

Character Zone Assessment 5

University Core

Zone includes:

- The core buildings of the University, clustered around Radcliffe Square and Broad Street
- Includes the Bodleian Library, Radcliffe Camera, Old Ashmolean, Sheldonian Theatre, Clarendon building and St. Mary's Church



Oxford Central (City & University) Conservation Area



University Core Character Zone Oxford Central (City & University) Conservation Area

The Conservation Area Appraisal divides the Conservation Area into nine character zones. This chapter contains a detailed analysis of one of these: the University Core Character Zone. It can be used to understand the history, character and appearance of this part of the Conservation Area, and to inform planning application and development proposals.

This Conservation Area Appraisal aims to promote and support developments that are in keeping with, or enhance, the character of the Central (City & University) Conservation Area. This section is concerned with the reasons for designation, defining the qualities that make up its special interest, character and appearance. It is not possible to describe every facet of the area that contributes positively to its character. The omission of any reference to a particular building, feature, space or positive contributor should not be taken to imply that it is of no interest. Additional positive contributors will be identified through the development management process.

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5.1	An overview of character and special interest
5.2	A brief history
5.3	An analysis of character (considering use, street and townscape, green space, buildings, roofscape, landmarks and views, movement and activity, archaeology)
5.4	Further useful information

Icons

Throughout, icons direct you to relevant sections of the Conservation Area Appraisal and links to other relevant documents.



relevant layers of the conservation area map / GIS mapping



relevant character themes in the appraisal



relevant sections in the appraisal



suggestions for further reading



information relevant for planning



sources of further information

Maps

The maps below are extracts from the Conservation Area mapping set, which consists of layers of useful information ranging from archaeology and historic maps to green space, listed buildings and street materials. Please note that maps may not show the full extent of listed buildings and do not show curtilage-listed structures. If you are unsure if your building is listed check the National Heritage List for England and seek the advice of the City Council's Urban Design and Heritage Team.

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The exceptional Jacobean tower over the main entrance to the Bodleian Library

5.1 Overview of character and significance

The buildings of the University of Oxford are amongst the most celebrated in the country. As a wealthy and sophisticated patron, the University commissioned magnificent monumental architecture that helps to define the very image of the city. Sir Nicolaus Pevsner wrote 'the area by the Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian is unique in the world'.

The following aspects of the zone contribute positively to the character and appearance of the conservation area:

- the monumental nature of the core buildings of the University, which are an architectural expression of institutional status and pride.
- the use of warm golden limestone for the majority of buildings in this zone.
- its highly dynamic roofscape, which contributes to the iconic roofscape and skyline of the City.
- its exceptional townscape, especially around Radcliffe Square, including high quality landscaping and street furniture.
- buildings of exceptional individual architectural and historical interest.
- widespread public access.

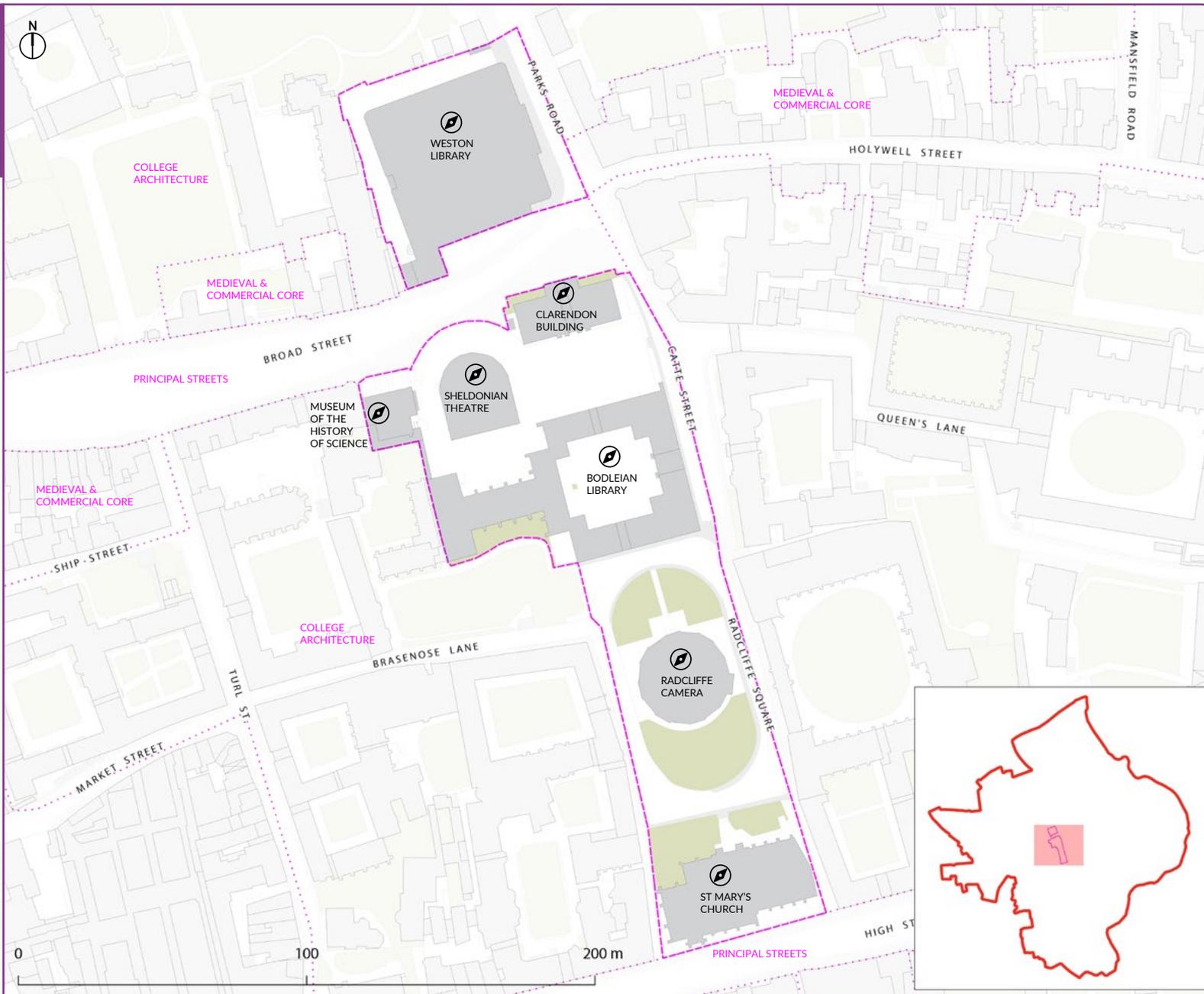
The principal aspects of the zone that harm its character and appearance are:

- crowding in some areas, particularly during the main tourist season, which can detract from the ability to appreciate exceptional architecture of the University Core.
- patching and poor quality repairs to street surfaces, particularly Radcliffe Square, which detracts aesthetically from the listed buildings' setting.
- although the amount of signage and advertising is minimal in this area, there is some that is inappropriate which poses a threat to the exceptional townscape of the character zone and the enjoyment of individual buildings within it.

Overview University Core

Key

-  Oxford Central Conservation Area boundary
-  Neighbouring character zones
-  Reference point



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5.2 History

5.2.1 Origins

- The church of St Mary the Virgin is first mentioned in the 11th century and may have been a gate church for the primary burh. Its current fabric is 13th and 14th century with later restorations. It has been the University church since the 13th century and is closely linked with John Henry Newman (vicar 1828-1843) and the 19th century Oxford Movement for religious reform.
- The University as a corporate identity emerged in the early thirteenth century; its earliest purpose-built structure was the Convocation House, built in the 1320s as a meeting space in a northern extension to St Mary's Church with a library above.
- Wealth was concentrated in the colleges and the University was reliant upon donors to fund major building projects. The area was the location for the bulk of the medieval university rooms where teaching was undertaken, and attracted artisans such as copyists and bookbinders to the surrounding streets.

5.2.2 Major projects

- Lack of finances delayed completion of the University's first major building project, the Divinity School, constructed c.1420–90. Plans were altered to incorporate a first floor library (Duke Humfrey's Library). This was the start of a gradual project to disentangle the University from the Church and to remove secular functions from St Mary's.
- The library was extended with supervision and funding from Thomas Bodley and the Schools Quadrangle of the Bodleian was completed in 1624.
- Other University buildings clustered north and south of the Bodleian are:
 - the Sheldonian Theatre, designed by Christopher Wren and commissioned to host ceremonial events
 - the Old Ashmolean Building on Broad Street (now the Oxford Museum of the History of Science), built in 1683 to display the personal collection of Elias Ashmole
 - the Clarendon Building, designed by Hawksmoor and completed in 1715 as a printing house for the University Press
 - the Radcliffe Camera, a library designed by James Gibbs and opened in 1749.

5.2.3 Twentieth century

Expanding library collections prompted the construction of the New Bodleian Library on the site of shops and townhouses on the north side of Broad Street between 1937–40 to designs by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. This reflected both the enormous increase in printed material in recent times and increasing subject specialisation.

The New Bodleian Library was internally remodelled by Wilkinson Eyre to increase public access and improve its relationship with its urban setting. It re-opened in 2015 as the Weston Library, with a new public entrance to Broad Street.



The Sheldonian Theatre, a monumental architectural expression of University status and pride

5.3 Character

5.3.1 Use and access



Historic urban characterisation



Theme 2: university

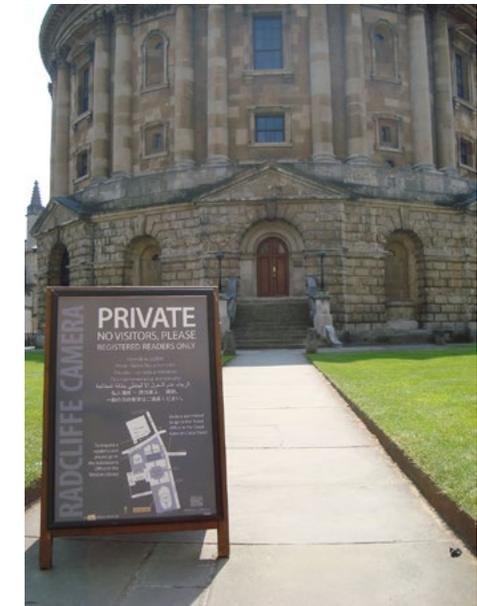
Theme 3: association with historical figures

The primary uses within this zone are institutional, educational, religious and ceremonial, reflecting the functions and traditions of the University. However, there are also other aspects catering to tourists and other visitors.

- St Mary's Church has public access to the vaults café in Convocation House; also the church lawn, church shop, internal heritage displays and paid access to the church tower.
- University buildings provide some public access, either free of charge (e.g. St Mary's Church; the Weston Library) or via a modest entrance fee (the Sheldonian Theatre).
- The Sheldonian Theatre hosts numerous public events and concerts.
- The Bodleian Library and Radcliffe Camera are publicly accessible to registered readers.
- The buildings have various shops and cafes which are open to the public.

5.3.2 Streets and townscape

The University Core zone includes some of the finest townscape in the conservation area. The architecture and setting of the cluster of buildings between St Mary's Church on the High Street and the Sheldonian Theatre and Clarendon Building on Broad Street is synonymous with Oxford and recognised worldwide as an icon of the City. The buildings align to create a view through the Clarendon Building and Bodleian quadrangle to the Radcliffe Camera, forming an exceptional unfolding vista. Every major approach hosts a notable view, particularly the glimpsed view from High Street down School Street and Catte Street.



University core buildings generally provide a greater level of public access than most colleges, while the libraries are accessible to registered readers

Street pattern



Saxon and medieval streets; Medieval plot boundaries



Theme 18: street layout

- Elements of the Saxon and medieval street network between the High Street and Broad Street survive, including Catte Street, School Street (now Radcliffe Square) and Brasenose Lane.
- Radcliffe Square, created in the eighteenth century, is a distinctive piece of formal town planning.
- The closeness and parallel nature of School Street and Catte Street may reflect the layout of the primary Saxon burh.

Public spaces



Theme 19: public space

- Pedestrianisation of Radcliffe Square and the streets around it has made this area one of the most important public spaces in the city.
- Places such as the steps of the Weston Library and the Sheldonian Theatre forecourt provide some of the few off-street locations in the city centre for locals and visitors to rest, linger and enjoy their surroundings.
- Other 'lingering' public or permissive spaces include the Bodleian Quad, Clarendon Quad, and St Mary's Churchyard.

Plots and building lines



Medieval plot boundaries; Building lines and gaps



Theme 20: medieval plots

- University buildings occupy large, formal plots, created by purchasing, amalgamating and thereby eradicating narrow medieval tenement plots.
- It is characteristic of University buildings that they are frequently set back from the street for architectural effect, within a forecourt defined by railings or balustrade walls. This is in marked contrast to colleges, retail and residential buildings, which are usually hard up against the pavement.

Pavements and street materials



Street materials



Theme 14: materials

- There is a good survival of historic street materials around University buildings in the central core: e.g. cobbles and paving around Radcliffe Square and the Sheldonian Theatre, and the modern interpretation of the medieval central street drain (kennel) on Brasenose Lane.
- These materials are highly important to the historic character and townscape texture of these areas.
- The eighteenth-century cobbled street surface of Radcliffe Square is listed at Grade II for its scenic value as a setting for the listed buildings.

Street furniture

- The University zone contains some of the few public benches in the city centre: in front of the Clarendon Building and in St Mary's Churchyard.
- High quality historic railings (e.g. Radcliffe Square) and historic street lamps, particularly the railings at the Radcliffe Camera, St Mary's, the Clarendon Building, Sheldonian and Old Ashmolean, contribute positively to the character of this zone.



The University Church of St Mary the Virgin, the location of the first purpose-built University spaces (OCC)

5.3.3 Green space



Public access to green spaces



Theme 25: green space

Accessible green space:

- The only area of public green space in this zone is the small churchyard of St Mary's. This includes mature trees that are an important green counterpoint to the otherwise hard streetscape of High Street. This is of considerable importance to the character and appreciation of the conservation area because public green space within the core is otherwise very limited.

Private green space:

- The lawns around the Radcliffe Camera provide a formal setting for the building. Their simplicity and formal nature enable the architectural detailing of the surrounding buildings to be better appreciated.



Benches outside the Clarendon Building provide some of the few public benches in the city centre



The Garden of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, the only area of public green space in this zone



Historic street materials in Radcliffe Square, listed at Grade II

5.3.4 Buildings



Designations



Theme 14: materials

Theme 15: architectural details

The buildings of the University are amongst the most celebrated in Oxford, part of the image of the city. The monumental central cluster is of exceptional architectural and historic interest, including the Bodleian Library and works by nationally renowned architects: Christopher Wren (Sheldonian), Nicholas Hawksmoor (the Clarendon Building) and James Gibbs (Radcliffe Camera).

University buildings demonstrate the evolution of architectural style from the Gothic of the Middle Ages, through Classical, to the loose interpretation of twentieth century Neo-Georgian (Weston Library). Nevertheless, common characteristics can be identified:

- Formal, monumental buildings set apart from their surroundings on separate plots.
- Built of Oxford limestone.
- Functions that bring people together and normally allow some public access.



The Clarendon Building, a formal, monumental composition built of characteristic warm golden limestone

5.3.5 Positive contributors



Positive contributors

All the buildings in the University Core character zone are listed at Grade I, with the exception of the Weston Library (Grade II), reflecting their exceptional historic and architectural interest. There are however, a number of smaller features that are unlisted that contribute to the character and appearance of the character zone. These comprise the historic streetlamps in Radcliffe Square and the water pump adjacent to the western elevation of the University Church of St. Mary.



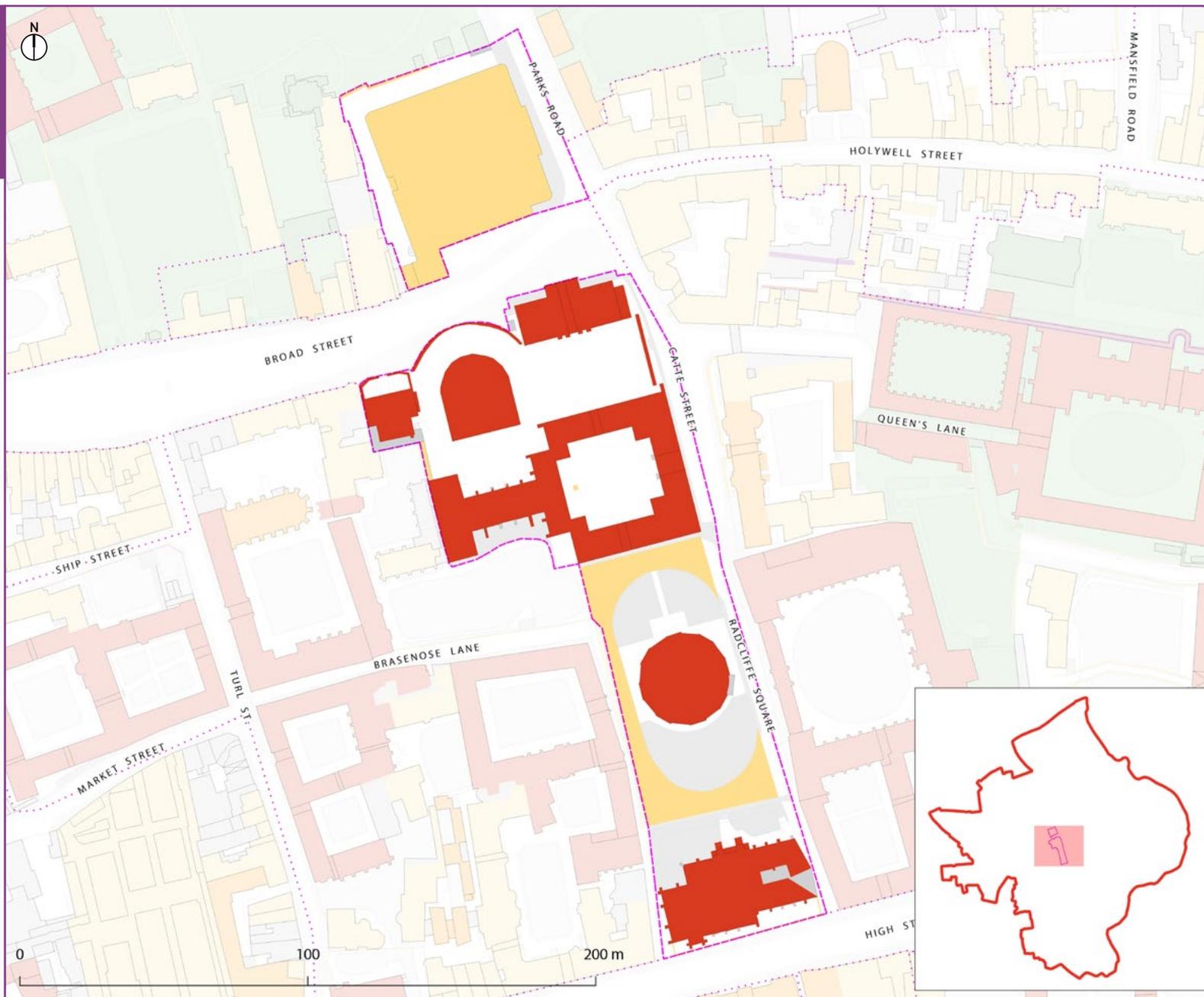
Designed vista through the Bodleian Library courtyard towards Radcliffe Camera

Designations

University Core

Key

- Oxford Central Conservation Area boundary
- Grade I listed
- Grade II* listed
- Grade II listed



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5.3.6 Roofscape



Roofscape



Theme 21: roofscape, skyline and landmarks

Building heights

- Building heights are varied, but tend to have three or more storeys of generous dimensions, reflecting the functions of the buildings.
- The bookstack of the Weston Library rises higher but is set well back from the building's façade, lessening its impact.
- Buildings rise to higher focal points such as the tower of St Mary's Church, the gatehouse of the Bodleian Library and the dome of the Radcliffe Camera.

Roofscape and skyline

- It is characteristic of the monumental and symbolic role of University architecture that the buildings have dynamic roofscapes which make a major contribution to the iconic skyline of Oxford.
- Elements include spires (St Mary's Church), domes (Radcliffe Camera), towers (the Bodleian), cupolas (Sheldonian Theatre) and pediments (Clarendon Building).
- Crenellations, pinnacles, parapets, statuary, chimneys etc., provide texture and incident.
- More recent buildings, conceived in the Modernist movement, have quite different roofscapes; the Weston Library has a large expanse of flat roof with a starkly horizontal profile.



The horizontal roof profile of the Weston Library



The lively roofscape of the Clarendon Building and Sheldonian Theatre

Roofscape

University Core

Key

 Oxford Central Conservation Area boundary

Building heights

-  0m
-  5m
-  10m
-  15m
-  20m

 Flat roofs

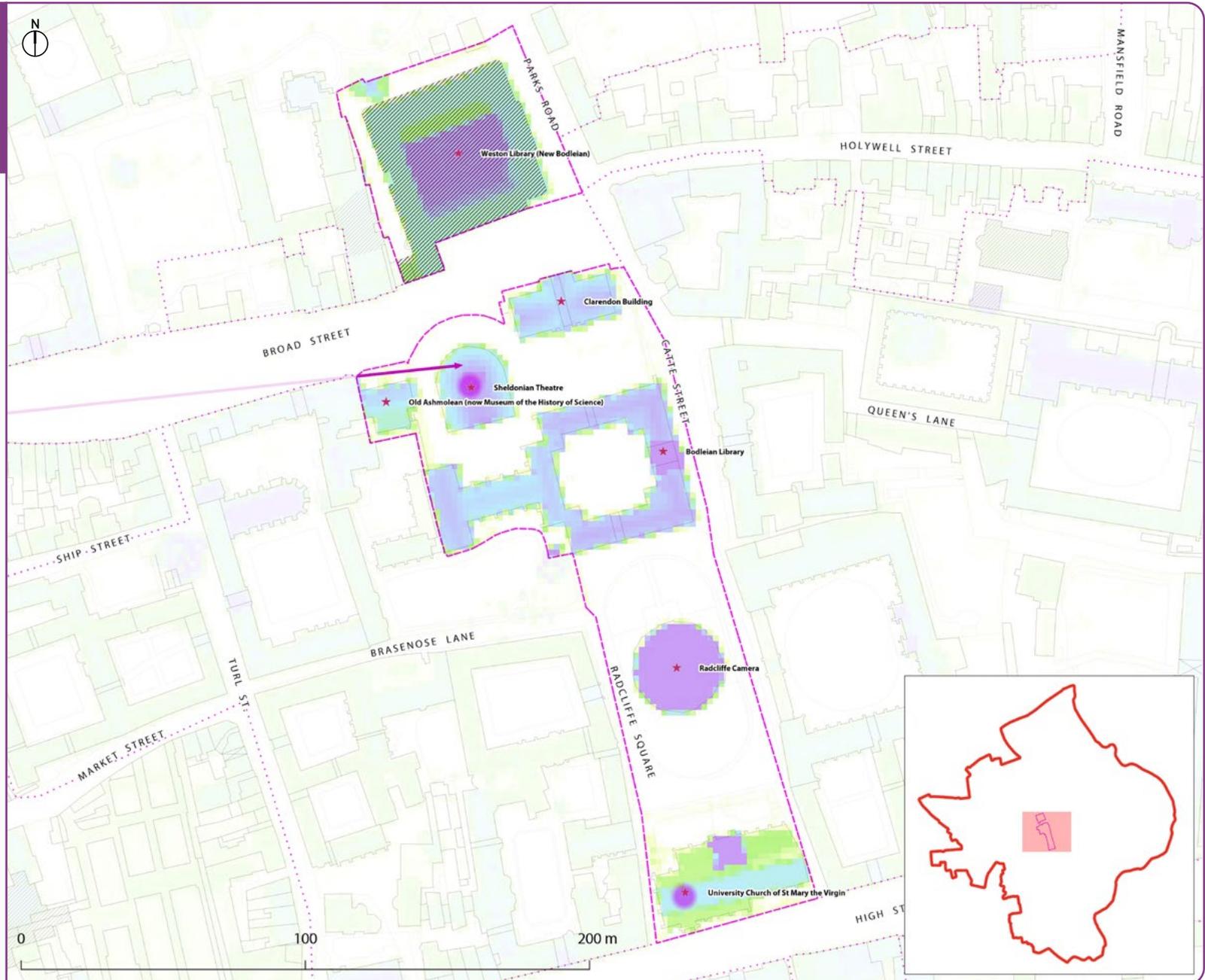
 Elevated panorama

 Designed public view

 Focal point

 Landmarks

Source: Building height data based on environment agency lidar DTM and DSM 2m



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5.3.7 Landmarks



Roofscape



Theme 21: roofscape, skyline and landmarks

Theme 22: views in the conservation area

Theme 27: setting of the conservation area

By their very nature, almost every building in this character zone is a landmark. Additionally, the towers and spires of neighbouring colleges are prominent in the setting of many University buildings.

- Bodleian Library, Broad Street.
- Clarendon Building, Broad Street.
- Old Ashmolean (Museum of the History of Science), Broad Street.
- Radcliffe Camera, Radcliffe Square.
- Sheldonian Theatre, Broad Street.
- University Church of St Mary the Virgin, High Street.
- Weston Library (New Bodleian), Broad Street.

Landmarks outside the zone

- Indian Institute cupola, corner of Holywell Street.
- Hertford Bridge (bridge of sighs), Hertford College, New College Lane.
- The Hawksmoor Towers, All Souls College.
- All Saints College (now Lincoln College library, Turl Street).
- Exeter College spire and fleche.

5.3.8 Views

Public viewing panoramas

- This zone contains two of the elevated positions from which the public can view 360-degree panoramas of the city: the cupola of the Sheldonian Theatre, which appears to have been designed for this purpose, and the tower of St Mary's Church, which is the most popular elevated public viewing point in the city. It has superb views over the historic core of the University and colleges; this allows visitors to experience and appreciate the historical form and architectural character of central Oxford and understand its relationship to its landscape setting, something that is otherwise difficult in a dense and largely flat city centre.

Designed views

- In addition to the panoramic views provided from the Sheldonian cupola, the University created views of the Clarendon Building and the Sheldonian Theatre by demolishing houses in the middle of Broad Street in 1667.
- The view along Broad Street to these buildings is one of the most important in the city.
- The buildings have been aligned in such a way that there is a view from the front door of the Weston Library, through the portals of the Clarendon Building to the doorway into the Bodleian courtyard with a glimpse of the Radcliffe Camera beyond, forming an exceptional vista.

Unfolding and glimpsed views

- University buildings are the focus of many unfolding and glimpsed views in the Conservation Area, no more so than in the streets and spaces of the core group around the Radcliffe Camera. Here, the townscape and architecture are of such exceptional quality that every corner reveals another magnificent view.

5.3.9 Movement and activity



Theme 26: tranquillity

Traffic

- The central core is pedestrianised. There is some limited vehicle access to Broad Street.

Pedestrians

- The University buildings attract a high footfall because of their international fame and because they are open to the public.
- The courtyard of the Bodleian Library can become extremely crowded with tourist parties, creating conflicts with registered readers trying to use the library.
- Pedestrianisation of Radcliffe Square and the streets around it provides some of the capacity needed to handle this number of visitors, and a pleasant place to linger and take in the exceptional architecture.
- Pinch points, such as where Cattle Street meets the High Street, can become extremely crowded with pedestrians.

5.3.10 Archaeology



Roofscape



Theme 21: roofscape, skyline and landmarks

- This character zone comprises a part of the Saxon burh and the medieval historic core encompassing the early focal points of the medieval University.
- Archaeological investigations over the last one hundred and twenty years have demonstrated the presence of well-preserved urban deposits of national importance in this area. Outside of the areas truncated by the construction of the University underground book stacks the zone encompasses parts of the Late Saxon and medieval defences, the remains of medieval tenements along Catte Street and Schools Street and the site of the Late Saxon and later medieval church University Church of St Mary's. The archaeological resource is complemented by the exceptional level of documentary information that survives about the town from the medieval period.
- The below-ground archaeological potential of the zone to reveal evidence of past occupation is considered to be high.



The tower of St Mary's Church provides an important public viewing point, offering superb views of the city centre

5.4 Useful documents and further guidance



Refer to the following Historic Urban Character Assessments on the Oxford City Council website for detailed accounts of the character zone. The key plan shows their boundaries.

HUCA 33 The Eastern Colleges: University Buildings.



Other useful documents include:

Oxford Heritage Walks Book 1: On foot from Oxford Castle to St Giles', Malcolm Graham 2013

Oxford Heritage Walks Book 2: On foot from Broad Street, Malcolm Graham 2014

