CENTRAL OXFORD HISTORIC URBAN CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

2012

Oriel Street, Oxford
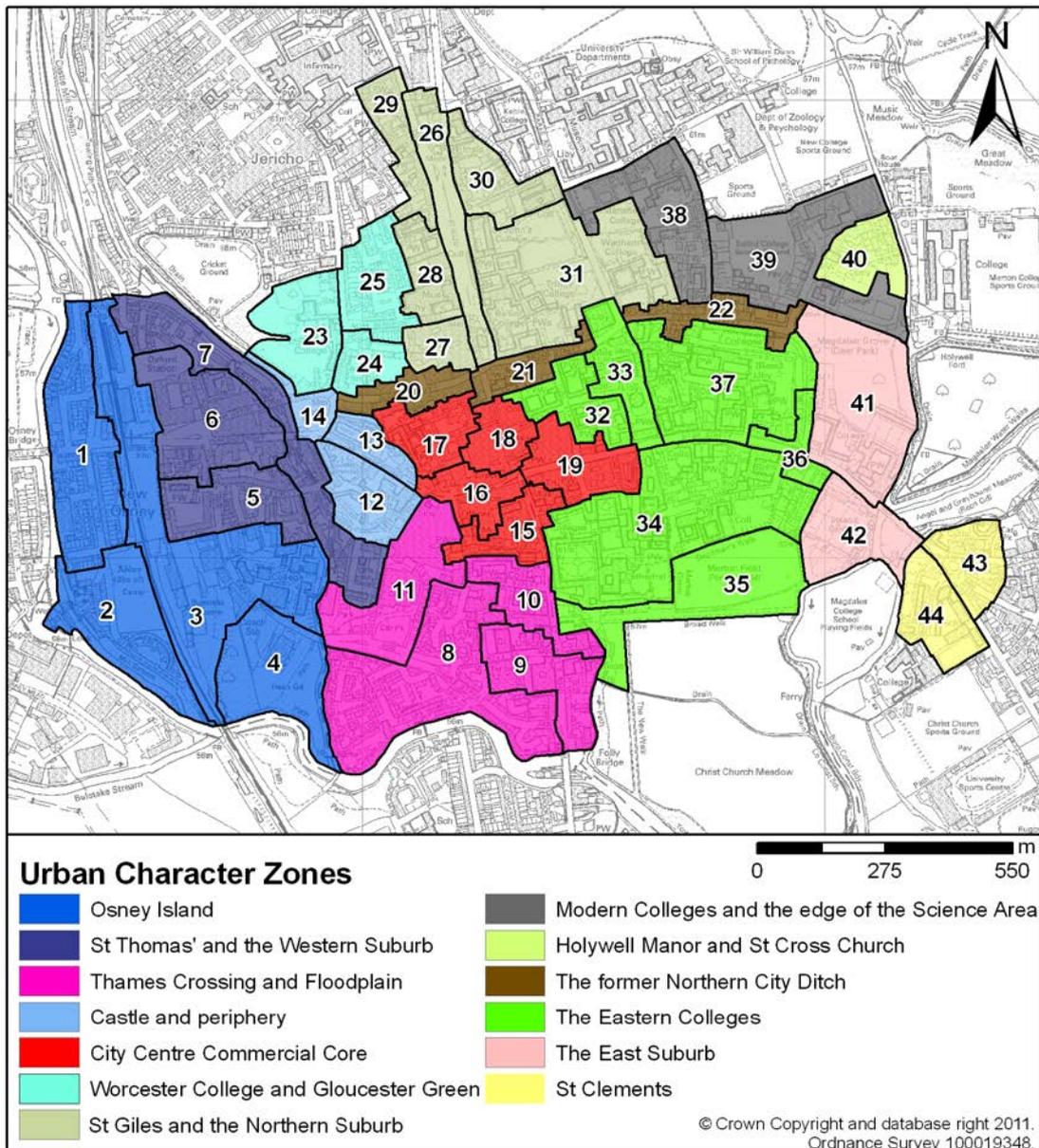
INTRODUCTION

This document provides an introduction to a series of character area statements covering central Oxford compiled in 2011-12 by the Oxford City Heritage and Specialist Services Team. The work was undertaken as part of the Oxford Historic Landscape Characterisation project funded by English Heritage. Each character statement provides a description of the area and a short summary of its historic, evidential, aesthetic and communal values. For the purposes of this study the character areas have been identified by using digital maps to record blocks of urban historic character defined by an assessment of land use, built form and plot type. From this base map a series of thirteen broad character zones have been created. These have then been subdivided into forty-four smaller character areas (see Fig 1).

Urban Character Zones

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▇ Osney Island	▇ Modern Colleges and the edge of the Science Area
▇ St Thomas' and the Western Suburb	▇ Holywell Manor and St Cross Church
▇ Thames Crossing and Floodplain	▇ The former Northern City Ditch
▇ Castle and periphery	▇ The Eastern Colleges
▇ City Centre Commercial Core	▇ The East Suburb
▇ Worcester College and Gloucester Green	▇ St Clements
▇ St Giles and the Northern Suburb	© Crown Copyright and database right 2011. Ordnance Survey 100019348.

Fig 1 Map showing the forty-four character areas with colours denoting broad character zones

THE COMPLEXITY OF OXFORD'S HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

The exact origin of urban settlement at Oxford remains a matter of investigation and debate. Archaeological and documentary evidence indicates that Middle Saxon activity around the Thames River Crossing at St Aldates had developed into a defended settlement (known as a burh) centred on the Carfax crossroads by the early 10th century. The morphology of the Late Saxon town was notably altered by the Norman Conquest which resulted in the creation of a castle precinct over the existing streets in the west end of the burh. Oxford enjoyed periods of both instability and growth in the 12th and 13th century, with a growing economy driven by trade in cloth, wool and leather. This gave way to a period of stagnation and decline in the late 13th and 14th centuries when the halls and colleges of the emerging University took advantage of the availability of cheap land to expand, especially land in the eastern part of the town away from the more commercially desirable plots fronting onto the street market which occupied the roads meeting at Carfax. Subsequently the success and wealth of the University and its colleges over the years have led to a notable concentration of monumental historic buildings and structures for a city of Oxford's size and population.

Over a thousand years of urban settlement at Oxford has created a complex historic environment. Forward looking stewardship, sympathetic town planning and appropriate built design is required to protect this rich legacy. This in turn requires access to data about the historic environment which is adequately synthesised and summarised and allows for the quantification and understanding of patterns of change and continuity. This study forms one of several approaches being employed in Oxford to break down and communicate the complexities of the local historic environment. Other approaches include Landscape Character Assessment, Historic Context Assessment, a View Cone Study, Conservation Area Appraisals and the development of a Conservation Appraisal Toolkit. Some of this information is already available on the City Council website, other studies will come on-line in due course via a Heritage Plan website for the City.
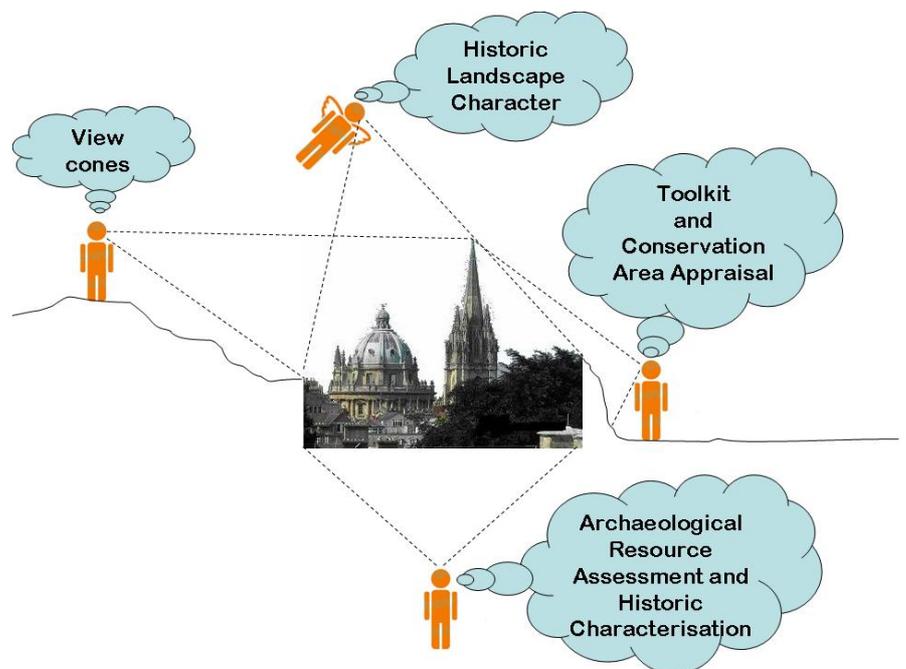
Fig 2 Approaches to summarising and communicating information about the historic environment.

HOW CHARACTERISATION WORKS

Historic Character mapping can be undertaken at a variety of resolutions (e.g. levels of detail) depending on the aims of the study. Historic Landscape Character mapping is a low resolution (or simplified) approach that allows for the quantification of growth and change in large areas of landscape, for example the survival of field enclosure patterns and the expansion of urban growth (See fig 3 and Fig 4). This approach requires that urban areas are recorded at a low resolution that will not produce an overcomplicated pattern when viewed at a county level. For example blocks of
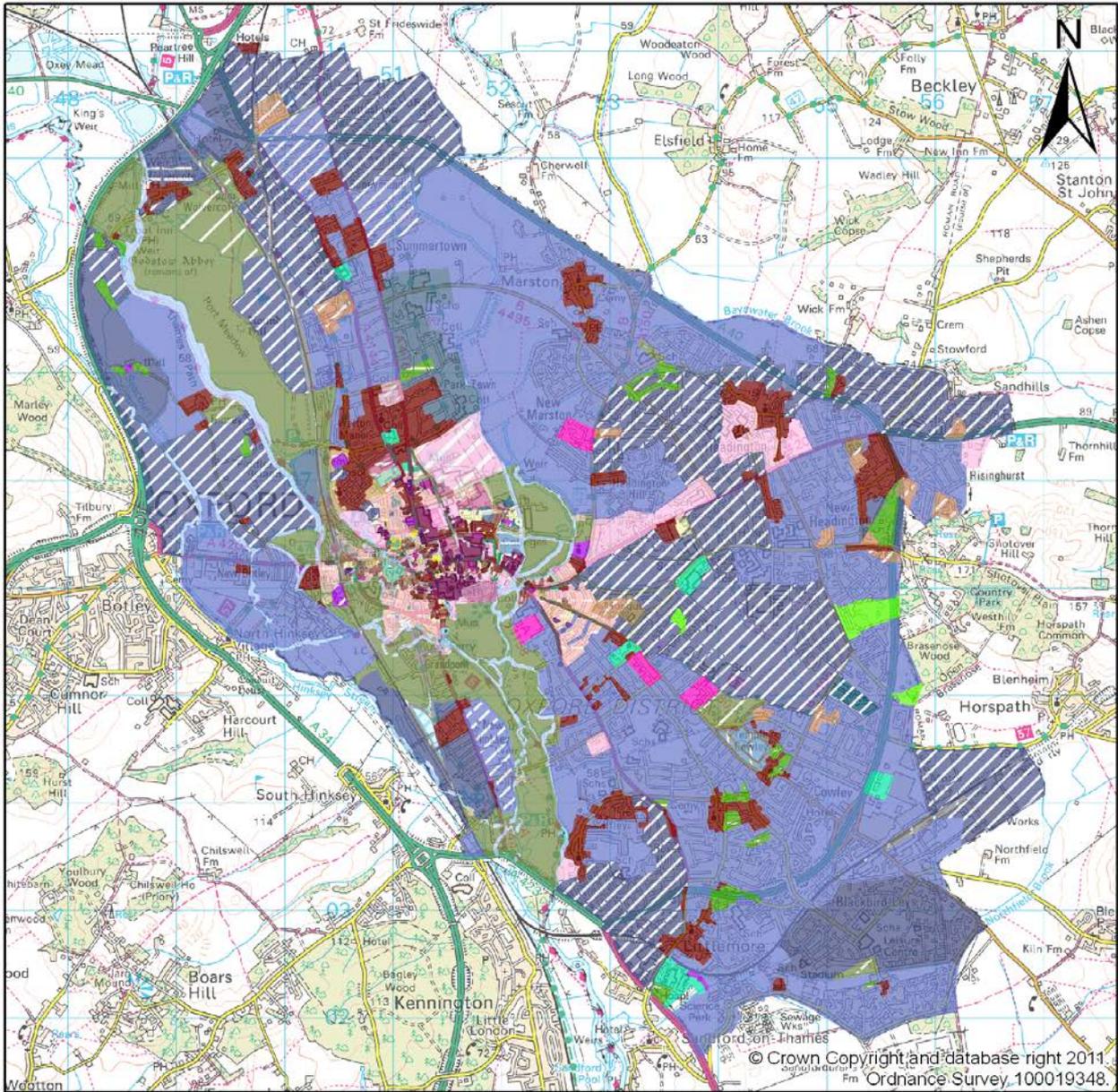
urban growth may be recorded as pre-1700 or post-1700 urbanisation. At the other end of the spectrum the highest resolution of urban character study can involve the mapping of individual boundaries and buildings. Such an approach may be appropriate for small areas but is time consuming and can produce an overcomplicated picture that makes it hard to identify wider patterns and to quantify change. Historic Urban Characterisation tends to focus on a medium level of resolution that involves making generalisations about blocks and groups of urban buildings and plots based on an assessment of plot boundaries, land use and built character. This can lead to individual structures or land-use areas being subsumed within a more dominant character type. For example in Oxford some historic colleges are clearly late medieval in basic form but may incorporate later fabric and modern structures. For the purposes of characterisation these may be recorded as historic medieval colleges. Alternatively distinct extensions to historic college precincts that have been added in the post-medieval or modern periods would be mapped as such. The approach to characterisation mapping is generally undertaken by a rapid assessment of aerial photographs and modern and historic maps. It does rely on the quality of information available, the time available to ground-check character types and is necessarily a point-in-time study with an element of subjective assessment.

Historic Urban Characterisation studies can be enhanced and revised over time as the townscape changes and should not be seen as definitive statements. Nevertheless they provide a useful tool for identifying patterns in the historic environment, for quantifying change and as a means of making summary information more widely accessible to the general public, planners, developers and architects.

For more information about the Oxford Historic Urban Characterisation study please refer to the Oxford Historic Characterisation Methodology Report and Oxford Historic Landscape Characterisation Summary reports (both forthcoming).

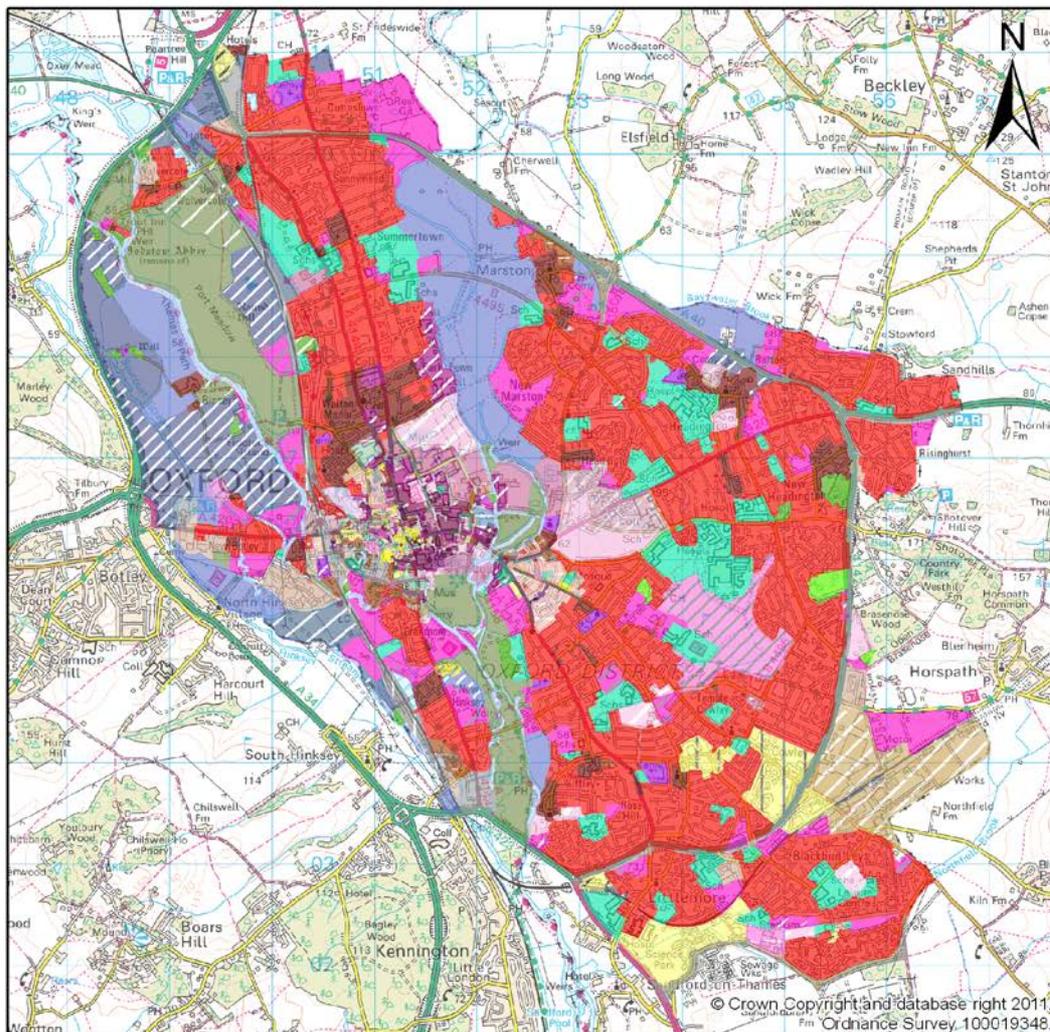## HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CHARACTERISATION

The process of mapping the Historic Landscape Character of England has been underway for several years and most of England is now covered. Further information on this process can be found on the English Heritage Characterisation website (see link below). Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) mapping was undertaken for the whole Oxford City local authority area between May 2010 and February 2012 (see Figs 3 and 4). Oxfordshire County Council began a programme of HLC mapping for the remainder of Oxfordshire in October 2012.

Legend:

- Settlement pre 1880
- Victorian Terraces 1850-1900
- Enclosure Pre 18th century regular
- Enclosure Pre 18th Century irregular
- Enclosure Parliamentary
- Park Area
- Commons and Greens
- Meadows
- Woodland Ancient Semi Natural
- Historic Parkland
- Recreation
- Hospitals, Schools and University Use

Oxford in the 1870s

Fig 3 Map showing Historic Landscape Character mapping for Oxford in the 1870s

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Fig 4 Map showing Historic Landscape Character mapping for 21st century Oxford.

URBAN CHARACTERISATION OF THE HISTORIC CORE

More detailed Historic Urban Character mapping has been undertaken for the Oxford central urban area. The mapping can be used to show broad land use (Fig 5) or more detailed character types which record aspects of land use, built form and plot type (Fig 6). It is hoped that over time it will be possible for the Historic Urban Character methodology to be applied to the wider local authority area however for the purpose of this study the mapping was restricted to the extent of the post-medieval city as conveniently defined by the extent of the Royalist defences established around the city during the Civil War.
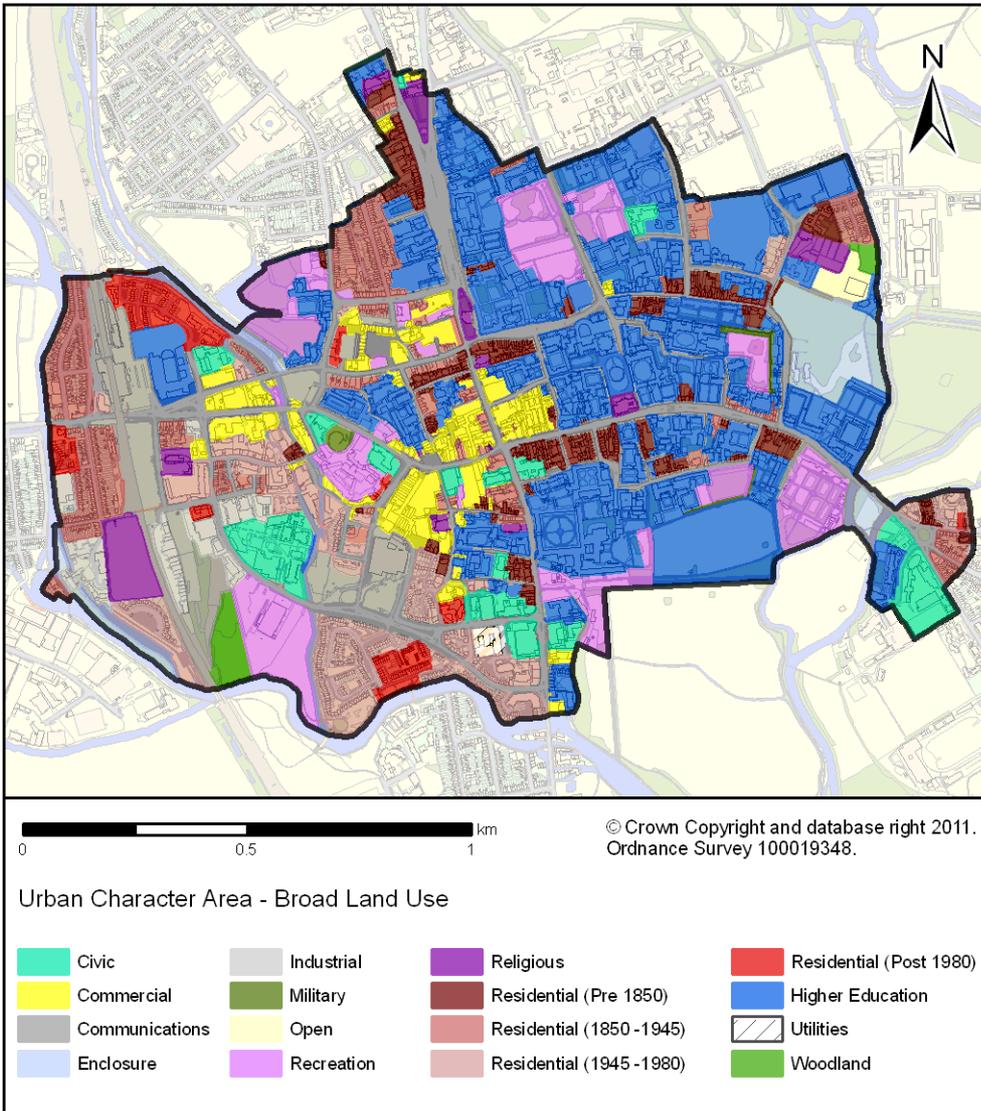
Fig 5 Broad land use in the central area

Characterisation 2011

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Townhouses	Schools & Colleges post 1945	Utilities
Mixed townhouses/shops	Civic	Factory/warehouse
Narrow plots	University Halls	Industrial
Irregular plots (historic)	Medieval Colleges	Town Defences Medieval
Victorian Townhouses	Post-medieval Colleges	Castle
Victorian Villas 1850-1900	19th century Colleges	Water feature
Victorian Terraces 1850-1900	20th century Colleges	Canal
Mixed Housing & Shops	University of Oxford Museums	Canal infrastructure
Detached Villas 1900-1919	University of Oxford Libraries	Bridge
Terraces & Cottages 1900-1919	University of Oxford Structures	Medieval long distance route
Detached Villas 1919-1945	University of Oxford Sports Areas	Medieval medium distance route
Social housing	Hotels pre 1945	Lane
Blocks of Flats 1945-1980	Indoor market	Back lane
Private housing 1945-1980	Modern shopping centre	Major road scheme
Private Housing Post 1980	Offices/Commercial	Modern Roads
Cemetery	Mixed Shops/Offices	Square or Place
Church pre 1086	Offices post 1945	Transport infrastructure/links
Church pre 1800	Banks pre 1945	Railway
Schools & Colleges pre 1945	Inns pre 1800	Rail station
Recreation	Historic Parkland	Post-medieval deer park
Sports/Fitness	Urban/College Gardens	Woodland Secondary
Leisure	Meadows	Late Regency Townhouses

Fig 6 Historic Urban Character Mapping Zone (showing character types)

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BROAD CHARACTER ZONES

Based on the results of the Historic Urban Character mapping a number of broad character zones have been identified based on broad topographic and historic areas. Each broad zone was then divided into character areas based on the extent of cohesiveness in the modern built character or where the mapping identifies distinctive areas of historic evolution in the townscape. The identification of character areas included consideration of the modern urban morphology and the historic processes that shaped it, for example the impact of the castle precinct and the medieval defences, the historic street plan and subsequent additions, the impact of the former religious precincts, areas of reclaimed land in the floodplain, water channels, rivers and river crossings, the extent of the gravel terrace etc. However it is the current built environment, rather than its historic antecedents, that is given primacy in the assessment of character area (in this way it differs from the West End Historic Context Study for example).
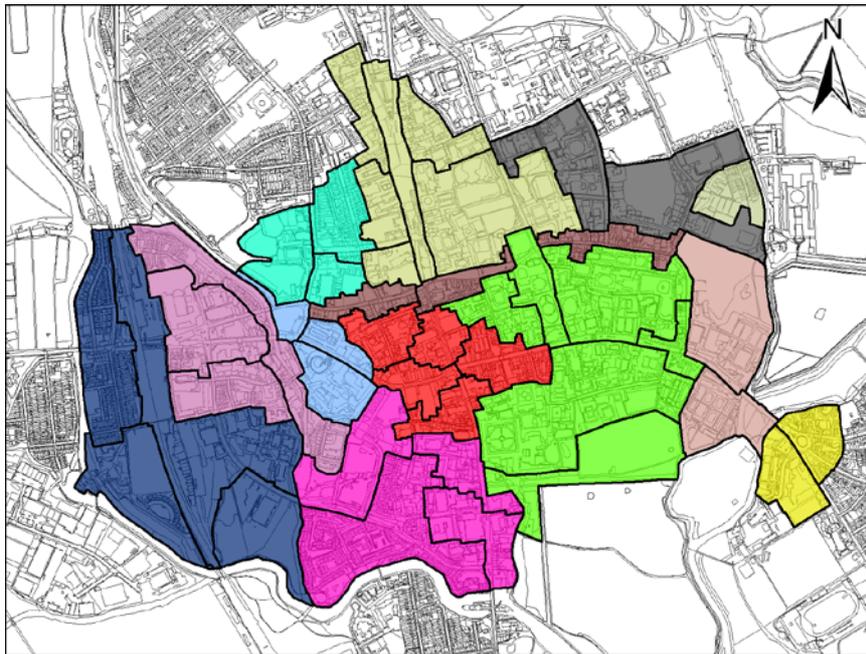
Osney Island (Zone A)
St Thomas' and the Western Suburb (Zone B)
Thames Crossing and Floodplain (Zone C)
Castle and Periphery (Zone D)
City Centre Commercial Core (Zone E)
Worcester College and Gloucester Green (Zone F)
St Giles' and the Northern Suburb (Zone G)
Modern Colleges and the Edge of the Science Area (Zone H)
Holywell Manor and St Cross Church (Zone I)
The former Northern City Ditch (Zone J)
The Eastern Colleges (Zone K)
The Eastern Suburb (Zone L)
St Clements (Zone M)

The following Character Zones have been identified:

Osney Island (Zone A)
The bulk of Osney Island formed by channels of the River Thames. This zone consists of early modern development around the railway and the site of medieval Oseney Abbey. The parish of St Thomas, also on Osney Island, and land to the north of it has been separated into a different zone.

St Thomas and the western suburb (Zone B)
The medieval suburb of St Thomas and related development south of the castle combined with development on former site of the medieval Rewley Abbey to the north. Part of Osney Island.

Thames crossing and floodplain (Zone C)
The southern suburb and historic route over the Thames floodplain along St Aldates combined with reclaimed floodplain land located south of the medieval City walls. Includes the 1960-70s Westgate shopping centre and car park complex which occupies reclaimed floodplain and extends into the intra-mural area of St Ebbes.

Castle and periphery (Zone D)
Broadly defined by the extent of the Norman castle defences but including elements of the former canal basin located to the north.

City centre commercial core (Zone E)
The central crossroads at Carfax and the tenements arranged on the axial streets leading off from this, now primarily the central shopping thoroughfares of the City. The area also contains the City Council Offices and the Town Hall. This is a zone where medieval tenement boundaries, enclosed yards and back lanes retain the character of the medieval town rather than of the University and colleges, although boundaries have been significantly impacted by later commercial developments.

Worcester Street and Gloucester Green (Zone F)
The north-western suburb located around the former medieval open space of Broken Hays, the route to Walton Village along Worcester Street and the12th century Royal Beaumont Palace. Now comprises the bus station, market space and shops at Gloucester Green, Late Georgian – early Victorian development on Beaumont Street and Worcester College.

St Giles and the northern suburb (Zone G)
The expansive northern approach to Oxford and the medieval colleges and suburb located north of Broad Street.

Modern colleges and the edge of the Science Area (Zone H)
An area encompassing a number of science buildings on the southern fringe of the University Science Area and a number of early modern colleges and college sports fields.

Holywell Manor and St Cross Church (Zone I)
Part of the historic suburb of Holywell that retains medieval, post-medieval and later residential character.

The former northern city ditch (Zone J)
An area comprised of tenements and plots that broadly reflect the post-medieval colonisation the in-filled medieval city ditch and extra-mural land adjacent to it.

The eastern colleges (Zone K)
The eastern end of the historic city is dominated the enclosed quadrangles and grand buildings of the medieval and post-medieval colleges, with localised survival of post-medieval town houses.

The eastern suburb (Zone L)
The area beyond the former medieval Eastgate dominated by Magdalen College and the 17th century Botanic Garden.
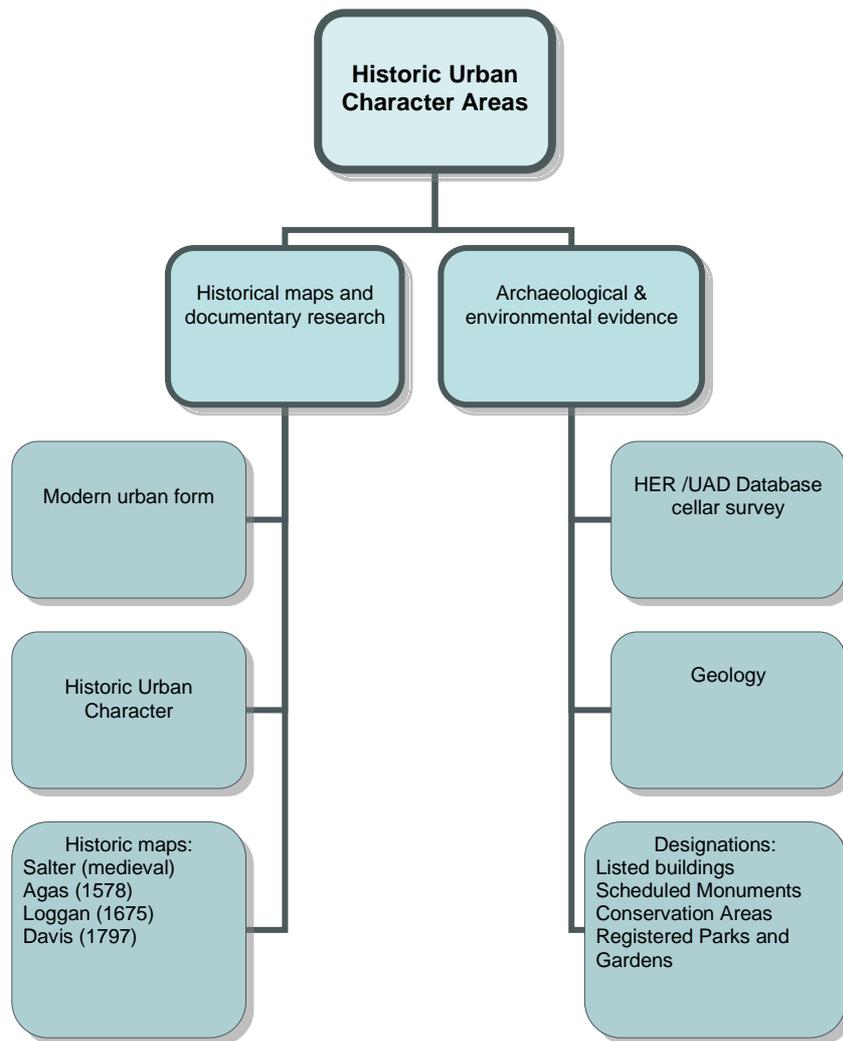
St Clements (Zone M)
Part of the historic suburb of St Clements and a small former part of Cowley parish. The zone forms the junction of arterial roads from Cowley, Iffley and Headington at the Plain, leading to the crossing over the River Cherwell at Magdalen Bridge.

HISTORIC URBAN CHARACTER AREAS

Historic Urban Characterisation data was used to identify forty-four Historic Urban Character Areas or HUCA (see Fig 1). Each HUCA was defined first through a consideration of the current character mapping followed by consideration of additional sources e.g. historic maps and aerial photography (see table 1). Each character area is provided with a descriptive statement and a summary of the historic, evidential, aesthetic and communal values of the area based on the criteria set out by English Heritage in Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance (2008). These criteria can be summarised as follows:

- Evidential - potential to yield primary evidence
- Historical - means of connecting with the past
- Aesthetic - sensory and intellectual stimulation
- Communal - meaning for collective experience and memory

The character area statements provide an introduction to key characteristics that contribute to the townscape and sense of place of a given area of Oxford. They are intended to provide short introductions for members of the public and to aid developers, architects and planners in the planning and design process. They should be considered as an introduction to the significance of an area and are not a substitute for detailed Desk Based Assessment, Conservation Area Appraisals, Historic Area Assessments or Historic Character Toolkit Assessments. A list of HUCA reports is provided below.

Historic Urban Character Areas

Historical maps and documentary research

Archaeological & environmental evidence

Modern urban form

Historic Urban Character

Historic maps:
Salter (medieval)
Agas (1578)
Loggan (1675)
Davis (1797)

HER /UAD Database cellar survey

Geology

Designations:
Listed buildings
Scheduled Monuments
Conservation Areas
Registered Parks and Gardens

Table 1: Factors in the creation of Historic Urban Character Areas

The following character areas have been identified:

HUCA Reference	Name
1	OSNEY ISLAND - MILL STREET AND BOTLEY ROAD
2	OSNEY ISLAND - OSENEY ABBEY
3	OSNEY ISLAND - TRANSPORT AND BUSINESS
4	OSNEY ISLAND - OPEN RECREATION
5	THE WESTERN SUBURB -RESIDENTIAL
6	WESTERN SUBURB - FACTORIES AND OFFICES
7	WESTERN SUBURB - CASTLE MILL STREAM AND FISHER ROW
8	THAMES CROSSING AND FLOODPLAIN - THAMES WATERFRONT
9	THAMES CROSSING AND FLOODPLAIN - ST ALDATES
10	THAMES CROSSING AND FLOODPLAIN- COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITY
11	THAMES CROSSING AND FLOODPLAIN - WESTGATE CENTRE
12	CASTLE AND PERIPHERY- OXFORD CASTLE
13	CASTLE AND PERIPHERY - NUFFIELD COLLEGE
14	CASTLE AND PERIPHERY - FORMER CANAL BASIN
15	CITY CENTRE COMMERCIAL CORE - PEMBROKE STREET AND ST ALDATES
16	CITY CENTRE COMMERCIAL CORE- QUEEN STREET AND BONN SQUARE
17	CITY CENTRE COMMERCIAL CORE - NEW INN HALL STREET
18	CITY CENTRE COMMERCIAL CORE - CORNMARKET
19	CITY CENTRE COMMERCIAL- THE HIGH - TOWN HOUSES AND MARKET
20	FORMER NORTHERN CITY DITCH - GEORGE STREET
21	FORMER NORTHERN CITY DITCH - BROAD STREET
22	FORMER NORTHER CITY DITCH - HOLYWELL STREET
23	WORCESTER COLLEGE AND GLOUCESTER GREEN - WORCESTER COLLEGE
24	WORCESTER COLLEGE AND GLOUCESTER GREEN - GLOUCESTER GREEN
25	WORCESTER COLLEGE AND GLOUCESTER GREEN- BEAUMONT STREET AND ST JOHN'S STREET
26	ST GILES AND THE NORTHERN SUBURB- THE STREET AND ISLANDS
27	ST GILES AND THE NORTHERN SUBURB- WESTERN FRONTAGE COMMERCIAL
28	ST GILES AND THE NORTHERN SUBURB- ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM AND COLLEGES
29	ST GILES AND THE NORTHERN SUBURB - TOWNHOUSES
30	ST GILES AND THE NORTHERN SUBURB - ST JOHN'S COLLEGE EXPANSION
31	ST GILES AND THE NORTHERN SUBURB- MEDIEVAL COLLEGES
32	EASTERN COLLEGES - TURL STREET COLLEGES
33	EASTERN COLLEGES- UNIVERSITY BUILDINGS
34	THE EASTERN COLLEGES - SOUTH OF THE HIGH STREET
35	THE EASTERN COLLEGES - BROAD WALK
36	THE EASTERN COLLEGES - FORMER EASTGATE
37	THE EASTERN COLLEGES - NORTH OF THE HIGH STREET
38	HOLYWELL AND NORTHEAST EXPANSION - MANSFIELD ROAD
39	HOLYWELL AND NORTHEAST EXPANSION- MODERN COLLEGES
40	HOLYWELL AND NORTHEAST EXPANSION - HISTORIC CORE
41	THE EASTERN SUBURB - MAGDALEN COLLEGE
42	THE EASTERN SUBURB - BOTANIC GARDENS
43	ST CLEMENTS - COMMERCIAL AND RESIDENTIAL
44	ST CLEMENTS - ST HILDAS COLLEGE AND MAGDALEN SCHOOL

More information

The Character Area Statements will be made available via the Oxford Heritage Plan website once a public consultation process has been completed.

For more information on Historic Landscape and Urban Characterisation please refer to the following useful websites:

- English Heritage Characterisation webpages: http://www.english-heritage.org/professional/research/landscapes-and-areas/characterisation/historic-landscape-charcter/

- HELM Historic Characterisation webpages: http://www.helm.org.uk/server/show/nav.19604

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