AD at a crossing point over the River Thames. Oxford grew quickly from this into a defended, walled burh, thriving on trade between the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex.

Following the Norman Conquest, this grew into one of the most economically successful towns in England and a major trade centre, overlooked by a Norman castle and ringed by

major religious houses. The University arose in the 12th century and gradually grew into a major force in the city's life. To the west, monasteries and friaries occupied large complexes, emphasising the importance of religion in the life and form of the city.

The Saxons' rigid street layout and the fixed line of the 13th century defensive walls, together with the floodable river valleys, largely determined the plan of the historic centre as it is today. The gentle curve of the High Street, the great market place of St Giles and the older churches, together with the medieval post-medieval timber-framed buildings, are powerful reminders of this.

As the University expanded in the later Middle Ages it colonised the eastern half of the town with halls and later walled quadrangular colleges, occupying plots abandoned after the Black Death had reduced the town's population by perhaps a third.

Colleges continued to expand in number, size and status as the Dissolution put an end to the religious houses. Generously supported by benefactors, they became wealthy landowners able to employ the finest masons, builders and architects.

The growth of the University's central institutions is well illustrated by the magnificent group of buildings situated between Broad Street and St Mary's Church. This group grew out of the organisational focus provided by the University Schools and began with the addition of the 14th century Convocation House and Library on the north side of St Mary's Church, followed in the 15th century with the building of the Divinity School and Duke Humfrey's Library. This nucleus expanded in the 17th century with the construction of the Schools' Quadrangle, Convocation House and Sheldonian Theatre. With the later addition of the Old Clarendon Building and Radcliffe Camera, this forms the exceptional architectural and historic sequence that is the aesthetic heart of the Conservation Area.

Subsequent University development reflected its growing importance as a focus of scientific research and discovery, together with its role in promoting the study of the humanities - resulting in buildings such as Holywell Music Room, The Ashmolean, The Taylorian Institute, Science Museum, and Natural History Museum. Other institutions trained civil servants to work across a growing empire, and yet further facilities related to its role in pioneering development in the medical sciences, such as the Radcliffe Infirmary.

Whilst the University was evolving and expanding, changes and growth to Oxford in the 19th and 20th were also stimulated, first, by the arrival of the Oxford Canal and then the Great Western Railway. By substantially improving communications, these developments fuelled industrial and commercial expansion to the west of the centre, and the erection of terraced housing for their workforces. Slum clearances in the 1930s between the river and railway station resulted in housing and other buildings which complemented the growing motor industry in the area.

Oxford was fortunate to survive the Second World War unscathed, and to escape the worst of post-war town planning that followed. Today it is an expanding and world-class educational and research centre, a vibrant and prosperous regional hub, and one of the most visited tourist destinations in the country.

This timeline is adapted from the Oxford Archaeological Action Plan 2013-2018.

Pre-historic

Monumental earthworks influence later routeways.

Farmsteads and field systems are established.

Roman	Roman roads and pottery manufacturing compounds.
Saxon	<p>Religious and trading centre established by a crossing point over the Thames.</p> <p>Oxford established as a planned defended settlement (or burh) with an orthogonal street grid centred on Carfax.</p>
Norman	<p>1066: the Norman invasion leads to the construction of a motte and bailey castle over the western part of the town.</p> <p>The 1086 Domesday Survey records large areas of waste ground within the town. Subsequent growth leads to the division of existing tenements, the creation of new streets and big infrastructure projects like the Grandpont causeway over the floodplain, new religious buildings and hospitals.</p> <p>Oxford enjoys Royal patronage with the construction of the Royal Beaumont Palace north of the town.</p>
Medieval	<p>Monastic houses and friaries are attracted to Oxford and establish precincts outside the walled town, some on land reclaimed from the floodplain.</p> <p>The town wall is rebuilt in the 13th century with bastions and unusual double (concentric) line along the north-east part of the circuit.</p> <p>Oxford's economy falters in the 14th century with increasing areas of the town recorded as waste.</p> <p>The 13th and 14th centuries see the growth of academic halls and colleges associated with the University.</p>
Post-medieval	<p>The Dissolution of the Monasteries leads to the closure of the friaries and abbeys leaving the west and south-western suburbs of Oxford economically disadvantaged.</p> <p>Oxford becomes a city with a Cathedral established first at the former Osney Abbey Church then at Christ Church.</p> <p>During the Civil War Oxford is chosen by Charles I as his temporary capital and consequently defensive and siege earthworks are built around the town, clearing part of St Clement's.</p> <p>In 1644 a major fire destroys many properties between George Street and Queen Street. The 17th century sees the expansion and rebuilding of the town, with land inside the town wall and the in-filled town ditch newly developed.</p> <p>The canal reaches Oxford in 1790.</p> <p>A major clearance of obstructions was undertaken by the 1771 Paving Commission including the demolition of remaining gates. New drains were laid and an indoor market</p>

replaced the historic street market.

Modern

The railway arrives in Oxford in 1844.

The 19th century sees the reform and expansion of the University and its colleges and the rapid expansion of the suburbs to cater for wealthy trades people, academics and those in domestic service.

In the early 20th century the development of the Morris Motors and Pressed Steel plants transformed east Oxford.

After the First World War the city authorities reluctantly engage in slum clearance and a programme of council house building which continued until the 1980s.

Between 1938-1966 the outer ring road is completed. Major plans for inner ring road and city redevelopment were subsequently abandoned.

Between 1957-1974 a major project was undertaken to replace decayed stonework on historic buildings.

In the 1960s and early 1970s the 19th century suburb in St Ebbe's was demolished and the Westgate shopping Centre was constructed.

21st century

The late 20th-early 21st century has seen the expansion and renewal of college and University facilities.

Renewal of the west side of the city centre begins with the transformation of Oxford Castle, and continues with the redevelopment of the Westgate Centre.

There is pressure to redevelop and infill urban space in order to meet housing needs.