

Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal

6. Assessment

The Character Statement (chapter 2) summarises the value and qualities that make the conservation worthy of its designation. To appreciate them in more detail, it is helpful to examine them thematically under three broad topics:

- Uses and history
- Architecture and townscape
- Landscape and setting

Theme 1: Contrasts and Complexity

Oxford city centre is a place of harmonious contrast. While some historic areas are significant thanks to their uniformity and regularity, Oxford is distinctive due to its complementary combination of many aspects of city life:

- commerce and education
- monumental college architecture and modest houses
- limestone ashlar and painted render
- green spaces and dense streets
- spires and rooftops
- tranquil river banks and busy streets
- vibrant shopping areas and quiet back streets
- administration and retail

Use and History

Theme 2: University

The University of Oxford, including its 39 colleges and 6 private halls, make the centre of Oxford distinctly different from other regional towns and cities. The buildings and spaces within the conservation area provide an opportunity to make a tangible connection with the city's history of education and research. The most recognisable built form, the quadrangle, has retained a significantly high number of medieval buildings and open areas of preserved archaeology within. Outside of the quads, the walls to the earlier colleges are often inactive, contrasting to the retail and residential areas and creating distinctive patterns of activity.

Theme 3: Association with historical figures

The city has been home to a high number of notable figures as residents, visitors or scholars, and is often associated with their lives and achievements. Many are linked to specific buildings and sites, a tradition which continues today.

Stephen Hawking; The Oxford Martyrs; Jacqueline du Pré; Sir Roger Bannister; T.E. Lawrence; Lewis Carroll; J.R.R. Tolkien; Emily Wilding Davison; Adam Smith; John Donne; John Wesley; Sir Walter Raleigh.

As wealthy and sophisticated clients, the University and colleges have also employed some of the most sophisticated architects in the country, from William Wynford to Sir Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor, G.T. Andrews and Powell and Moya. The city is an

excellent showcase to see the works of leading architects from so many historical periods in one location.

Theme 4: Fame and celebration

Oxford has been the subject of and setting for countless works of art and literature. The townscape, landscape, architecture, culture and sense of place celebrated in these works are still recognisable thanks to the unusual degree of preservation and continuity in the conservation area.

The city's associations, architecture and landscape draw over 7 million visitors a year from across the world. This is a source of economic prosperity and vibrancy, but such large numbers on the principal streets is a threat to the quality of experience and sense of place, as well as unbalancing the functional use of the centre.

Theme 5: Religion

Religion has shaped the built form of the city more than many realise today. The University and colleges were established to prepare scholars for a life in the church.

The most significant religious building is Christ Church Cathedral, and there are numerous others of several denominations including college chapels. The concentration of places of worship is exceptional in post-Reformation Britain, and embodies a physical link to the contribution of Oxford priests and theologians to the history of faith in the UK.

Many of these religious buildings are prominent elements in the townscape of the conservation area, most famously in their contribution to the celebrated skyline of the city. Not all are easily seen or visited as they are part of academic institutions, but some do form focal points within the streets and spaces, such as St Michael at the North Gate. Some have been lost, such as Carfax of which only the tower remains, while others have been converted to different uses, such as St Peter in the East, which is now a library.

Prior to the Reformation, the city hosted more wealthy abbeys and other religious houses, mainly to the west of the walled town. The footprint of these later shaped development and street layouts. Traces of these are as grand as the cathedral and as modest as isolated stretches of wall. On Beaumont Street, a plaque remembers the now-lost Rewley Abbey which once stood there.

Theme 6: Continuity of land ownership

Long-term institutional ownership has helped to shape the character and appearance of the conservation area, mainly by the retention of older buildings:

- An exceptionally high proportion of pre-1800 buildings
- Employment of nationally and internationally significant architects
- Non-educational buildings owned by colleges, particularly in commercial and residential areas, who have long-term interests in protecting their appearance

Theme 7: A service economy

In 1851, more than a quarter of the city's employed population were engaged in domestic service and association occupations, such as inn servants or washerwomen. The average for England and Wales at that time was just 13%; this disparity can be explained by the presence of the University and colleges, who are still major employers in the city.

Architecturally, this is expressed through the large number of inns and pubs, particularly those without coaching facilities. In addition, there are fragmentary survivals of simple brick housing from the 19th and early 20th centuries for workers' accommodation. These are important Victorian structures, but their very simplicity makes them vulnerable to change.

Theme 8: Commerce and retail

The city began at a Thames crossing point on the boundary between two Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. This likely became an important trading centre, and retail and commerce have influenced the central streets ever since. Evolving shop design indicates the developments in shopping and commercial life, from the narrow frontages of early family businesses to large Victorian premises with expansive glass frontages. Department stores and two modern shopping centres were created by combining several historic plots.

Oxford is unusual in not having a distinct market place, for different streets have been used for different markets over time. The Covered Market was built in the 1770s and later enlarged through the 19th century. It provides the typical market stalls of fruit and veg, butchers, fishmongers, bakery together with boutique retail and food to go. As a large rectangular structure, it connects and has influenced buildings on the streets to its north and south. It is a distinctive feature of the conservation area, particularly on Market Street where it has four separate entrances.

There are several reminders of Oxford's industrial heritage on the fringes of the conservation area. Until the 20th century, the Castle Mill Stream and the river were the focus of this activity as a source of power, raw material, and means of transportation. Notable survivals are the Lion Brewery and Cooper's Marmalade Factory in the Western Fringe Character Zone, as well as remnants of the motor industry on Park End Street and Longwall Street.

Theme 9: Civic administration

As the county's main centre for administration and justice since the 11th century, the city has several large structures that are clearly identifiable as functional and institutional. These are located in the west of the centre adjacent to the Norman castle, which was the first of those buildings to be erected.

The law courts, police station, county and city government offices occupy several traditional plots in a range of building styles. Following the expansion and reform of public services in the mid-late 20th century, most of these are Modernist. Their main differentiating element is their relationship to the street: the main elevation and entrance are clearly located, facing the public, and set back slightly from the pavement.

Theme 10: Defence

Like many settlements of the Saxon and Norman periods, Oxford was a fortified city, and the Norman wall defines the shape of the central core of the conservation area. Significantly, there is a high level of survival of this wall, although much of it is hidden from public view. The wall can be traced in locations such as Bulwark Lane, Broad Street, and Holywell Street.

Oxford had one of the most extensive and complete system of Civil War fortifications. Although only traces of this are still visible, the buried archaeology of earthworks and structures and their operation and inhabitation are of national importance.

Theme 11: Living

The number of houses and residences above shops indicates that the city centre has long been inhabited by residents in various dwelling forms. The tenure mix has changed over time, with more transient students occupying houses and purpose-built accommodation across the city for specific parts of the year, and the permanent residents being concentrated in the western areas. In some places, this has changed the activity on the street. Student entrances are often relocated to the rear, meaning that while the historic front doors are retained, their lack of use reduces the activity, vitality and surveillance on the street.

Theme 12: Archaeology

Much of the history and evidence for past uses of the city centre, and the lives of those who lived there, exists in archaeology both below and above ground. This includes evidence for all phases of human activity since the last Ice Age. The Oxford Archaeological Action Plan 2013-2018 has more detail on this record. In addition, the colleges have extensive medieval documents to accompany the physical remains.

The colleges and their continuity of use have protected a significant amount of Saxon and medieval archaeology beneath the quads and gardens. Due to the distinct quad form, it is unlikely that these will be highly altered to erect new buildings. As most archaeology survives best when retained in situ, this preservation is likely to continue.

Above ground, the buildings and spaces are embellished with flourishes and details from previous ages. These details, such as materials, fittings, street surfaces, place names and association, often go unnoticed. This lack of acknowledgement and understanding leaves them vulnerable to replacement.

Architecture and townscape

The distinctive limestone colleges and medieval street layout are perhaps the most visually recognisable parts of Oxford's townscape. The architectural and townscape significance of the conservation area can only be understood in combination with all the other buildings and streets that make up the centre of the city:

Theme 13: Colleges and quadrangles

Colleges began as academic communities that provided space and quiet for students to prepare for entry into the church profession. While the users and subjects have changed over time, the use of the college as private accommodation and study spaces has remained.

The traditional college design is a series of private precincts planned around quadrangles and enclosed within a defensive perimeter. The principal components were a chapel, communal dining hall, library and study/sleeping rooms, with a gatehouse to ensure that the outside world did not disturb the peace that the academic community enjoyed. The different ways in which these elements are laid out around one or more quadrangles is what gives the colleges their individual characters:

- Colleges founded within the walled medieval city, densely planned and inward looking building complexes with gardens.
- Colleges founded outside the medieval walls, with much larger grounds and open aspects.
- More recent colleges inserted into the expanded city, compact and often inward looking and still inspired by the principles of the medieval quadrangle.

The defensive perimeter creates a very distinctive streetscape in parts of the conservation area, characterised by few doors and high walls, but enlivened by intricate use of architectural detail and glimpses of college gardens. This functional yet sometimes inactive streetscape is characteristic of many parts of the city.

The accumulated wealth and long-term commitment of the colleges frequently enabled them to employ the best architects and craftsmen to create imposing and sometimes ostentatious buildings of the highest architectural quality. This has continued as the colleges have expanded, with the new structures often reflecting their time of construction, not always mimicking the original era of the college.

The colleges have continued to grow in both student numbers and areas of expertise. Over time, they have absorbed more of the city's buildings and spaces. Beef Lane was incorporated into Pembroke College as recently as the 1960s.

In recent decades, the rapid expansion of student numbers has been accommodated in a wider range of ways, such as new buildings within existing precincts, colonisation of houses and shops adjoining precincts and pavilion blocks around the perimeter of playing fields. This has had the effect of changing the character of these places, for example by building over what was previously green space or by relocating entrances to the rear of historic buildings, often having a detrimental impact on the character and quality of the streetscene.

Theme 14: Materials

The overall quality and detailing of materials and the workmanship with which they have been employed is exceptional and contributes strongly to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area.

A number of materials are strongly associated with the historic core of the city and do much to define its appearance:

- **Limestone:** Wheatley and Headington quarries supplied the early colleges with facing stone. Since the 18th century, the rapid rate of wear and the exhaustion of the quarries forced the use of other similar stones. As these were carefully selected to be a close colour and texture match, they have integrated well into the city's streetscapes.
- **Timber frames and painted render:** Before the 18th century, modest buildings such as lodgings, houses and shops were normally built of oak frames. Large numbers survive, and all such survivors are significant by virtue of their national rarity. Today, they are frequently rendered and colourfully painted, helping to create highly picturesque streetscapes such as Holywell Street. Although the use of many colours is a relatively modern development, it is generally agreed that it has successfully become part of the widely recognised and enjoyed image of the city.
- **Brick:** From the 18th century, red brick was commonly used commonly for domestic and commercial buildings. For this reason, its appearance is concentrated in the western fringe and those commercial streets such as George Street that were redeveloped. When it was used by a college, for the construction of William Butterfield's Keble College, it was a considered a shocking introduction, though it is now considered a triumph of the Gothic Revival. Nevertheless, the use of brick remains unusual in historic college precincts. At first, bricks were locally fired with a warm red hue; from the 19th century it was machine made and joined by pale biscuit and yellow bricks that could be economically imported by rail and canal. In the later 20th century a hard brown brick emerged across the country as a favoured material. Its tone and machined texture have

not proved a success in the Oxford townscape.

Theme 15: Architectural details

The quantity and quality of architectural detail is one of the defining characteristics of the conservation area and animates many buildings and streets. These details are not random and rarely solely decorative. They form part of a 'language' or pattern of building elements that reflect function and the evolution of architectural style.

Recurring details add to the town's richness. Details vary from one character zone to another, depending on prevailing building type and age, and they are therefore important to reinforcing the unique characteristics of different parts of the conservation area. The Assessments describe these local variations.

Theme 16: Architectural style

The 'Oxford tradition' is frequently used to describe the Gothic style which many associate with the city's buildings. However, Oxford is also home to several other architectural styles for both public and private buildings. These include the classical style of the Ashmolean, the Palladian Radcliffe Camera, and the Modernist St Catherine's College. What matters more than style in the contribution of architecture to the international significance of the conservation area are factors such as function, planning, materials, detailing, roofscape and the relationship to the street, all of which are the subject of their own significance theme.

Theme 17: Post-war architecture

Oxford boasts several high-quality and listed post-war buildings. These designations are heavily weighted towards the colleges, reflecting the marked difference in quality between buildings commissioned by the colleges and those built by public bodies for commercial and retail use.

Many aspects of Modern Architecture and planning are at odds with the historic characteristics of Oxford's urban form and its architectural traditions. The best examples of post-war architecture respond positively to this context, rather than ignoring it, such as St Catherine's College, built with a low height that ensured it does not intrude into the views of the city centre from the Eastern Hills. The music room at Corpus Christi College, built into a bastion of the medieval town wall, is another interesting example. Here, an innovative architectural intervention has enabled an important heritage asset to be reused, which will contribute to its future conservation and enjoyment.

Theme 18: Street layout – Saxon burh, medieval changes and later town planning

The largely regular street layout of the Saxon burh has been retained as the core of the Conservation Area. This historical continuity and resonance are of fundamental historical interest.

Subsequent centuries have also made their mark, leaving important examples of the evolution of the core and the expansion of the city. For example, medieval streets such as Holywell Street and later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, development inspired by formal Renaissance concepts of town planning – either replacing the earlier pattern as at Radcliffe Square, or new suburbs such as St John's Street.

Theme 19: Public space

A legacy of the Saxon burh layout is the shortage of planned public spaces within what was the walled city. Those places that have been created and those streets that have taken on

the function of public spaces are therefore of great importance to the history and life of the city:

- Radcliffe Square: created within the Saxon burh in the 18th century to make a site for the Radcliffe Camera. The square is internationally significant and famous because of the quality and planning of the architecture. It has no comparison in Britain.
- Broad Street: its shape was derived from the town ditch from which it was created. The street has many of the characteristics of a major public space: its origins as a medieval market place, its broad dimensions, the public architecture and the tradition of public assembly and demonstration.
- St Giles': a distinctive funnelling form and impressive scale reflect its origins as a medieval suburb outside the town walls, which has been the site for St Giles' Fair and before that markets since the middle ages.
- Gloucester Green, Oxford Castle, Bonn Square: recent public spaces, all purposefully created by opening up previously closed places.
- Cornmarket Street and Queens' Street: focal points of activity effectively made into public space by restricting vehicles

Increased traffic over the last century has harmed the character of Broad Street and St Giles', by its appearance, the space it occupies, the noise it generates, and the impact of pollution and vibration on historic buildings. By contrast, the recent restriction of vehicles into streets such as Cornmarket Street has not only enhanced their character, it has also made it easier to appreciate the architecture.

Theme 20: Medieval plots

Narrow Norman tenement plots survive in many streets in the historic core, where they have not been amalgamated to form colleges and to a lesser extent large retail buildings. This survival is of national historical importance as evidence of the planning and life of a medieval town.

It has shaped several of the key characteristics of the conservation area: the building line hard up against the pavement, narrow frontages and roofs that form animated streetscapes, 'backlands' of yards, gardens extensions and outhouses. Taken together, these form highly aesthetic and historically resonant counterpoint to monumental college precincts.

The survival of these tenement plots is fragile if there is pressure to merge plots and demolish boundary walls.

Theme 21: Roofscape, skyline and landmarks

The roofscape and skyline of the Conservation Area is perhaps the most animated and architecturally rich in the country. It is unquestionably the most famous. It is also fragile, and easily eroded by inappropriate or ill-considered development both inside and outside the Conservation Area. In recognition of this, as early as 1962, the City Council adopted View Cones and a High Buildings Area to manage and protect it.

What makes it special is a harmonious combination of the vertical accents created by the famous landmarks, many designed to have a brilliant architectural effect on the skyline, and the rich background of historic roofs, whose pitches, parapets, pinnacles, turrets and chimneystacks create a vibrant and picturesque texture. In longer views, the green spaces and higher ground form an attractive foreground or background.

In this, the following factors are of special importance:

- complementary palette of materials

- narrow roofs whether houses or colleges (because pre-Victorian builders were limited by the use of timber)
- gentle range of building heights (mostly two – four storeys).
- combination of horizontal elements (e.g. parapets and ridge lines) and vertical elements (especially chimneystacks and pinnacles). The effect and rhythm of the vertical elements is particularly important
- subtle variations in the building heights of different streets, which are important in distinguishing the different historical and townscape character of different parts of the conservation area. For example, residential streets are two-three storeys, whereas the primary commercial streets are four and sometimes five storeys.

These factors cause harm to the significance of the roofscape:

- Post-war development where roofs consist of large flat planes, modulated on a large scale or not all, and are without vertical accent or detail.
- Roof plant, extract flues, etc., associated with modern heating and ventilation systems, because of their non-historical form, their location, prominence, number and colour.

Theme 22: Views

Significant and enjoyable views are exceptionally widespread in the conservation area, so much so that it is not possible here to identify all of the views that contribute to the experience and enjoyment of the city centre.

It is useful, however, to identify types of views and the characteristics of them that contribute to their significance:

Unfolding views: most famously, the curving topography of High Street creates a continuous sequence of unfolding views of streetscape and landmarks such as All Saints Church and the University Church.

Glimpsed views: of landmarks, for example, from Broad Street southwards down Turl Street to the spire of All Saints Church, or the Radcliffe Camera from the High Street; charming glimpses down alleys and side streets and into colleges, especially along the High Street.

Vistas to focal points: Tom Tower is the focal point of the north-south axis of Oxford, clearly visible for the length of Cornmarket Street and St Aldates.

Designed views: there are few designed views in public areas, but they include the Observatory views along Beaumont and Walton Streets, views of Clarendon Building and the Sheldonian Theatre created by demolishing houses in the middle of Broad Street, and the panorama from the motte of the castle (for surveillance and defence). There are many designed views within the formal gardens of the colleges. Though these are not always accessible to the public, they help shape the contribution that the colleges make to the significance of the conservation area and they are experienced and often appreciated by the college members and visitors.

Public viewing panoramas: from which the viewer can experience and appreciate the historical form and architectural character of central Oxford, and its relationship to its landscape setting. Seven have been identified: Carfax Tower (Church of St Martin), the Saxon tower of St Michael at the North Gate, St George's Tower, the Castle Motte, the University Church (of St Mary the Virgin), the cupola of the Sheldonian Theatre, and (just outside the area but with views over it) the rooftop café terrace of the Westgate Centre. Of these, only the Sheldonian and Westgate Centre were views designed for enjoyment and

pleasure.

Views across the flood plain: to the city centre are amongst the most famous in the city, panoramas which are part of the very image of the city; in particular, the view across Christ Church Meadows. These views illustrate the original siting of the city on dry ground adjacent to a river crossing. As the historic core is otherwise so dense, these views are the only ground level panoramas in the conservation area.

Views from and along the rivers: both from river crossings and from boats and punts, these are highly significant because of the historical importance of the rivers to the foundation of the city and for movement and trade, and because of the way topography and landscape can be understood, experienced, and above all enjoyed.

Views out of the Conservation Area: on the eastern edge are screened by a band of mature trees along the Cherwell. This screening provides a strong sense of seclusion: from a distance, east Oxford is entirely hidden by trees and vegetation, so that water meadows feel remarkably rural despite being surrounded by the city.

Landscape and setting

Landscape, in the form of geography, topography, waterways and parks and gardens, makes a contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area which is as significant as the buildings and streets.

Theme 23: Topography and geology

The location of the historic core is defined by the topography and geology of the Thames valley. The Saxon burh was set out on the gravel terraces above the water meadows, in the peninsular between the River Thames and the River Cherwell.

Today, the extent of development is still strongly defined by these terraces. Overlaying geology and street plans show that very few buildings have been built on the flood plain (notably St Catherine's College and the former industrial zone along the Castle Mill Stream).

The famed setting of the city centre, and views of it, is formed by the low hills rising up on either side of the river valley, which creates a gentle bowl.

Theme 24: Waterways

Oxford exists because of the River Thames and the River Cherwell. It was founded as a crossing point across the Thames, at the junction of the two rivers. They have sustained Oxford's economy and been its playground. Together with the Oxford Canal they stimulated the industrial and commercial life of the city as a means of communication source, source of power.

The different characters of the Thames, the Cherwell and the Castle Mill Stream and Canal give each of the east, south and west edges of the Conservation Area a distinctive identity.

The history of boating is a particularly distinctive feature of the rivers that is indelibly linked to the world-wide image of the city and the conservation area. Before their use as pleasure craft, punts were working boats for fishing and transporting goods, closely associated with the boat people of Fisher Row in the western fringe of the Area. They have been used as a pleasure crafts since at least the 1880s and there is a special importance to experiencing the conservation area from the quiet rivers of the Cherwell and Thames as they pass through

the tranquil green spaces of the flood plain.

Although the boathouses lie just outside the conservation area, competitive rowing provides another focus of activity intimately linked with the image of the University and city that extends to the riverside within it. River bathing also has a long history in Oxford with specialised locations such as Parsons' Pleasure used since the 16th century.

Theme 25: Green space

At first glance, Oxford appears to have a relatively small amount of green space. However, 40% of it is designated as Green Belt, mostly to the south and eastern edges. The frequent glimpses of trees and lawns in the college precincts, together with the sports fields, show that the green space is there to be discovered and enjoyed. The flood plains of the Cherwell and the Thames encircle the city centre, a rustic counterpoint to its architectural splendours and a cherished public resource of great historical and artistic interest. The combination of greenery and buildings – both designed and accidental – is fundamental to the unique character and townscape of the conservation area and the colleges in particular, whether they can be visited and seen or not.

There are numerous college lawns and gardens, often places of exceptional quality; their historical and design significance is indicated by the high concentration of registered parks and gardens in the Conservation Area, some 15 in total, of which 5 are registered in the highest Grade I and II* categories. This significance is not diminished by the fact that the gardens are private and access is limited, though this does mean that public appreciation is restricted.

However, the gardens are frequently glimpsed in the city streets, as overhanging trees and planting, and views through gates and over walls. These contributions are of great importance to the streetscape, which is otherwise largely devoid of greenery.

A high portion of the green space in the Conservation Area is used for recreation, either as public park or college and University sports fields. The largest of all, The University Parks combines both of these in a purpose designed Victorian landscape of national significance. The design and use of green space for organised sport is historically significant both because of its contribution to the culture of the University and because of the influence in popularising and codifying games across the world.

Much smaller in size and number are churchyards, but these too are significant as relics of the medieval city, for their memorials and as the setting of historic buildings to which the public have access.

Green space carries the most significant ecological value in the conservation area. Through the range of flora and fauna this contributes directly to both the area's appearance. For example, the concentration of Snakes Head Fritillary in the Magdalen Meadows is the legacy of an historic land management regime that has allowed these plants to survive and flourish where they have otherwise been lost elsewhere in the Thames Valley. As a result of this historical management, they contribute to the meadows' draw for tourism.

Theme 26: Tranquility and sound

Away from the busy and bustling city centre, a large part of the conservation area is quiet and shielded from traffic, enabling a more peaceful experience to be had.

Tranquillity and sanctuary are intrinsic aspects of the character of much of the publicly accessible green space, the river and canalside walks, and the colleges. In the case of the colleges, silence is an intentional part of their design and function, in order to foster learning

and research. Against this backdrop, the colleges create a distinctive and beautiful soundscape of bells, clock chimes and the muffled music of organs and choirs which can be enjoyed in the streets beyond.

A total or substantial absence of traffic, also contributes strongly to the character and appearance of many significant and historic streets, such as Holywell Street, St Thomas Street and New College Lane.

This tranquillity is cherished by the people who live, work, study and visit in the city, but it is vulnerable to developments both within and outside the conservation area.

Theme 27: Setting

From surrounding hills, the views of Oxford's dreaming spires rising above the trees and meadows form one of the most famous images of any town or city in Britain. The aesthetic, historical and communal value of these views is exceptionally important and form part of the core interest of the conservation area. This is analysed in depth in the Oxford View Cones Study and also in the Oxford High Buildings Technical Advice Note.

The setting of the conservation area is important for preserving its skyline and roofscape. It has different characteristics on different sides, reflecting the underlying landscape and the impact that this, and roads, railways and canals, have had on the development of the city's suburbs:

To the north: the contrasting dense and terraced Victorian suburbs of Jericho and the affluent detached villas of North Oxford are both conservation areas that were built to house people working in the city centre, and still do. Through them pass the arterial streets – Banbury Road and Woodstock Road – whose names indicate they are some of the most ancient routes to connect the city with the county of which it was the administrative centre. The experience of the approach along these broad, tree-lined routes culminates in the great arrival moment at St Giles, heralded by the substantial buildings of the former Radcliffe Infirmary and the University laboratories.

To the east: largely hidden by the treeline of the Cherwell valley is St Clements' suburb, also a designated conservation area. It was first developed as a commercial area beyond the bridge over the Cherwell on the historic main road from Oxford to London, and included inns that would have served the stagecoach trade. The area was rebuilt after its demolition during the Civil Wars. The 'Plain' provides an important gateway to the city centre with views to Magdalen Tower over Magdalen Bridge.

Beyond, the compact mostly Victorian terraced streets branch off the Iffley and Cowley Roads, rising up gently towards Cowley. Further round to the north is Headington, rising up towards South Park and Headington Hill. These are the eastern heights that form the largely green back drop to views out from the conservation area.

To the south: a sliver of Victorian and Edwardian development in Hinksey, in the flat floodplain beside the Thames and along the railway line to Didcot.

To the west and south west: Osney Island, industrial, commercial and residential development spurred by the arrival of the railway in the 1840s, on land owned in the middle ages by Osney Abbey. The opening of the canal and later development of railway stations on land around Frideswide Square made the western area an important point of arrival on the edge of the city. The route into the city centre became a significant approach in ways it had not previously been, though the buildings reflect more of the industrial and commercial life connected to rail, river and canal.

Beyond the railway and the flood plain of the Thames, including the archaeologically and ecologically significant Port Meadow, the landscape rises to Botley and Boars Hill, with the famed view over the city that inspired the poet Matthew Arnold to first write of Oxford's 'dreaming spires'.

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