

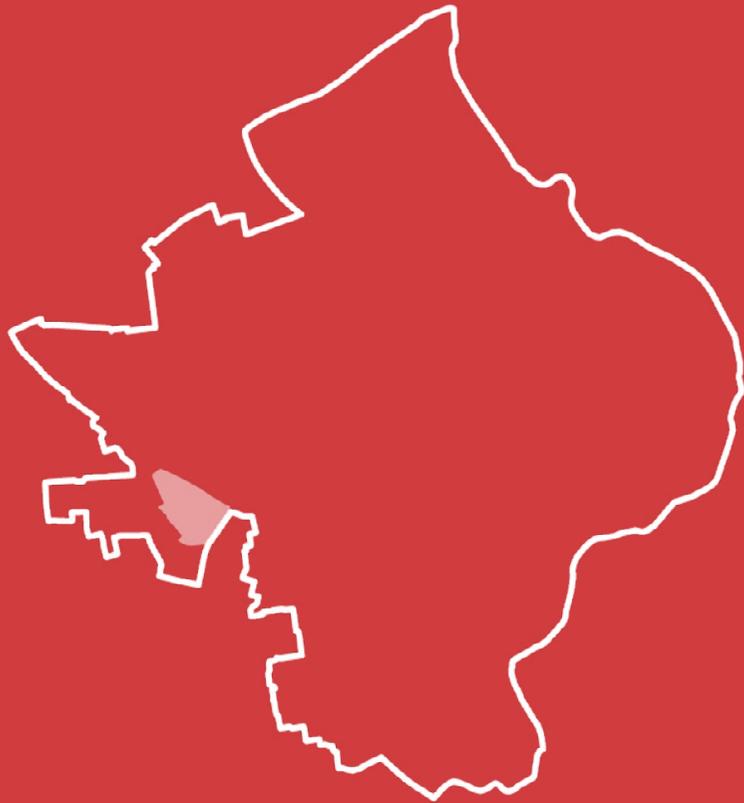
Character Zone Assessment 3

Oxford Castle

Oxford Central (City & University) Conservation Area

Zone includes:

- The Oxford Castle complex, including Castle Mound, St. George's Tower, County Hall and the former prison



Oxford Castle 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 Oxford Castle 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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3.1	An overview of character and special interest
3.2	A brief history
3.3	An analysis of character (considering use, street and townscape, green space, buildings, roofscape, landmarks and views, movement and activity, archaeology)
3.4	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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3.1 Overview of character and significance

This character zone comprises the judicial and defensive heart of the city. It contains exceptional structures that illustrate the Norman seizure and domination of Oxford and the austere character of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century penal system. It continues to be a centre of civic governance. The redevelopment of the Castle complex has opened this unique area to the public for the first time in centuries, rejuvenating this part of the city.

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

- Oxford's Saxon, Norman and medieval past are discernible in the surviving structures in the Castle complex and in the surrounding street pattern.
- The domed green banks of the motte are a distinctive landmark which define this part of the city.
- Redevelopment of Oxford Castle has made the medieval castle, motte and former prison accessible to the public for the first time in centuries and has created the only significant new publicly accessible open space in Oxford's recent history.
- The area remains a hub of County administration, continuing its long association with judicial and administrative functions.
- The views from the Castle motte and St George's Tower were designed to command all of their surroundings and contribute greatly to its significance.
- The zone has a high level of archaeological interest and has yielded significant information about Oxford's Saxon, Norman and medieval past.

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

- Large twentieth-century Council office buildings which are out of scale with their surroundings and lack active street frontages, reducing vitality.
- Buildings set back behind tarmac forecourts, used for parking, which detracts from their setting and the character of New Road.
- Parked vehicles adjacent to Justice Walk detract from the appearance as well as reducing the quality of the public realm and pedestrian permeability through the site.
- The accumulation of various types of advertisements which detract from the simple form and appearance of the Castle.

Opportunities for enhancement are:

- Measures to reduce or prevent parking within the Castle Quarter.
- Ensure consistent installation and management of signage, lighting and street furniture across the castle site which has an appropriate and cohesive appearance that does not detract from the simple form and appearance of the castle.
- Appropriate repairs to historic street materials where these are in poor condition and have been patched or otherwise repaired with inappropriate materials such as tarmac, for example granite sett gutters on Tidmarsh Lane.
- Improving awareness of the public open spaces available within the Castle Quarter, which are of great importance given the shortage of public spaces within the Conservation Area, but are currently under-utilised.
- Introducing lighting, of an appropriate form, to the Airing Yard in the Oxford Castle Quarter to encourage its use during the later opening hours of the associated businesses.

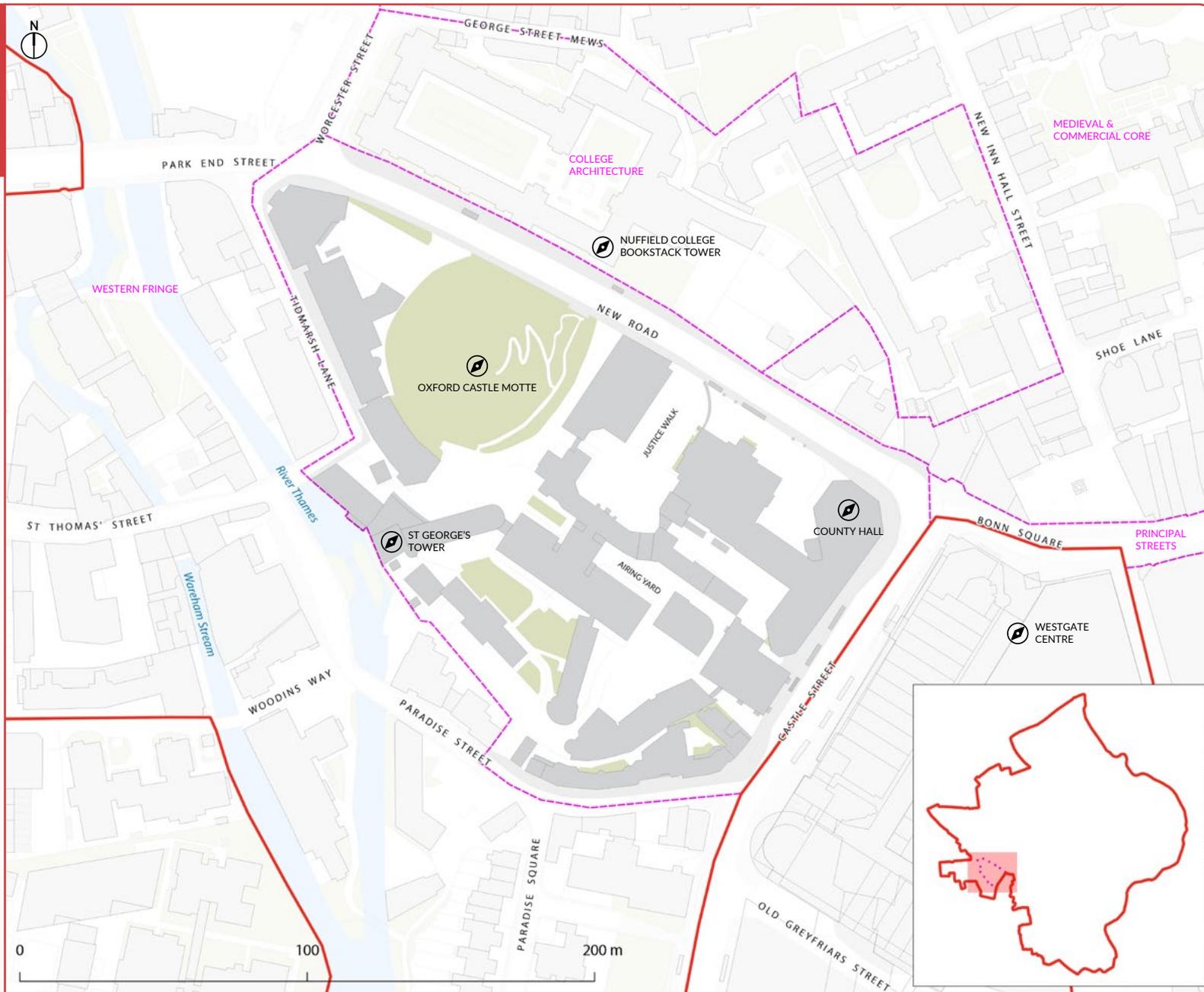


Redevelopment has opened the Castle complex to the public for the first time in centuries

Overview Oxford Castle

Key

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



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3.2 History

3.2.1 Saxon origins and Norman Conquest

- The Norman overlord Robert d'Oilly built a motte and bailey castle over the west of the burh in 1071, to dominate and intimidate the Saxon population. This interrupted the Saxon street pattern at the west side of the city.
- The late-eleventh century St George's Tower is the only survivor of several towers set at intervals along the stone defensive wall of the Castle. It guarded the old west gate into the city.
- St George's Chapel by St George's Tower was founded in 1074 and survived into the eighteenth century, when it was demolished to make way for the prison. The Norman crypt survives, with a reconstructed stone vault, and has historic associations with the historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was a canon of St George in the twelfth century.
- The other surviving Norman structure is the motte, although the ten-sided stone tower which once surmounted it has gone. Set deep within the motte is a vaulted well chamber dating from the thirteenth century.
- The Castle continued to be used as a defensive structure; most notably, the Empress Matilda was besieged in the Castle in 1142.

3.2.2 Decay and demolition

- The Castle suffered badly during the Civil War, when Parliamentary forces pulled down most of the buildings.
- It was further mutilated in 1769-70 with the construction of the New Road to improve connections to the west of the city. This cut through the Castle's outer bailey and ramparts, although the motte was protected by Christ Church as 'a venerable monument of antiquity'.
- The remains of the outer bailey on the north side of New Road were obliterated with the construction of the Oxford canal basin in 1790 (now the site of Nuffield College).
- The Castle's ditches were gradually colonised with narrow tenement plots.

3.2.3 County administration

- The Castle became the focus for the growing judicial and administrative functions of the city in the nineteenth century.
- Continuing its historic use, it was the site of the county gaol, which was rebuilt in 1785-1805 to designs by William Blackburn and enlarged by H J Underwood in 1850-52.
- The Assize Court was added in 1839-41, designed by John Plowman in a heavy Neo-Norman style with crenellations and arrow slits.
- New offices for the County Council's education department were constructed at the south end of the site in 1912, designed by W A Daft in yellow brick with Bath stone quoins (now the Oxfordshire Register Office).
- Further Council offices were added in the post-war period: Macclesfield House to the south of the motte in 1969, designed by the County Architect Albert E Smith in pre-cast concrete and set back by Tidmarsh Lane (now the Oxford Centre for Innovation); and the County Council offices in 1974 on Castle Street, facing the Westgate Centre.

3.2.4 Closure of prison and redevelopment

- The closure of the prison in 1996 prompted a redevelopment of the Castle site, allowing public access for the first time in centuries.



Malmaison Hotel occupying the former Oxford Prison building

3.3 Character

3.3.1 Use and access



Historic urban characterisation



Theme 11: living

Theme 8: commerce and retail

Theme 9: civic administration

This zone maintains its important role as a hub of civic administration, but now is also a significant leisure and entertainment destination.

- This zone is the administrative core of the County Council, containing their main offices and the County Register Office.
- Following the redevelopment and conversion of the prison in 2006, the buildings and historic structures host a range of commercial and educational uses, including a museum, apartments, hotel and restaurants.
- There is also residential on the Castle site, built as part of the 2006 redevelopment.
- The Castle Quarter is now an important area of public realm and outdoor space, which is now an under-utilised yet key use of the site.



The Castle motte is a distinctive feature in the streetscape and provides a welcome area of green space with panoramas over the city



Following redevelopment, the Castle complex is now an important leisure and entertainment destination



The County Council offices continue the long history of civic administrative in this area

3.3.2 Streets and townscape

The Castle site preserves a palpable sense of being a distinct zone set apart from the rest of the city. Despite the truncation of the Castle bailey by the construction of the New Road, the outline of the former Castle precinct is still discernible in the curve of Paradise Street, skirting the southern boundary, while Bulwarks Lane to the north curves and winds along the line of the former northern bailey.

Topography



Topography



Theme 23: topography and geology

- There is a gentle incline towards the city centre from the west and south, rising from the river valleys.
- The man-made mound of the Castle motte stands out as an elevated area of higher ground with views across the city.

Street pattern



Building lines and gaps; Saxon and medieval streets; Medieval plot boundaries



Theme 18: street layout of the Saxon burh

- Remains of the medieval street pattern survive at Tidmarsh Lane and Paradise Street, which skirt the outer line of the Castle precinct.
- The New Road is an example of eighteenth-century town planning, reflected in its relative straightness and greater width compared to the majority of Oxford's streets.
- Re-aligned in the twentieth century, Castle Street is dominated by the looming bulk of the Council offices on the west side and the Westgate centre on the east side of the road.
- Within the Castle complex, routes across the site were significantly altered as part of its conversion to a public leisure site.

Public spaces



Theme 5: religion

Theme 19: public space

- The modern development of the Oxford Castle complex has created the only significant new publicly accessible open space in Oxford's recent history.
- All the spaces between the buildings in the Castle quarter are open to full public access 24 hours a day.
- The Castle motte is open to the public on payment of a small fee.

Plots and building line



Medieval plot boundaries; Building lines and gaps



Theme 20: medieval plots

- The Castle complex consists of buildings occupying large footprints and set back from the road (originally behind a high wall), limiting their bulk in the streetscape.
- Development around the south and east perimeter of the Castle complex is generally back of pavement, creating a more intimate streetscape.
- Some buildings are set back behind forecourts, now dominated by parking, which is unsightly and detracts from their setting.



The forecourt of the Oxford Centre for Innovation is dominated by parking and vehicle controls, which detracts from the character of New Road

Pavements and street materials



Street materials



Theme 14: materials

- Street materials along New Road and Castle Street are mainly new and largely appropriate.
- The Oxford Castle complex generally uses new but appropriate materials including sandstone flags and areas of resin-bonded gravel which have a softer appearance that compliments the stone buildings.
- Some historic fabric remains in the secondary streets, especially along Tidmarsh Lane, which has surviving granite sett gutters and driveways, and a long stretch of blue clay pavers on the pavements (associated with waterside and nineteenth century industrial areas around St Thomas's) which contributes positively to the historic character of this area.
- Paradise Street also retains its granite sett gutters, which add to the historic character of the conservation area, and may have some surviving older street materials under the later tarmac surface near Quaking Bridge. There is a small border of cobbles at the corner with Castle Street but this is in poor condition.

Street furniture

- Street furniture in this area is generally modern and of a variety of different designs, creating an overall lack of cohesion.
- The Castle Quarter contains a suite of modern public realm and wayfinding signage fixtures, in addition to individual business signage boards and Council wayfinding totems. For the most part, these are minimal and employ a limited palette of materials, which helps to ensure that they do not unduly detract from the simple, austere architecture of the site.
- Galvanised steel railings along Castle Street and New Road are utilitarian and do not enhance the character of the area.
- The main historic survivals in this area are the characteristic Oxford street name plates, either free standing or attached to buildings, which create a strong sense of place.

The former Assize Court retains its highly characterful entrance pedestals surmounted by iron fascies, now topped with lanterns of a sympathetic design, which add to the historic character of its forecourt.



Blue clay pavers and granite sett gutters on Tidmarsh Lane



Cobbles in relatively poor condition and modern paving on the corner of Paradise Street and Castle Street. The galvanised steel railings do not contribute positively to the character of the conservation area

3.3.3 Green Space



Public access to green spaces



Theme 19: public space

Theme 22: views in the conservation area

Theme 25: green space

- The motte at Oxford Castle provides a welcome area of green space for the public to enjoy, with a small fee for entry to the mound.
- The Castle complex provides some welcome areas to sit and linger away from the busy streets, with an area of lawn behind the former prison block and other areas of trees, shrubs and planting. However, these public spaces are under-utilised with car parking on Justice Walk and by the entrance along the Paradise Street contributing towards the false sense of these as private rather than public spaces.
- Street trees along New Road outside Nuffield College and the Oxford Centre for Innovation, complemented by the grassy banks of the Castle motte, create a pleasantly green streetscape, which is distinctive to this part of the city.
- The Castle Mill Stream is tucked away behind buildings on secondary streets, giving it a peaceful and secluded character, with pockets of trees and climbers overhanging the stream.



The grassy banks of the motte and mature street trees on New Road create a pleasantly green streetscape



Area of lawn with deckchairs behind the former prison block



St George's Gate development adjoining St George's Tower by the Castle Mill Stream, a successful recent addition to the conservation area

3.3.4 Buildings



Designations



Theme 1: contrasts and complexity

Theme 14: materials

Theme 15: architectural details

Typology

- Like most of the conservation area, this zone contains considerable architectural variety, but three types are particularly characteristic:
 - the Castle, a unique site due to its medieval fortifications, and also its scale, form and historic prison complex
 - smaller-scale development around the Castle periphery, which has a more 'town' character of small plots with a lively roofscape
 - twentieth-century development, most notably for County Council offices, which have large floorplates and starkly horizontal roof profiles.

Details

- The Castle buildings are predominantly built of limestone and have an austere and forbidding character reflecting their former defensive and judicial functions.
- New development on the Castle site has respected the integrity of the historic buildings and is sympathetic in scale and materials.
- Buildings around the periphery are more diverse, with materials including yellow and red brick and painted render.
- The post-war Council offices are characterised by exposed reinforced concrete frames and large sheet glazing.

Lighting

- The Airing Yard is the large open space surrounded by dominant and robust walls. Lighting this space would encourage it to be used during the later opening hours of the associated businesses. Simple and utilitarian lighting would complement the industrial starkness of the site while enabling this later use.
- Frivolous or residential Victorian-style lighting, including catenary lighting, would not be appropriate for this large and open area, even though the benefit of increasing the after-dark uses is acknowledged.

3.3.5 Positive contributors



Positive contributors

The core buildings in the Castle complex are listed. Unlisted buildings are largely confined to the periphery of the site. Those which are sympathetic to its historic character use appropriate materials and address the street successfully, contributing positively to the area's character and vitality.

- The Register Office on New Road has a high degree of historic and architectural interest through its association with the area's development as a focus of civic administration and through its architecture, which complements the later Nuffield College on the opposite side of the road.
- The Quaking Bridge over Castle Mill Stream possesses historic interest as there has been a bridge in this location since at least the thirteenth century. The current structure is a good example of the a late Georgian iron bridge with elegant railings.
- Other positive contributors that have been identified within the character zone include sections of stone walling and areas of traditional surfacing materials which contribute positively to the appearance of the area.

The less successful modern insertions are generally those buildings whose scale and materials are insensitive to their historic surroundings, such as:

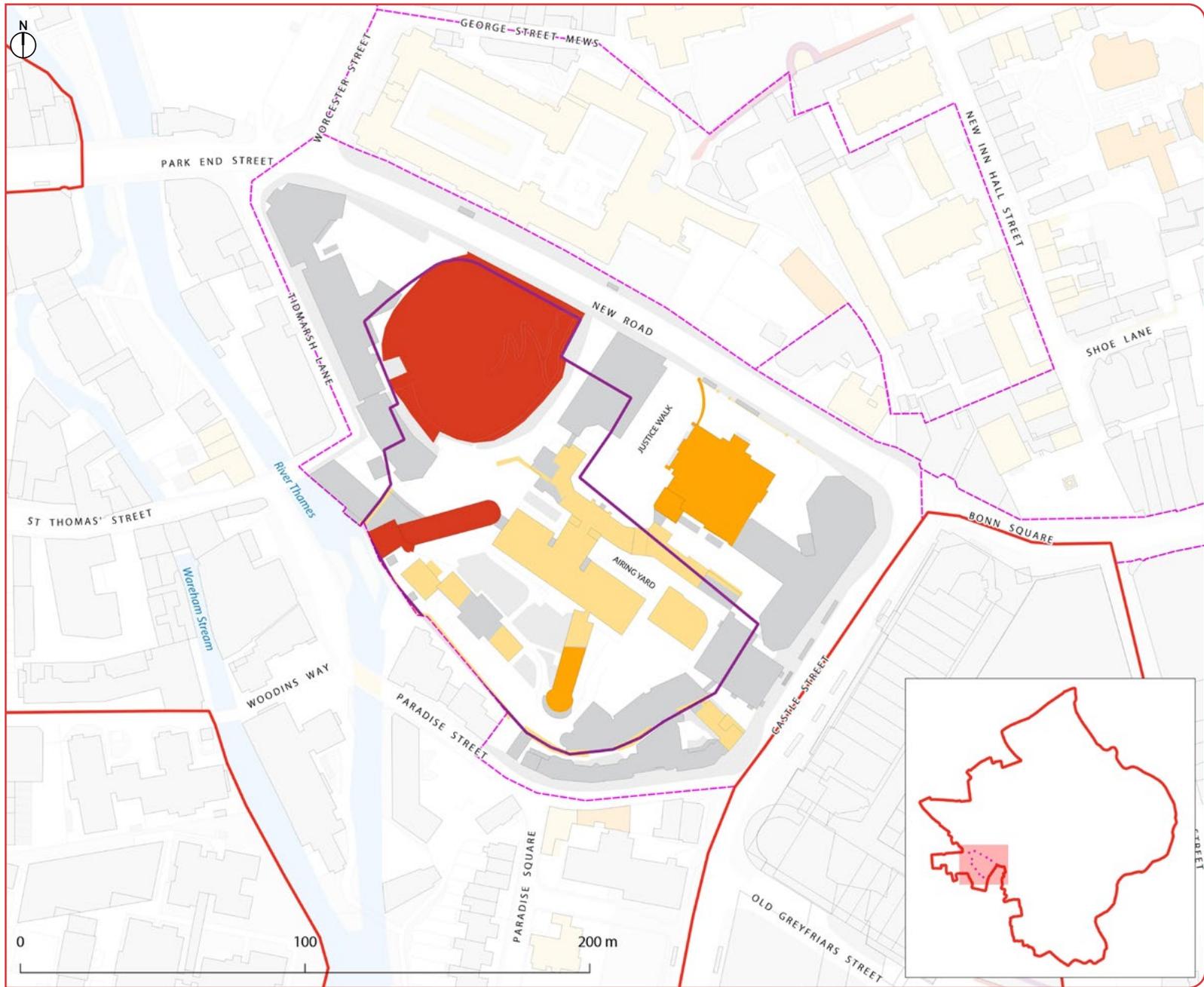
- County Hall, on the corner of New Road and Castle Street, is an unforgiving neighbour to the Castle and its motte and lacks an active street frontage.
- The Oxford Centre for Innovation (former Council offices) is set back from New Road behind an unsightly area of tarmac given over to parking, which detracts from the experience of pedestrians walking towards the city centre from the station, and provides an oversized and unfriendly elevation to Tidmarsh Lane.
- Where historic surfaces have survived or are reinstated they contribute positively to the character of the area, such as the blue clay pavers and granite setts on Tidmarsh Lane.

Designations

Oxford Castle

Key

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

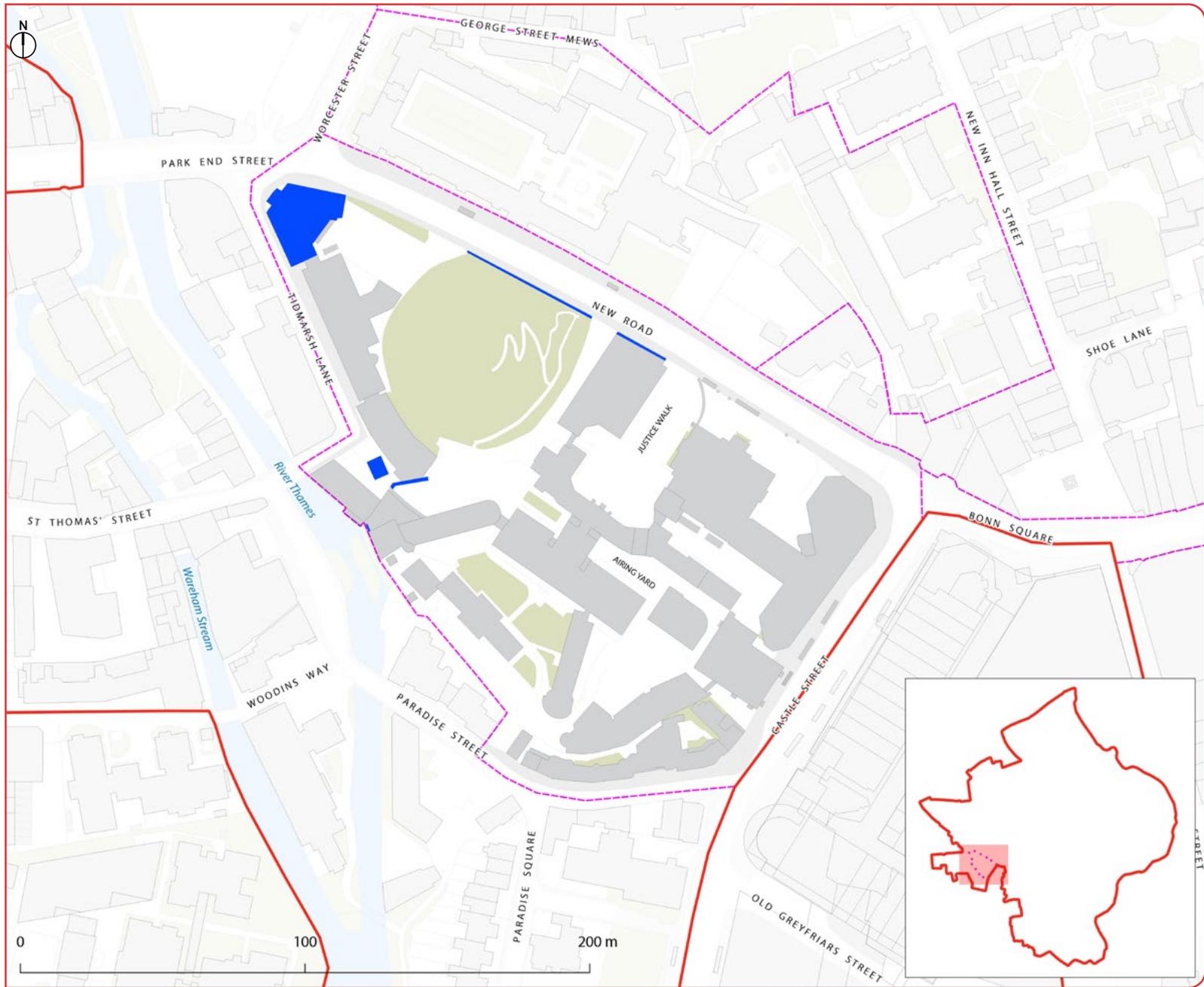


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Positive contributors Oxford Castle

Key

-  Oxford Central Conservation Area boundary
-  Positive contributors (non-designated)



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3.3.6 Roofscape



Roofscape



Theme 21: roofscape, skyline and landmarks

The roofscape in this zone is notable for its horizontal emphasis, in contrast to the lively pitched roofs which are characteristic of the city centre. The skyline is dominated by the distinctive domed profile of the motte, which defines this part of the city.

Building heights

- Building heights are mostly three to four storeys, rising higher to the focal point of St George's Tower.
- The new County Hall on the west side of Castle Street rises to five storeys and is overly dominant because of its height and scale, exacerbated by the rising slope up New Road which makes it more prominent in views east.

Roofscape and skyline

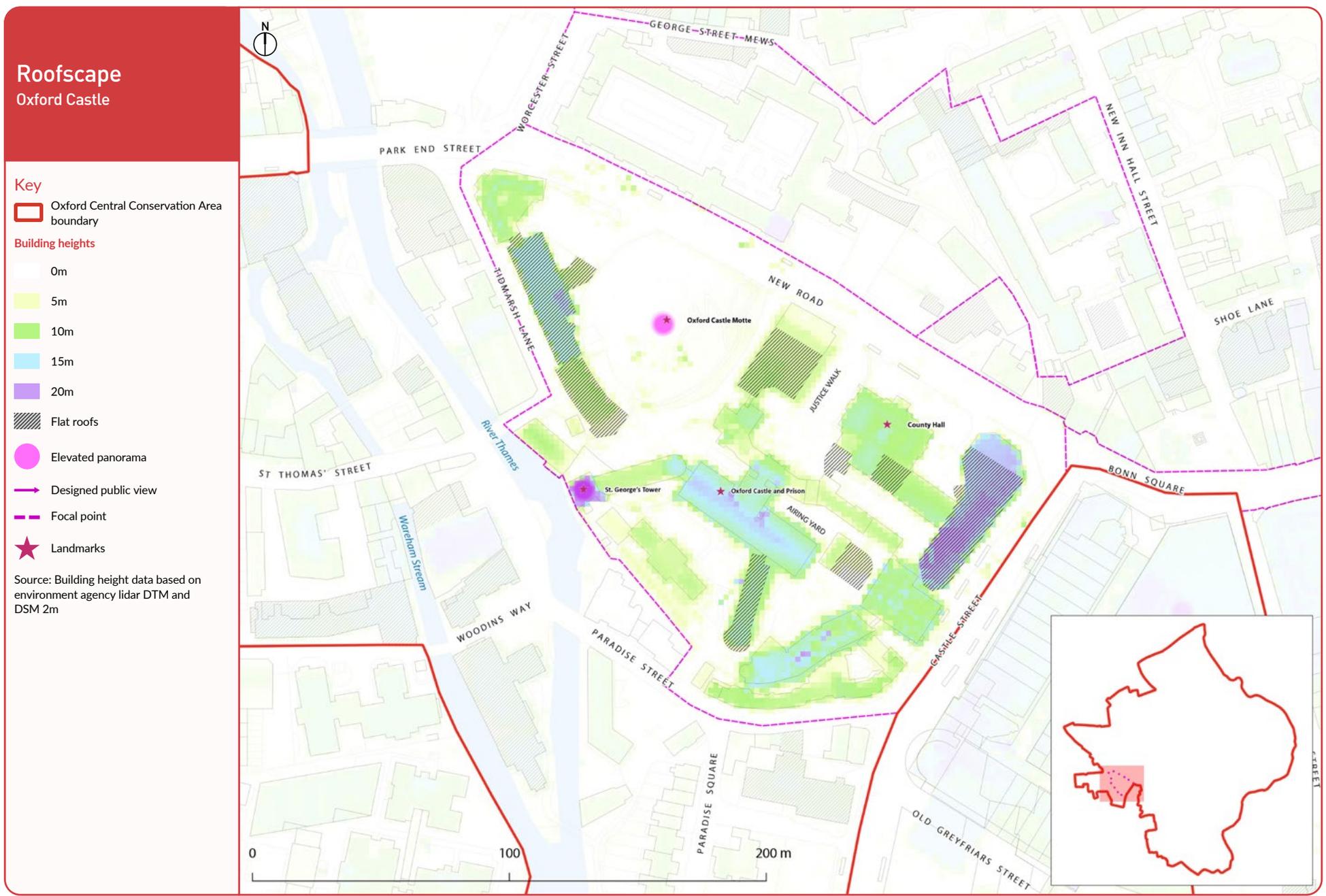
- The Castle motte rises to 20 metres and create a distinctive skyline in this part of the city.
- The Castle complex is characterised by long stretches of predominantly horizontal rooflines, relieved in places by crenellations and the gatehouse to the former prison building.
- This characteristic is continued and intensified by modern development such as County Hall, the Oxford Centre for Innovation, which have long stretches of starkly horizontal roof profiles that can be oppressive.



The Register Office on New Road has architectural interest and continues the history of civic administration in the area



The Castle Motte creates a distinctive part of the skyline. Crenellations add interest to the roofline of County Hall



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3.3.7 Landmarks



Roofscape



Theme 21: roofscape, skyline and landmarks

Theme 22: views in the conservation area

Theme 27: setting of the conservation area

The monumental motte of Oxford Castle is the defining landmark in this zone, with a character quite unlike any other part of the city.

Landmarks within the character zone

- County Hall, New Road.
- Oxford Castle motte, Castle Mound.
- Oxford former Prison (now hotel), Oxford Castle.
- St George's Tower, Oxford Castle.

Landmarks outside the character zone

- Nuffield College bookstack tower, New Road

3.3.8 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 motte of the Castle and St George's Tower (which was provided with a viewing platform behind the parapet as part of the redevelopment of the Castle complex in 2006). From these positions, the public can experience and appreciate the historical form and architectural character of central Oxford, and its relationship to its landscape setting, something that is otherwise difficult in a dense and largely flat city centre.

Designed views

- The views from the motte and St George's Tower of Oxford Castle were designed to command all of their surroundings, for the purposes of surveillance and defensive action. Therefore, maintaining these panoramas is essential to conserving the significance of the Castle.

Glimpsed views

- St George's Tower looms ominously over the Castle Mill Stream and appears in glimpsed views from the Castle complex and surrounding streets.
- Pedestrians can experience a variety of views moving through the quarter, as compressed passageways open out onto wider spaces.

3.3.9 Movement and activity



Theme 26: tranquillity

This zone has inconsistent levels of activity, busy along the main thoroughfare of New Road and around the Castle museum and motte, but far quieter in the remainder of the Castle complex and in the peripheral streets.

Traffic

- New Road, as one of the main approach roads from the west, is a key transport route for buses and taxis.

Cycling

- Cycling activity is moderate along the main roads and low on the secondary streets such as Tidmarsh Lane.

Pedestrian

- The Oxford Castle complex has an inconsistent level of activity; the Castle's museum attracts high numbers of visitors but this is not sustained in the areas surrounding the former prison.
- There is a steady stream of pedestrians moving along New Road either towards the station or the city centre.
- The pavements on the south side of Paradise Street are very narrow, forcing pedestrians to the opposite side of the street.

3.3.10 Archaeology



Theme 12: archaeology



Oxford Archaeological Action Plan further detail and guidance

- This character zone comprises parts of the Saxon burh and the Norman Castle. Notable archaeological assets within this zone include the buried remains of the late-Saxon town rampart and wall and contemporary street grids and buildings, the upstanding late-Saxon or Norman St George's Tower, the upstanding Norman motte and thirteenth-century well chamber, the remains of the Norman Collegiate church of St George at the Castle and St Budoc's Church, the buried remains of walls, gates, bridges, towers, defensive ditches and barbican belonging to the medieval castle, the site of the medieval Shire Hall and the upstanding remains of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prison complex and associated burials.
- Excavations undertaken as part of the redevelopment of the Castle complex in 2003–05 revealed important information about Oxford's late Anglo-Saxon origins. Part of the late-Saxon town wall remains on public display.
- Archaeological works at the motte have revealed evidence of the construction of the mound and remains of the twelfth-century stone tower on its summit, with Civil War earthworks and later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscaping of the mound.
- The area has exceptional potential for further well-preserved archaeology including water-logged remains in the base of the motte and bailey ditch system and burials from the prison and the Collegiate Church of St George at the Castle. The below-ground archaeological potential of the zone is considered to be very high.

3.4 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 12 Castle and Periphery: Oxford Castle.



Other useful documents include:

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

Castle, Canal, College, Oxford Preservation Trust, Oxfordshire County Council and Nuffield College, 2007

Excavations at Oxford Castle 1999-2000, Mumby, Norton, Poore and Dodd, 2019

