

Character Zone Assessment 6

Western Fringe

Oxford Central (City & University) Conservation Area

Zone includes:

- Castle Mill Stream and the Oxford Canal
- St. Thomas Church and St. Thomas Street
- The Former Lion Brewery
- Gloucester Green



Western Fringe 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 Western Fringe 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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6.1	An overview of character and special interest
6.2	A brief history
6.3	An analysis of character (considering use, street and townscape, green space, buildings, roofscape, landmarks and views, movement and activity, archaeology)
6.4	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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6.1 Overview of character and significance

This character zone consists of the areas west and south-west of the city centre along the Castle Mill Stream, St Thomas' and the Oxford Canal. There were medieval abbeys here, and later waterside industry until the second half of the twentieth century. Pockets of post-medieval character survive, but most were swept away by comprehensive redevelopment in the 1960s and 1970s, to be replaced by largely unsuccessful structures of a quite different scale and grain.

The following aspects of the zone are of considerable historical, architectural, townscape or social significance and contribute positively to the character and appearance of the conservation area:

- Castle Mill Stream and the Oxford Canal – tranquil green public spaces isolated by trees from the sights and sounds of the city around them. A secretive quality quite different from the Isis and Cherwell.
- The intimate network of streets and paths weaving along and across the streams, with diverse building types and tree-lined banks, experienced as a sequence of glimpses and revealed views, often from small bridges.
- St Thomas', a medieval extra-mural suburb with a distinctive character formed of former industrial buildings and modest residential terraces, terminating in views of the medieval church.
- Surviving fragments of the religious houses that dominated here in the Middle Ages.
- Surviving buildings and fragments of fabric (e.g. walls) of the industries that lined the Castle Mill Stream for centuries.

The principal aspect of the zone that harms the character and appearance is:

- Fragmented historic character due to twentieth-century redevelopment; large scale plots that do not reflect the historic street patterns.
- Areas of lifeless frontage that contribute to an unfriendly environment for pedestrians.

Opportunities for enhancement within this character zone include:

- Better realising the potential of the green spaces along the canal and Castle Mill Stream, which is currently under-utilised, by opening up access through improved physical or visual links.
- Improving street lighting by the canal to reduce instances of anti-social behaviour and improve safety.
- Enlivening the area by making it more appealing to pedestrians.
- For new development to take inspiration from the industrial riverside character of the zone in terms of architectural design, massing, its relationship to the water, landscaping, etc.
- The redevelopment of Gloucester Green has delivered a public square which hosts a vibrant market and public events, but the space can feel divorced from the city centre and the public realm is a little tired, There is therefore opportunity to enhance this area.



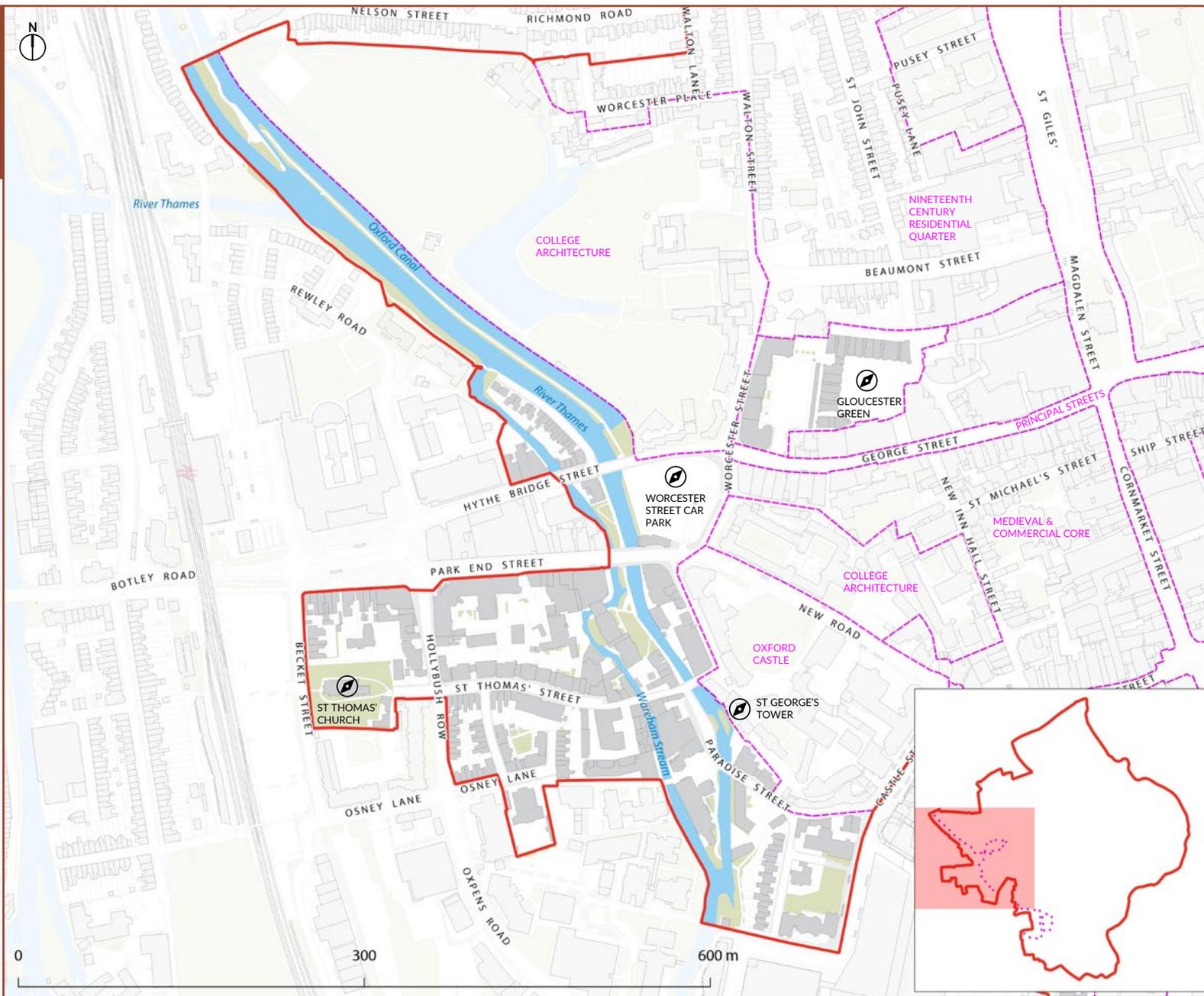
The Castle Mill Stream has a tranquil and secretive quality, with an intimate network of streets weaving across and along it

Overview

Western Fringe

Key

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



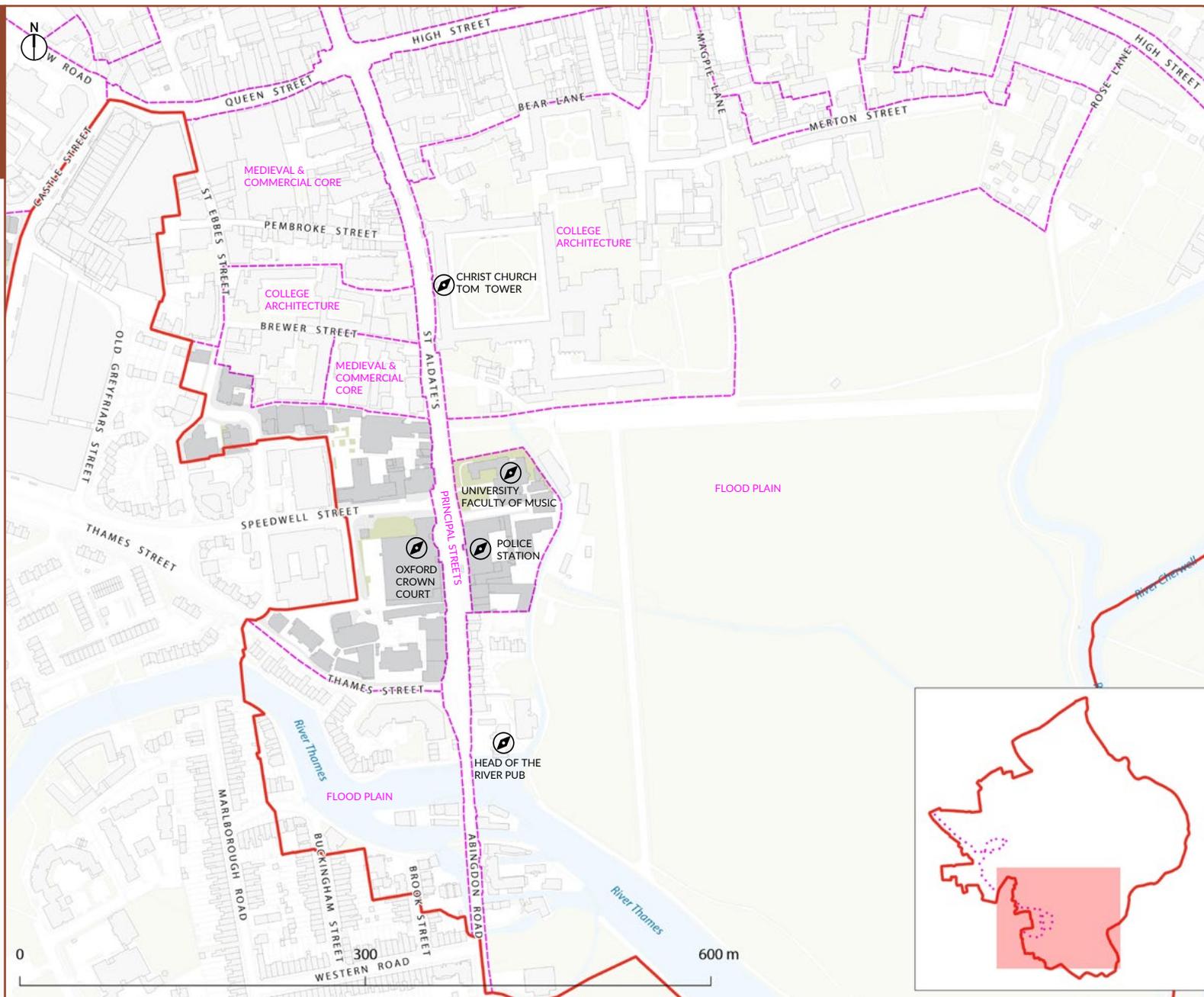
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Overview

Western Fringe

Key

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



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6.2 History

6.2.1 Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman

- During these early periods, this area consisted of swamps and meadows in the Thames floodplain.

6.2.2 Saxons

- This character zone lies just outside the walls of the Saxon burh.
- The Castle Mill Stream has prehistoric roots and was modified in Saxon times. The Wareham Stream of the Thames was most likely a Norman Mill back channel to feed the Castle mill, hence its alternative name, the backstream. Osney Island was thus formed, between the Mill Stream and the main channel of the Thames.
- The southern section of the character zone spans the route to the Saxon river crossing, a causeway which may have prehistoric origins (now St Aldate's).

6.2.3 Normans and Middle Ages

- The construction of the Castle over the late Saxon street grid on the west side of the city centre separated the western fringe from the main body of the town.
- Religious houses dominated the area south and west of the walled city, including Osney Abbey (an Augustinian priory), Rewley Abbey to the north-west (a Cistercian foundation), The Friars of the Sack in Paradise Square (given to the Franciscans in the 14th Century) and the largest Dominican friary outside London in St Ebbe's.
- The suburb of St Thomas developed from the twelfth century around the direct route between Osney Abbey and Oxford Castle, with a ribbon of development laid out along St Thomas' Street leading toward the parish church.
- Industries dependent on the Thames for transport, power and water developed in this area including mills, fishing, breweries, tanneries and timber yards.

6.2.4 Improving communications: New Road, Oxford Canal, Great Western Railway

- The Dissolution of the Monasteries permanently scarred the western and southern suburbs, leading to a period of decline.
- The New Road, a turnpike road, was built 1769–70 to improve communication to the west.
- The Oxford Canal was completed in 1790, with the opening of a two-fingered basin (the site of current Worcester Street car park and Nuffield College).
- Gloucester Green was the site of the City Gaol (built 1789) and subsequently the cattle market.
- The arrival of the Great Western Railway in 1845 further accelerated development with rows of workers' terraces and industries such as the gas works and breweries; it also made this area an important point of arrival on the edge of the city for many travellers.

6.2.5 Residential and commercial development

- Breweries were established in the post-medieval period, attracted to the area by the streams.
- The St. Ebbes suburb was developed for housing in the early 19th Century eradicating this part of the street plan around Paradise Square.
- Attempts were made to improve working-class housing in the overcrowded and insanitary St Thomas's area with the construction of the Christ Church



Christ Church model dwellings on Osney Lane

Model Dwellings in 1866 in The Hamel, and brick cottages along Osney Lane.

- This area also attracted larger-scale commercial developments in the early twentieth century, such as the Cantay Depositories on Park End Street (a furniture warehouse built between 1894–1909) and the Cooper's Marmalade Factory in 1909.

6.2.6 Redevelopment since 1930

- The Oxford Canal basin was abandoned and Nuffield College was built after the War on the coal wharf; the remainder of the basin was filled in and is now used as a car park.
- The lower section of St Aldate's was transformed by the construction of the large Morris car showroom in 1932 (now the Oxford Crown Court), the neo-Georgian Police Station (1936), and Sir Hubert Worthington's new premises for St Catherine's Society (now the University Faculty of Music): large-scale ashlar buildings which replaced the narrow plots and courtyards lining St Aldate's.
- St Ebbe's was comprehensively redeveloped after World War II, with a new street plan and new large-scale commercial, institutional and residential buildings.
- There was significant post-war slum clearance and redevelopment in St Thomas' in the 1930s, although the area retains the core of its medieval street pattern and grain of development.
- Gloucester Green was redeveloped between 1987–90, creating a new bus station, shops, offices and flats with space for an open-air market.
- Since c.2000, there have been new residential schemes, especially along the Castle Mill Stream, on old industrial sites such as the former Lion Brewery.
- Westgate, a substantial shopping centre outside the conservation area but with significant impact on its character and views, was built in 1970–72 and extensively remodelled and extended between 2016–17.



St Thomas' retains its medieval street pattern and grain of development, despite significant post-war development



Worcester Street car park on the site of the former canal basin

6.3 Character

6.3.1 Use and access



Historic urban characterisation



Theme 1: contrasts and complexity

Theme 2: university

Theme 8: commerce and retail

Theme 9: civic administration

- This character zone contains a greater variety of uses than other parts of the conservation area.
- Predominant uses are: residential, commercial and institutional (including County Council offices, the Crown Court and the police station).
- Other functions include retail and the University.

6.3.2 Streets and townscape

Topography



Historic urban characterisation

- Gently rising from the Northmoor gravel terrace to the second gravel terrace on which the Saxon and medieval town was laid out.



Gloucester Green, an architecturally spirited recent development with a vibrant open-air market, but can feel tucked away from the city



Albion Place, part of the comprehensive post-war development of St Ebbe's with residential and commercial buildings

Street pattern



Saxon and medieval streets; medieval plot boundaries



Theme 18: street layout of the Saxon burh

Theme 24: waterways

- The Western Fringe character zone has more variety in its street pattern than any other:
 - saxon and medieval thoroughfares: for example the gently winding St Thomas' Street, and St Aldate's, largely straight and wide
 - along the Wareham and Castle Mill Streams, intimate paths, streets and rows, weaving back and forth across multiple bridges. Some of these routes are believed to be Saxon or medieval in original, though they are little understood. Notable is Fisher Row, originally home to fishermen in sixteenth century, joined by bargemen in the seventeenth century and after that canal boatmen
 - post-war streets and roads, set out for road traffic on grids, with sweeping corners and wide pavements, for example west of St Aldate's. These bear little or no relationship to the historic street pattern which they replaced.

Public spaces

- There are limited public spaces in this part of the city and those that do exist are mostly recent creations.
- The largest is Gloucester Green, which hosts a vibrant market but can feel somewhat tucked away from the city centre. On non-market days it can be a peaceful space to sit, with benches and mature trees, although clusters of commercial dustbins by Worcester Street are a detracting feature.
- The canal paths and small green swathes are valuable public spaces.
- Paradise Square is a designed space.

Plots and building lines



Medieval plot boundaries; Building lines and gaps



Theme 20 medieval plots

- Along the Castle Mill Stream and in St Thomas' Street there are surviving narrow medieval plots that are of historic importance and significance because they create a dense grain in the townscape.
- Elsewhere on St Aldate's and to its west, there are large plots created in the second half of the twentieth century that frequently bear little relationship to what they replaced. Remnants of important boundaries and post-medieval buildings do remain.
- The disparate character of the area prevents a definitive description of the building lines. The historic building line is often to the back of pavement, but some post-war developments are set back, sometimes with a poorly resolved relationship to the street.

Street materials and street furniture



Street materials



Theme 14: materials

- There are few survivals of historic street materials and furniture in this character zone; where they do survive, or have been reinstated, they contribute to the area's historic significance.
- St. Thomas Street- blue clay pavers and granite setts

6.3.3 Green space

This zone is unusual in that most of the green space is publicly accessible, and linear. Despite this, it tends not to be as obvious or well used as some other parts of the conservation area. Realising its potential would be an enhancement.



Public access to green spaces



Theme 25: green space

- The principal green spaces here are along the Wareham and Castle Mill Streams and the Oxford Canal. These have a very intimate and peaceful quality, defined by the relationship to the water and absence of vehicles.
- Green space along the streams consists of pockets and slips of trees and shrubs in combination with buildings, experienced on footpaths and crossing bridges.
- The canal towpaths are green, wooded and quiet, so that the rest of the city is all but invisible and inaudible. This is precious and fragile.
- The churchyard of St Thomas' provides a small area of publicly accessible green space.
- Paradise Square is one of the few relatively formal public green spaces in the city, and a tranquil haven in set within post-war blocks.



Industrial blue clay pavers and granite setts in St Thomas' contribute to its historic character



The Oxford Canal (left) and Castle Mill Stream (right) provide a peaceful green space



Paradise Square provides a welcome area of public space amongst the post-war blocks surrounding it

6.3.4 Buildings



Designations



Theme 14: materials

Theme 15: architectural details

Theme 7: a service economy

Theme 17: post-war architecture

Typologies

There is a distinctive mixture of building types, quite different to much of the conservation area:

- Surviving remnants of the historic extra-mural settlement of St Thomas', most notably St Thomas' Church, Vicarage and the former grammar school (Combe House).
- Former industrial buildings, e.g. the Lion Brewery (now residential apartments) and Malthouse (now University Estates Office).
- Model nineteenth-century social housing on Osney Lane and the Hamel.
- Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century commercial buildings, such as the Cooper's Marmalade Factory and the Cantay Depositories.
- Civic buildings (predominantly twentieth-century), such as the Crown Court, County Council offices and Police Station.
- Bridges (low, small, often with iron components) and canal infrastructure.
- Post-war residential development.



The Crown Court, part of a cluster of civic buildings in the south part of St Aldate's

Materials

- In this zone brick is the predominant historic material – a red brick until the middle of the nineteenth century, and thereafter including buff. From the second half of the century bricks are no longer handmade.
- Surviving pre-Victorian buildings including St Thomas' Church, Lodge and Combe House are constructed of limestone; this was also the material of choice for 1930s development along St Aldate's, including the Crown Court (former Morris showroom), Police Court and Oxford Faculty of Music buildings. The use of limestone for these twentieth-century buildings provides a sense of continuity with the college and civic buildings further along St. Aldate's which are also of limestone.
- Post-war buildings use many materials, including concrete frames and panels, and more recently a variety of cladding materials, including a revival of brick.



Surviving late-Victorian terraced housing along Osney Lane in red brick

6.3.5 Positive contributors

Positive contributors

- The uses and typologies of the buildings within the Western Fringe Character Zone are very varied, and this is also true of those unlisted buildings and structures that combine positively to the character and appearance of the zone.
- Much of the zone's traditional housing and surviving nineteenth and twentieth-century buildings and structures contribute positively to its character, illustrating its industrial history and the transformative impact of transport innovations (the canal and subsequently the railway) on this part of the city.
- There are a number of fine examples of Victorian and early twentieth century unlisted buildings within the character zone. One example is the late-Victorian commercial terrace on the south side of Frideswide Square, which is well preserved, including some original shopfronts, and has a lively roofline with a characterful central turret.
- Another is St Thomas's School on Osney Lane, an attractive polychrome brick building with railings with Art Nouveau detailing.
- The former Morris showrooms, Police Station and Faculty of Music, form a cluster of limestone buildings along St Aldate's and reflect the area's commercial, civic and institutional development in the 1930s.
- Whilst much of the twentieth-century development within the character zone is unsympathetic, there are some successful examples that contribute positively to the character and appearance of the area such as the University Catholic Chaplaincy, which harmonises successfully with surrounding buildings in Rose lane through the sympathetic use of brick and its stepped design.
- 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 St. Thomas' Street, Tidmarsh Lane and Paradise Street.



St Thomas' School on Osney Lane is a characterful design in polychromatic brick

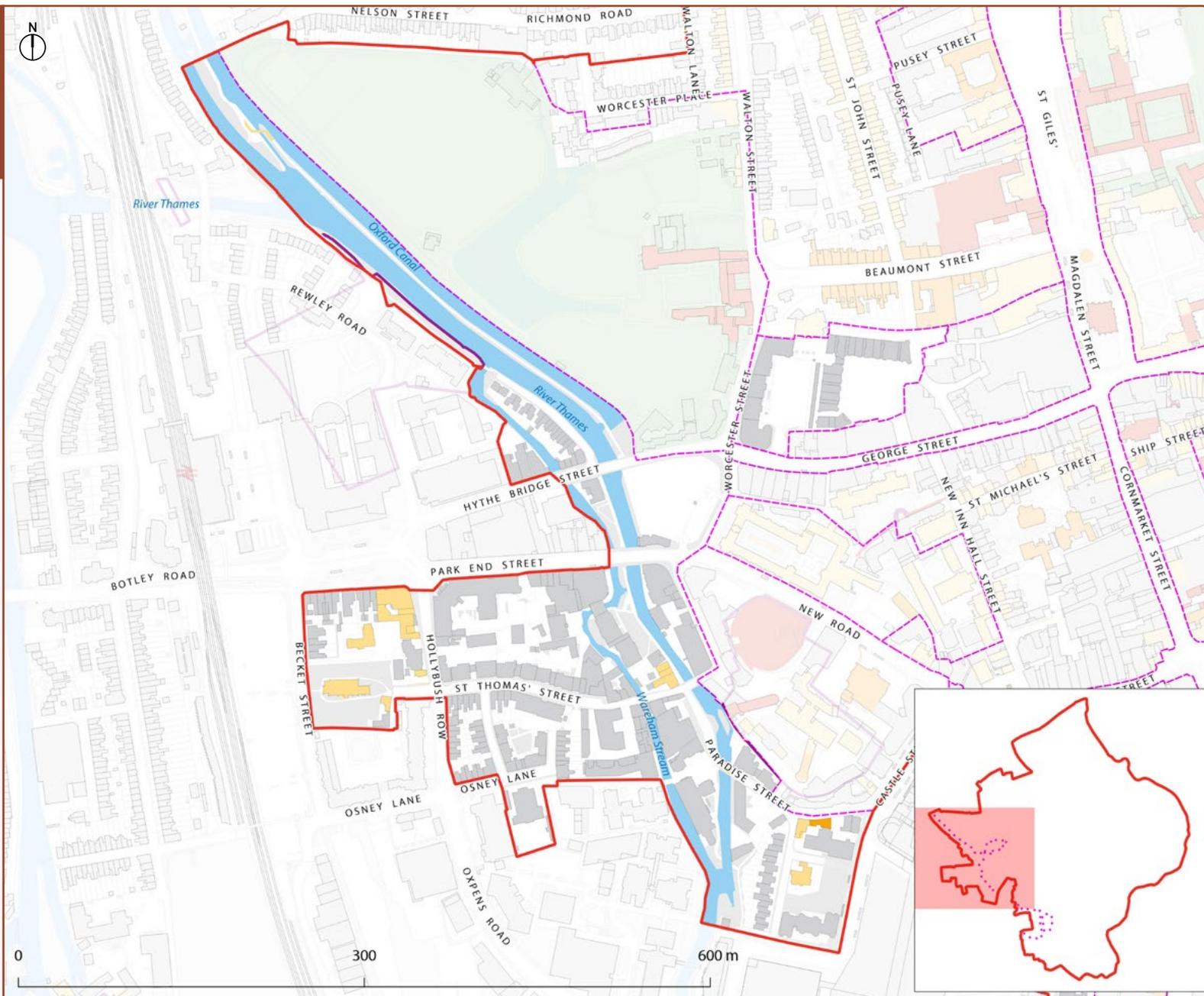


Surviving fragments of Oxford's industrial past, including the former Lion Brewery

Designations Western Fringe

Key

-  Oxford Central Conservation Area boundary
-  Grade I listed
-  Grade II* listed
-  Grade II listed
-  Scheduled monument
-  Registered parks and gardens

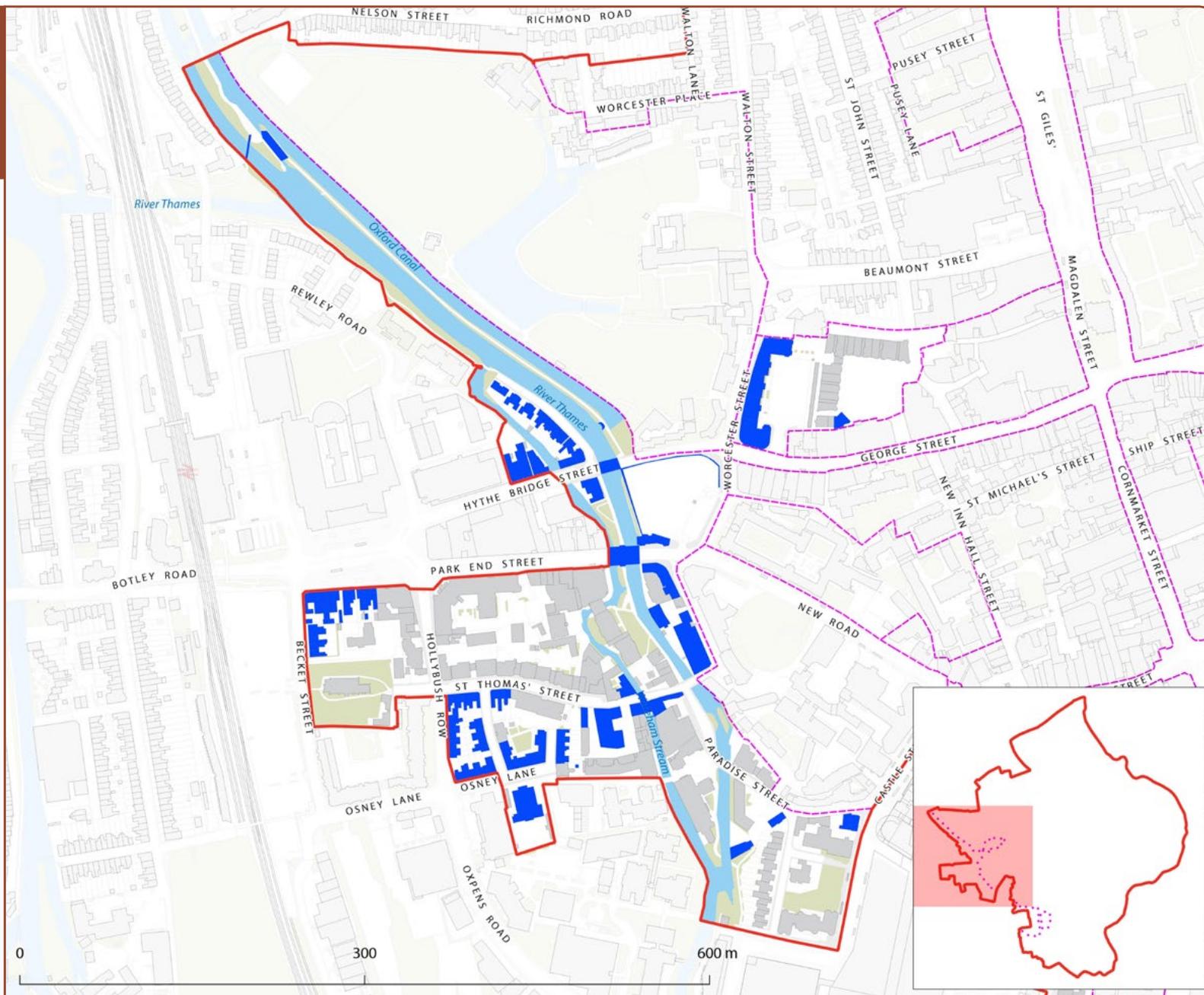


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Positive contributors Western Fringe

Key

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

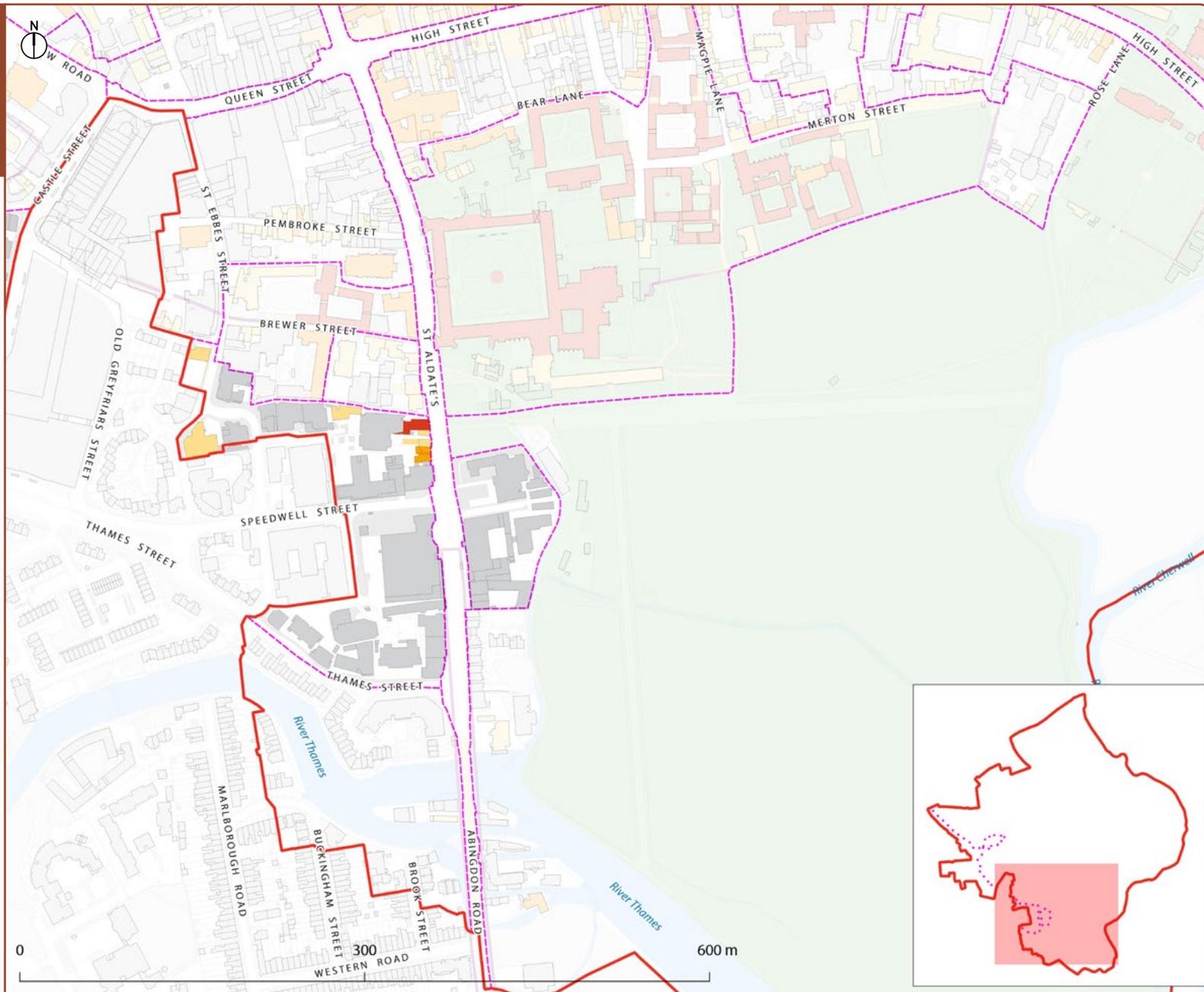


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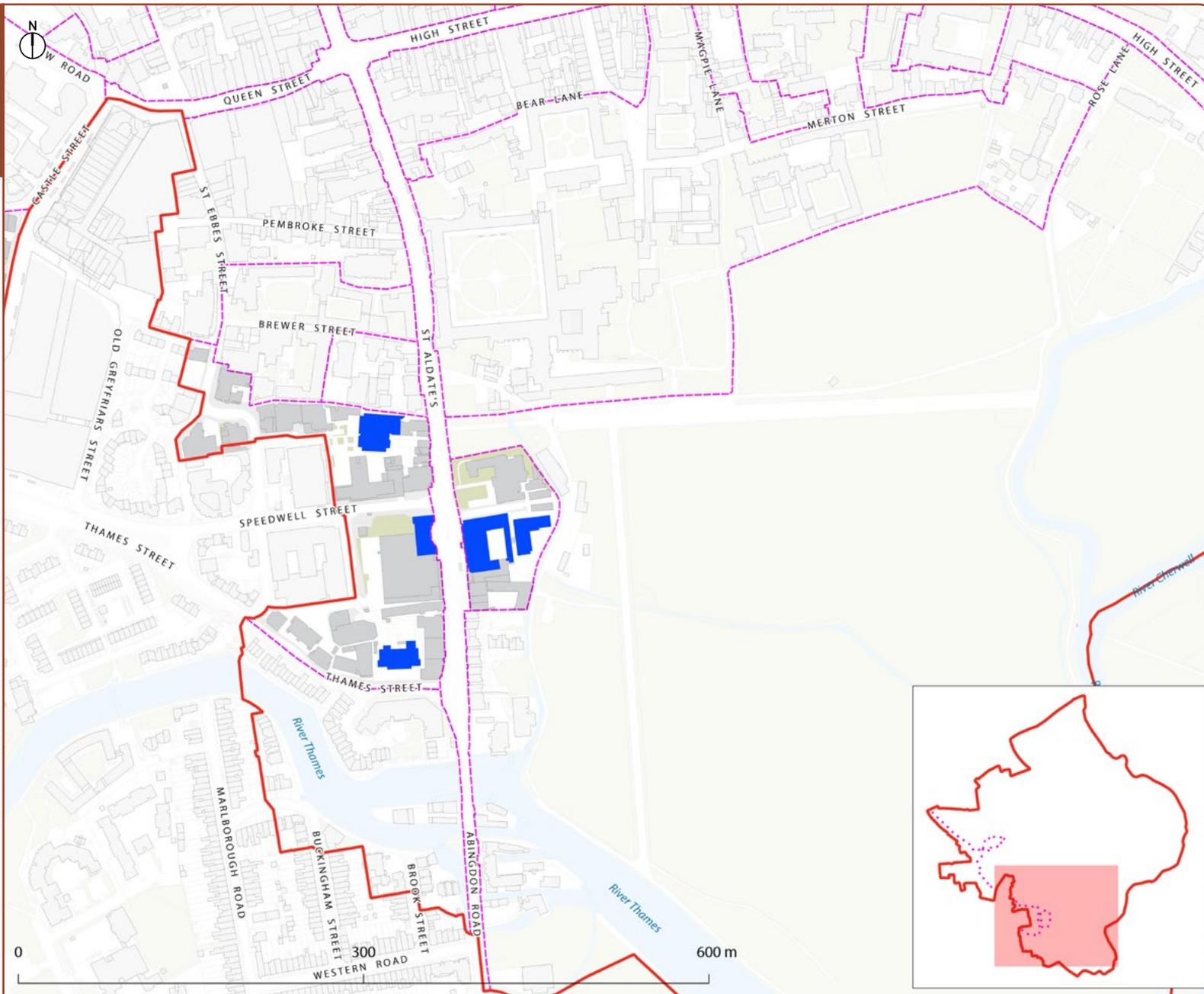


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Positive contributors Western Fringe

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6.3.6 Roofscape



Roofscape



Theme 21: roofscape, skyline and landmarks

Building heights

- Historically, buildings in this zone were largely two to three storeys, though industrial building such as breweries might have higher brewing towers and chimneys.
- Post-war redevelopment is typically four storeys.

Roofscape and skyline

- Traditional roofscapes have pitched roofs and chimneys, creating a lively skyline.
- Post-war development is normally characterised by flat roofs without vertical accents, which does not result in a varied or lively roofscape or skyline.
- Historic industrial chimneys such as those at the Jam Factory and Lion Brewery pop up in street and roof level views, helping to reinforce the area's former industrial character.



The University Catholic Chaplaincy harmonises successfully with surrounding buildings in Rose Lane through its sympathetic use of brick and stepped-out design



Large scale post-war development at the south end of St Aldate's has eradicated its historic character

Roofscape

Western Fringe

Key

Oxford Central Conservation Area boundary

Building heights

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

Flat roofs

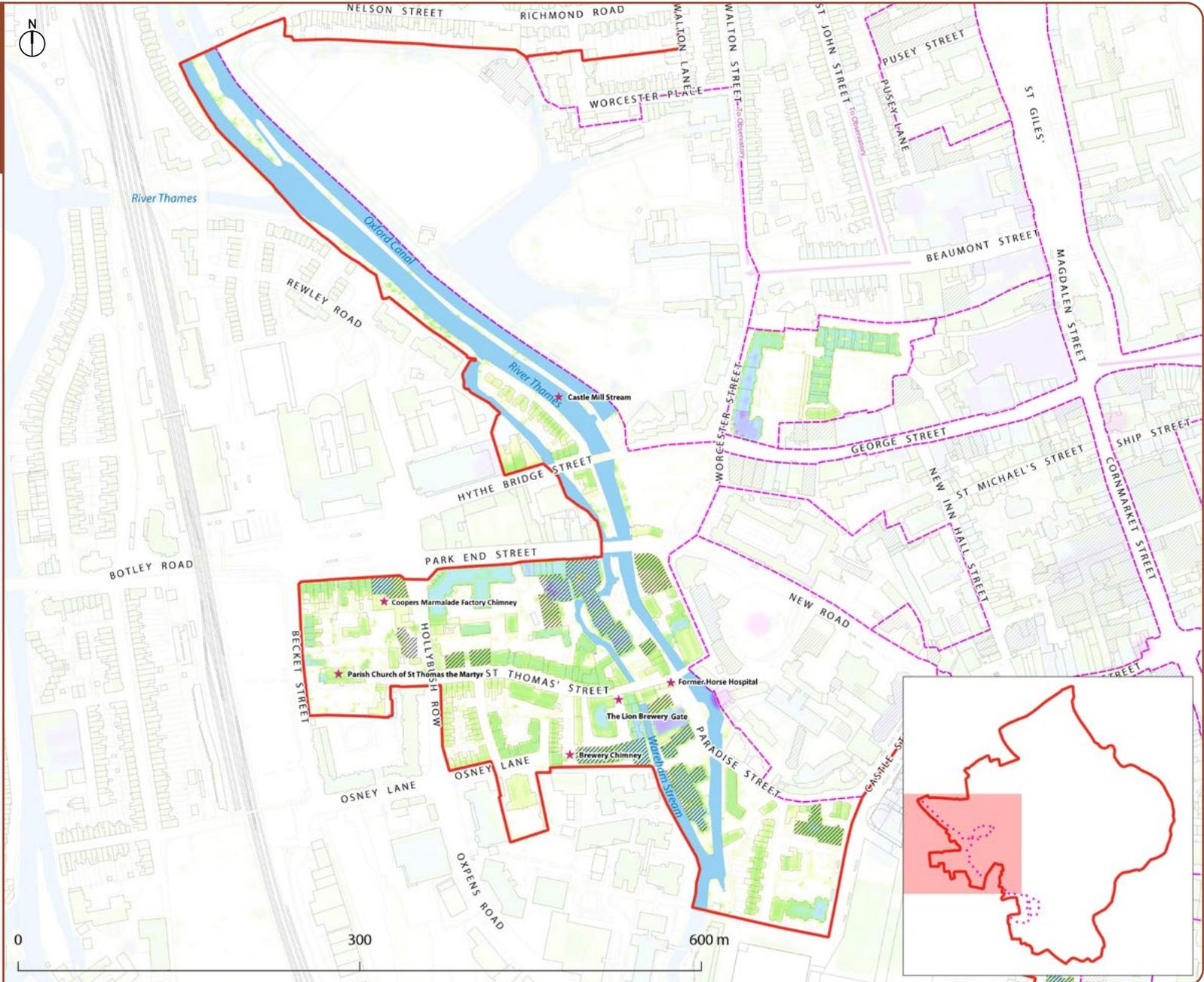
Elevated panorama

Designed public view

Focal point

Landmarks

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



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Roofscape

Western Fringe

Key

 Oxford Central Conservation Area boundary

Building heights

-  0m
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-  10m
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-  20m

 Flat roofs

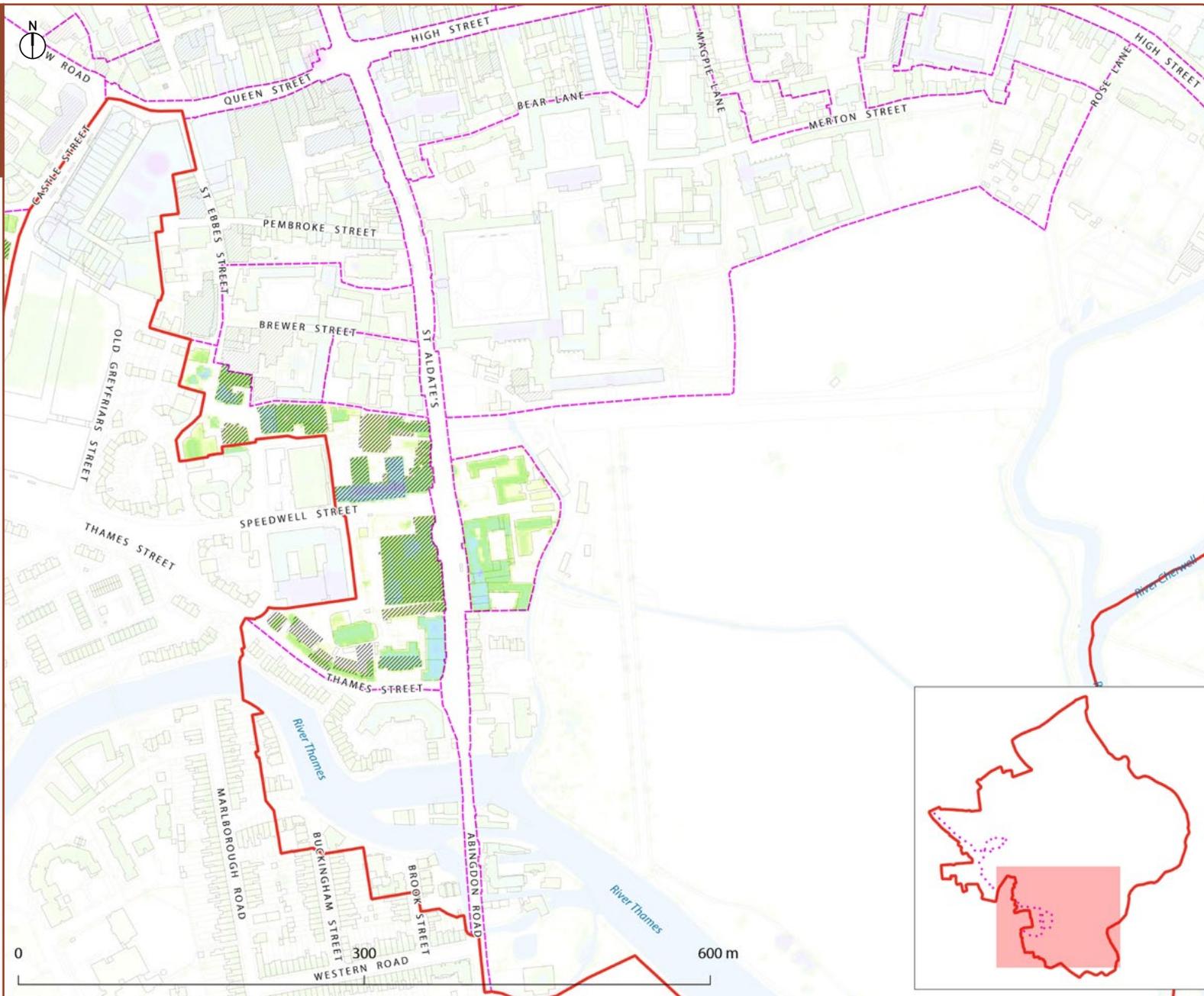
 Elevated panorama

 Designed public view

 Focal point

 Landmarks

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



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6.3.7 Landmarks



Roofscape



Theme 21: roofscape, skyline and landmarks

Theme 22: views in the conservation area

Theme 27: setting of the conservation area

Landmarks within the character zone

- Castle Mill Stream and bridges.
- Oxford Canal.
- Former Horse hospital, St Thomas' Street.
- Lion Brewery chimney, St Thomas' Street.
- Lion Brewery Gate, St Thomas' Street.
- Cooper's Marmalade Factory chimney (now the Jam Factory), Park End Street.
- St Thomas' Church, Becket Street.

Landmarks outside the character zone

- Tom Tower, Christ Church College.
- Town Hall, St. Aldate's
- Castle motte, Oxford Castle.
- St George's Tower, Oxford Castle.
- County Hall, New Road.
- Nuffield College, New Road.
- Folly Bridge over the Thames, Abingdon Road.
- Said Business School Tower, Frideswide Square

6.3.8 Views

- Unfolding and glimpsed views along the footpaths, alleys and little streets beside the streams and the canal are charming and reveal the very different character of this part of the character area.
- The numerous bridges provide excellent vantage points.
- Views up St Aldate's: frame the landmark buildings towards the northern end of the street, such as Tom Tower and the Town Hall.

- Unfolding views down St Thomas' Encapsulate the distinctive character of St Thomas': former industrial buildings and modest residential terraces, terminating in views of the medieval church.
- Glimpsed views: of St George's Tower from St Thomas' Street.

6.3.9 Movement and activity



Theme 26: tranquillity

Traffic

- The volume of traffic on streets in this zone varies. Some have low levels of traffic whereas others, such as Thames Street and St Aldate's are very busy.
- There is a steady stream of buses entering and exiting the bus station by Gloucester Green.
- Park End Street and Frideswide Square is busy with traffic, especially buses, coming into the city centre from the west, and cars heading towards the Westgate Centre from the west of the city.

Cycling and Pedestrian

- This zone contains attractive paths, especially along the streams and the canal, although pedestrians can come into conflict with swift-moving cycles along the relatively narrow canal towpath.
- Walking many streets is pleasant because of the low traffic levels.
- Frideswide Square and Hythe Bridge Street see high volumes of pedestrian and cyclists as part of the main route between the train station and the city centre. The latter can become very congested, due to sections of narrow pavements where the road crosses the river.

Activity

- Most of the streets in this zone are very quiet, and many of the post-war interventions have inactive frontages which can make the streetscape feel lifeless.
- There are a range of evening economy uses located in this area, this leads to significant numbers of people in the adjacent public spaces late into the night.

6.3.10 Archaeology



Theme 12: archaeology



Oxford Archaeological Action Plan further detail and guidance

- This character zone comprises parts of the medieval suburb of St Thomas and has been well-studied archaeologically, demonstrating good preservation of medieval and post-medieval remains despite later impacts from post-medieval brewery complexes and localised modern re-development.
- The area along the Castle Mill Stream is rich in archaeological evidence for industrial uses and processes and river-borne trade since the Middle Ages.
- Notable assets within the zone include the site of the Bronze Age (Beaker period) activity area at the Hamel, buried palaeochannels of the Thames and later man-made alterations to these water courses, the medieval church of St Thomas the Martyr, the site of the Friars of the Sack, parts of the Castle bailey ditch, the site of the Castle mill, parts of the Royalist Civil War defences, post-medieval brewery complexes and tenements plots associated with settlement from at least the Norman period onwards and including distinctive post-medieval river and canal boating communities.
- The site of Rewley Abbey partly adjoins this zone and has been investigated since the 1960s; this has yielded significant information about this important monastic foundation.
- The below-ground archaeological potential of the zone to reveal evidence of past occupation is considered to be fairly high.



The historic suburb of St Thomas' has a good preservation of medieval and post-medieval remains



Surviving fragment of Rewley Abbey by the Oxford Canal, an important monastic foundation

6.4 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 3 Osney Island: Transport and Business.
- HUCA 5 The Western Suburb: Residential.
- HUCA 6 The Western Suburb: Factories and Offices
- HUCA 7 The Western Suburb: Castle Mill Stream and Fisher Row.
- HUCA 8 Thames Crossing and Floodplain: Thames Waterfront.
- HUCA 9 Thames Crossing and Floodplain: St Aldate's.
- HUCA 10 Thames Crossing and Floodplain: Colleges and University.
- HUCA 11 Thames Crossing and Floodplain: Westgate Centre.
- HUCA 14 Castle and Periphery: Former Canal Basin.
- HUCA 24 Worcester College and Gloucester Green: Gloucester Green.
- HUCA 27 St Giles': Western Frontage Commercial.



Other useful documents include:

A study of the historic built environment of the West End of Oxford, Oxfordshire Buildings Record, January 2006

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

Oxford Heritage Walks Book 4: On foot from Paradise Street to Sheepwash, Malcolm Graham, 2016

Oxford's Working Past – walking tours of Victorian and Edwardian industrial buildings, Liz Woolley, 2013

West Oxford Character Statement and Heritage Assets Survey: Part 1 St Ebbe's Suburb and Osney Island, Oxford City Council, 2013

