

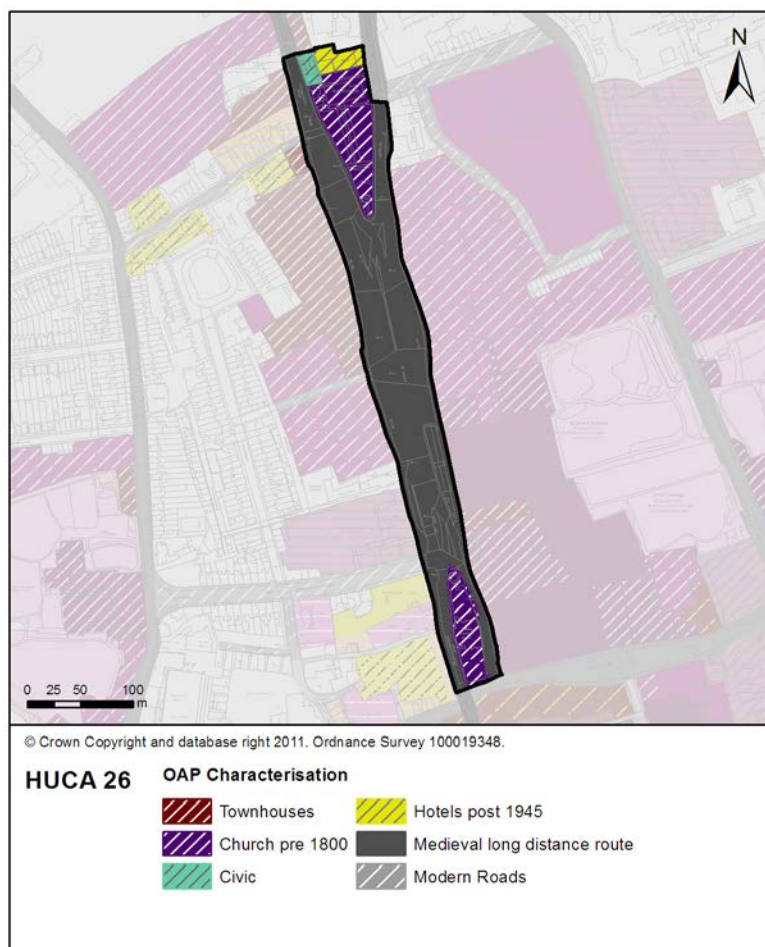
**HISTORIC URBAN CHARACTER AREA 26:  
ST GILES AND THE NORTHERN SUBURB- THE STREET AND ISLANDS**

**The HUCA is located within broad character zone G: St Giles and the northern suburb**

*The broad character zone comprises of the expansive northern approach to Oxford, the northern medieval suburb and subsequent modern expansion within the former line of the Civil War defences.*

**Summary characteristics**

- Dominant period: Medieval.
- Designations: Two Grade I, one Grade II\*, three Grade II listings. Central Conservation area
- Archaeological Interest: The routeway has likely prehistoric and Roman antecedents. Includes two medieval churches and churchyards and has potential for evidence related to previous encroachment and enclosure along the road and also or drainage and cesspit structures located beyond the building frontages.
- Character: Roman and Late Saxon long distance routes.
- Spaces: Wide road and pavements with open views along the street and good tree cover.
- Road morphology: Wide straight ancient route with gently curving building frontages. Forks to join ancient routes to Woodstock and Banbury. Narrow lanes and side roads of medieval, post-medieval and later date lead off. Beaumont Street was inserted into southeast frontage in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Plot morphology: Narrow irregular islands at either end.
- St Giles' is located on the central ridge of the Summertown-Radley Second Terrace at a height of around 65m OD.
- Survival of townscape elements:
  - Ancient long distance routes.
  - Historic walled enclosure outside St Johns College.
  - Medieval churches and churchyards.



**Historic urban character area showing modern urban landscape character types.**

- Martyrs Memorial and War memorial.
- Edwardian subterranean toilets.

### Description

St Giles is a distinctive wide medieval thoroughfare forming the northern approach to the walled city. The wide street may form an early market place and joins to the north with routes to the medieval royal hunting lodge at Woodstock and the hundredal town of Banbury. The street has resisted encroachment and in places is more than four times the width of an average intra-mural street.

St Giles is fronted by distinctive stone built college buildings and rendered townhouses, and is framed at either end by memorials and the medieval churches of St Giles and St Mary Magdalen. St Mary Magdalen is located on an island of land within the St Giles and its continuation along Magdalen Street East and West. St Giles Church is located on a triangular wedge of land formed by the coming together of the routes from Banbury and Woodstock.

A symmetry is provided by the Marty's Memorial by George Gilbert Scott, located on the southern central island, which provides a focus for the street and the war memorial located south of St Giles church which provides a less ornate counterpoint. St Giles is compartmentalised on either side for areas of parking. North-south traffic islands support mature trees. The tree lined churchyards, the imposing height and character of the facing buildings, along with the gently curving character of the opposing street frontages combine to create a green, open and expansive feel.



**Listed buildings by date of earliest identified fabric (based on listing description)**

### Historical value- means of connecting with the past

St Giles lies on a historic and likely ancient route that runs along the top of the Summertown-Radley gravel terrace towards a crossing point over the Thames floodplain. The date of this north-south route is not known however there is good reason to believe prehistoric and Roman routes followed a similar alignment. In 2008 the remains of the late Neolithic henge monument were discovered under part of St John's College located on the eastern frontage of St Giles. The earthwork was evidently still extant in the Late Saxon period and therefore may have shaped the orientation of adjacent routeways.

Small amounts of 8<sup>th</sup> century pottery have been found west of St Giles near Beaumont Street suggesting an early focus of activity in this area that may pre-date the foundation of a defended settlement (burh) at Oxford in the late 9<sup>th</sup> or early 10<sup>th</sup> century. However the presence of a Late Saxon mass grave in the ditch of the Neolithic henge under St John's suggests that much of St Giles remained a marginal space this time.

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Documentary evidence suggests that suburban settlement in this area expanded in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century as the town recovered from the Norman Conquest and the local leather and cloth trades flourished. The Church of St Mary Magdalen at St Giles is first recorded in 1074. The foundation of St Giles Church by about 1130 at the northern end of St Giles suggests that the suburb expanded rapidly during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The construction of the Royal 'King's Houses' or Beaumont Palace to the west of St Giles by 1132 would have provided an additional stimulus to development in this area. The uniformity of the tenement plots and the streets wide design with churches at the north and south ends may suggest that St Giles' was a planned suburb. A poorly documented medieval hospital is associated with St Giles but has not been located.

The cloth trade faltered in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and a combination of factors including navigation problems along the Thames and the arrival of the Black Death led to Oxford's decline as a trading town in national terms. Subsequently the fledgling halls and colleges of the University were able to take advantage of lower land prices to consolidate and expand, especially in the eastern walled town and in the northern suburb, thus permanently changing the balance of power between 'town and gown'.

Periodically properties on St Giles were able to enclose small forecourt areas of the street, a process shown on post-medieval maps of the area, one such example from the 16<sup>th</sup> century retains its shape in the walled forecourt outside St John's College.

The character area is illustrative of the planned Norman expansion of the town and the colonisation of the northern suburb by colleges in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. It also provides an insight into the 19<sup>th</sup> century theological disputes, the Martyrs' Memorial being a gothic inspired monument to Anglican victims of Catholic Orthodoxy.

#### **Evidential value- potential to yield primary evidence**

The character has high potential for significant remains relating to the medieval churches of St Giles and St Mary Magdalen and for road surfaces, drains, cess pits and cellars along the road frontages. The Urban Archaeological Database records thirteen archaeological events in this area. Previous investigations have recorded burials and brick barrel vaults at St Giles Church, also old road surfaces, a post-medieval vaulted drain and stone lined cess pit.

#### **Aesthetic value- sensory and intellectual stimulation**

St Giles is a distinctive area of Oxford, its monumental width and tall high status buildings providing an impressive entry into the city. The churchyards, mature trees and curvilinear street frontage contribute to an attractive street scene. The character area has high aesthetic value, combining several different elements, the wooded churchyards, the narrow lanes adjacent to notable public houses, the views to and from the Martyr's Memorial and War Memorial, the views to and from the historic colleges and the views down the Regency era Beaumont Street. The busy road junction at the Martyr's memorial has a particularly strong sense of place, being framed by a number of imposing buildings.

#### **Communal value- meaning for collective experience and memory**

This character area represents one of the main thoroughfares into the city, and one of the most recognisable entries. The street provides access to a number of colleges as well as to the Ashmolean Museum and the main commercial centre of the city. It has a strong communal value for the wide spacious and comparatively relaxed access it provides to pedestrians and cyclists and car users to the city centre. The street contains notable pubs, mature trees and important green spaces. The communal value of the space is enhanced by the quality of the built

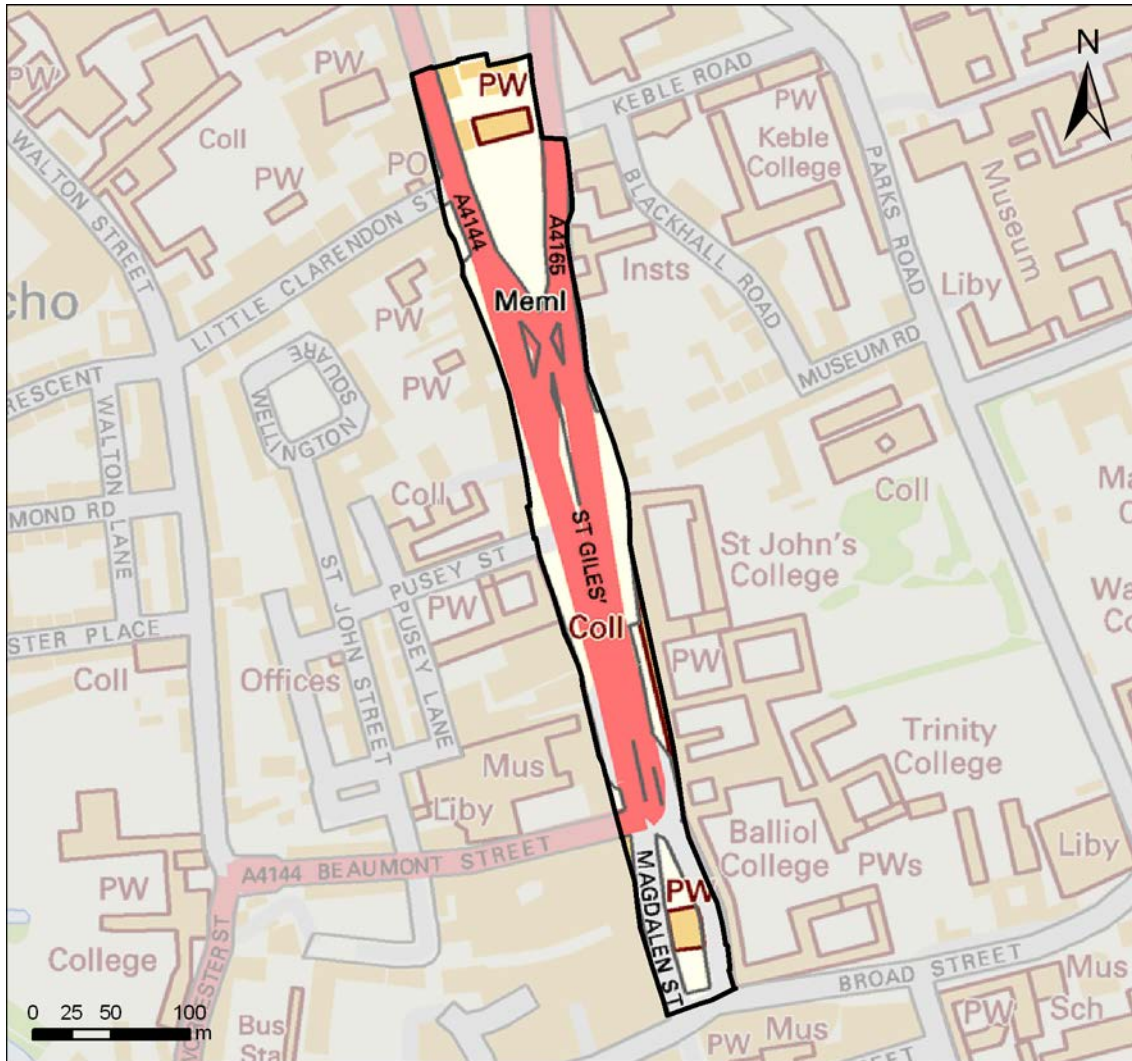


**The western frontage of St Giles looking north**



environment and the tradition of the annual St Giles fair. The graveyard of St Mary Magdalen represents one of the few sizable areas of non-University publicly accessible enclosed open space in the central part of the city. The area is a notable coach dropping off point. It contains many notable mature trees and now closed subterranean Victorian toilets.

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### HUCA 26 Orientation map