

The Building of Oxford Covered Market

By MALCOLM GRAHAM

THE main impulse behind the building of Oxford Covered Market was a general desire to rid the main streets of "untidy, messy and unsavoury stalls",¹ which offended contemporary sensibilities, and provided an effective barrier to traffic. Having survived since medieval times, the street markets in Fish Street, the modern St. Aldate's, and Butcher Row, now Queen Street, were finally condemned by the Oxford Mileways Act of 1771. This Act was primarily concerned with making the city's main roads "more safe and commodious for traffic", and provided for the appointment of commissioners to supervise the demolition of the remaining city gates, the widening of narrow streets, and, where necessary, the building of new roads. A small section of the Mileways Act dealt with the establishment of a joint committee of six university and six city representatives to build and administer a new market in the city for the sale of meat, fish, poultry, herbs and vegetables. Once this market had been completed, the sale of any of these commodities in the public streets was to become illegal.²

The new market committee met for the first time on 12th June 1771, and John Gwynn, architect of Magdalen Bridge, attended a meeting on the 24th to show members his outlines of a plan for the market.³ Gwynn's involvement had clearly been determined before the committee even met, since an anonymous broadsheet dated 4th May 1771 had asked "Why are we to be confined to the right lines drawn by Mr. Gwyn? Why may not Mr. Townsend, Mr. Randal, Mr. Keen or other ingenious and experienced men of the same profession be consulted and attended to?"⁴ No other architect was consulted, however, and Gwynn was ordered to draw up a plan and elevation. People occupying the site of the new market on the north side of High Street were ordered to quit before St. Thomas' Day, and the committee ordered the money required for the market project to be raised by borrowing or by granting annuities.⁵ Work on the foundations of the market began on 13th May 1772,⁶ following the acceptance of John Townsend's tender of 23 shillings per rod.⁷

On 7th June, Gwynn sent his personal estimate of the cost of building the market to William Wickham, treasurer of the committee. The total sum of £5,647 15s. could, he felt, be reduced to £3,997 15s. by the sale of surplus land and the premises on the High Street frontage, and he advised against leaving open the northern portion of the market which was planned to house the fishmarket. "If it was formed like the

¹ M. G. Hobson, *Oxford Council Acts, 1752-1801*, (1962), xii-xiii.

² 11 George III, cap. 19, 1771, *passim*.

³ Oxford City Archives (hereafter abbreviated O.C.A.) FF2. 1a Market Committee Minute book, 1772-1835, 2, 7.

⁴ O.C.A., C3. 4a. Market papers.

⁵ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 7-8.

⁶ Jackson's *Oxford Journal* (hereafter abbreviated J.O.J.) 16th May 1772.

⁷ O.C.A., D3. 9 (28) Market papers.

other shops", he argued, "they could be more convenient and certainly more profitable to the Commissioners, and only by the addition of £107".⁸ By 18th July, the committee was ready to advertise for tenders to build the market, and, in the following month, the Oxford carpenters, Henry Tawney and William Roberts duly tendered for the building of 40 butchers' shops; the committee decided, however, to build only 20 at first, Tawney and Roberts agreeing to do this at a cost of £916 10s.⁹

With the building of the new market under way, the committee turned its attention to the High Street houses that it had bought, and decided to sell them to any person or persons who would agree to take down the old buildings and "erect and build upon the premises four houses agreeably to a plan section and elevations by . . . John Gwynn and approved by the said committee".¹⁰ The committee negotiated with the Duke of Marlborough and John Dewe, an Oxford grocer, to build two houses each,¹¹ but the agreement signed in January 1773 shows that Dewe had lowered his sights to a single house. The fourth house was to be built by James Clarke, a local mercer. The three purchasers agreed to complete the external building of the houses by 1st July 1773, and accepted the committee's permanent aesthetic control over the façades.¹² The first stone of the houses, now nos. 13-16 High Street, was laid on 23rd February,¹³ but the building fell behind schedule, and final completion seems to have been delayed until September 1774, when Clarke & Castle, mercers, moved to their new shop from premises in Cornmarket. They were followed in December by another mercer, Mr. Browne, and by the grocer John Dewe. The fourth shop, a high-class fishmonger's run by Mr. Jones, opened in what became known as the Oxford Parade or the New Parade on 7th January 1775.

In the meantime, the butchers' shops behind this imposing façade had reached completion, although their building had not been without problems. On 15th January 1773, the clerk to the committee had been ordered to write to Tawney and Roberts, the contractors for building the twenty butchers' shops, "to expedite the works as fast as possible". Tawney and Roberts secured the contract for paving and other works "for the better accommodation of the butchers" in February 1773, but the contract for building the remaining 20 butchers' shops went to William Green, a carpenter from Waterstock, whose estimate, at £850 10s., was £66 lower than Tawney and Roberts's for the first block of 20.¹⁵ The ousted builders did little to co-operate with their successful rival, and, in June, Green wrote to the committee to complain of the piles of rubbish left by Mr. Tawney which had buried his timber. Gwynn's assistant, William Spiers, was ordered to see that the rubbish was moved, but was "most scandalously abus'd by Mr. Tawney's foreman".¹⁶ Despite these problems, Green was completing his shops at the end of September 1773¹⁷—less than a month behind schedule—and he was awarded the contract to build an ornamental

⁸ O.C.A., D3. 9 (16-17) Market papers.

⁹ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 35-7.

¹⁰ O.C.A., D2. 12c Agreement between Market Committee and Duke of Marlborough *et al.*

¹¹ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 44.

¹² O.C.A., D2, 12c.

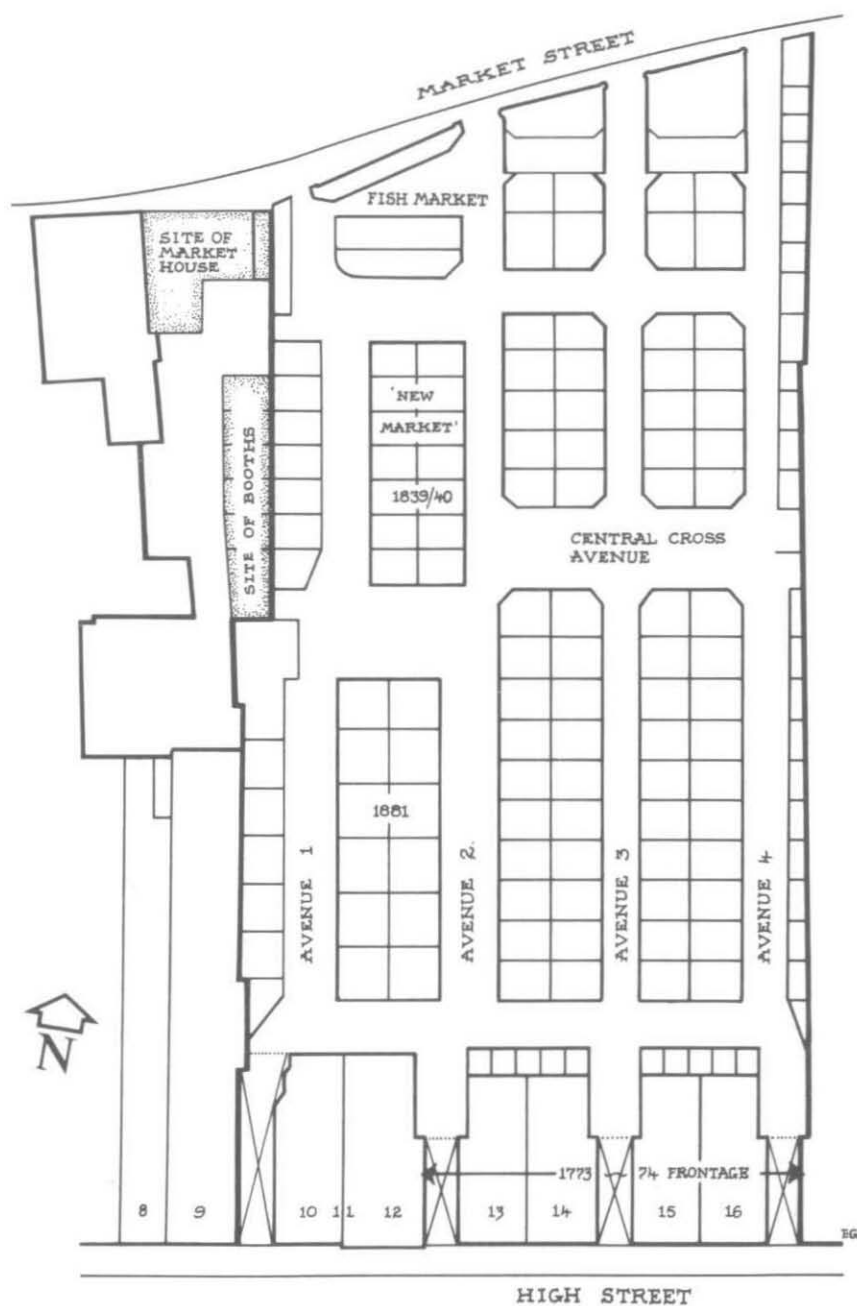
¹³ *J.O.J.*, 27th February 1773.

¹⁴ *J.O.J.*, 24th September 1774; 10th December 1774; 31st December 1774; 7th January 1775.

¹⁵ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 46-8.

¹⁶ O.C.A., D3. 10 (14) (17) Market papers.

¹⁷ *J.O.J.*, 2nd October 1773.



Oxford Covered Market PLAN

0 25 50 75 100 feet

Fig. 1

bell-turret at the north end of the block. In September, the committee resolved that the market should be open daily, and that Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays should be the general market days when country butchers, or non-freemen, could sell their produce. The butchers' section of the market was declared ready for business in October,¹⁸ and most butchers had already left the old Butcher Row and High Street by the 9th.¹⁹ The official opening of the market took place on 1st November 1773,²⁰ and it was thereafter illegal to expose meat for sale anywhere else in the city.

It still remained for the committee to create facilities in the market for the other traders specified in the 1771 Act. By September 1773, the committee had decided that Gwynn's plan for this part of the market was too expensive and he was forced to produce a cheaper version. William Green secured the contract for 40 stalls and 8 shops at an estimated cost of £1,622,²¹ and completed them by 21st December 1774²² when the market was at last fully operational.

The subsequent development of the market has so obliterated its original features that it is necessary to consider its appearance in 1774. From the south or High Street front, three avenues beneath the Parade led into the market. The forty butchers' shops, built in groups of ten and dissected by open avenues, stood immediately to the north. The shops, on Townsend's stone foundations, were of wooden construction with lath and plaster between the timber framing. The roofs were of Stonesfield slates, and a stone colonnade surrounded each block of shops, lending an air of elegance, and indeed permanence, to the whole. The shops and stalls further north were in two blocks of similar construction. Beyond them was an open area for fishermen, gardeners and sellers of small amounts of goods. At the north end of the market a high wall was pierced by three gates, giving access to and from Jesus College Lane, the modern Market Street.²³

Day-to-day supervision of the market was carried out by a beadle, who, in 1789, was given a house at the north-west corner of the site.²⁴ The first beadle, William Tubb, had to collect rents, to keep the market neat and clean, to lock and unlock the gates at the times directed, to lay information against wrong-doers, and, generally to act as the committee directed. Out of a wage of 10 shillings a week, Tubb was instructed "to provide . . . brooms, shovels, and all other implements and tools which may be wanting in the undertaking".²⁵

The market had a number of early problems, and the apparent popularity suggested by a scheme to make sheds on the east and west sides of the market in 1775 is contradicted by the fact that they seem never to have been built. Burdensome Land Tax and poor rate assessments, which had to be passed on to market tenants, may, as the committee feared, have obliged "many of the inferior tradesmen to leave the market". An appeal was made to the City Quarter Sessions in 1776 to try and secure a reduction in the poor rate assessment,²⁶ and a section of the second Mileways

¹⁸ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 53, 56, 60.

¹⁹ *J.O.J.*, 16th October 1773.

²⁰ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 60.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58-9.

²² *J.O.J.*, 26th November 1774.

²³ See PLATE I which is dated 1774 but appears to show a butter bench and Porter's Lodge.

²⁴ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-81. Unfortunately, neither the Quarter Session rolls nor the minutes survive for Michaelmas 1776.

Act in 1781 fixed the Land Tax assessment at £186.²⁷ The committee also faced resistance from traders refusing to pay for open standings, and, although Tubb was ordered "to acquaint such persons of the unlawfulness of their proceeding" and, if necessary, to remove their goods from the market,²⁸ a further clause had to be inserted into the 1781 Act empowering the committee to charge for these standings.²⁹ Theft of food and money from shops was not infrequent,³⁰ and lead was stripped from the roofs of butchers' shops in 1775.³¹ By 1784, the committee felt it worthwhile to pay the watchman of St. Martin's parish one shilling a night during the winter to guard the premises.³² The buildings themselves were not without fault, and in 1776 the avenues and the area in front of the market had to be re-paved. More serious still, four iron bars had to be placed under the higlers' stalls "as a support to the roofs which have in some places given way".³³

Sellers of china made an appearance in the market in 1776,³⁴ but room was probably found for them only because many dealers in foodstuffs were successfully evading the provisions of the 1771 Act. This Act had specifically excluded butter sellers, who still presumably used the Butter Bench on the south-west side of Carfax, and the sale of fruit elsewhere in the city remained legal.³⁵ As a result, the market committee obtained a clause in the 1781 Act forbidding the sale of butter, eggs, apples, cherries and other fruit outside the market, although people could still sell fruit at their shops and houses if it had been grown within the city or purchased at the market.³⁶ The influx of trades caused by this Act brought a need for expansion, and, in 1786, the committee asked Mr. Blackburn (possibly William Blackburn) to provide a sketch and estimate of stalls to be built on the east and west sides of the market for butter sellers and fruiterers.³⁷ Once again, it is unclear whether these stalls were ever built. An extension to the beadle's lodge was, however, constructed in 1788/9, and seems to have transformed the lodge from an office into a permanent dwelling house where the beadle was, in future, to live.³⁸

Physical expansion of the market is discernible in the 1790's, and it is possible that the increased concern of the committee with rent arrears and offences against the Acts of 1771 and 1781 was made necessary by the "great age and infirmities" of Mr. Tubb, who was forced to retire at midsummer 1797.³⁹ In May 1795, in an attempt to stamp out arrears of rent, the committee ordered that rents for stalls should be paid quarterly instead of annually, and warned that defaulters would face legal proceedings and notice to quit.⁴⁰ In 1797, the arrears had "lately very much increased", but it is noticeable that the anxiety ceased with the appointment of

²⁷ 21 George III, cap. 47, 1781, 96.

²⁸ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 77.

²⁹ 21 George III cap. 47, 1781, 96.

³⁰ e.g. *J.O.J.*, 14th January 1775; 16th January 1779.

³¹ *J.O.J.*, 4th November 1775.

³² O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 88.

³³ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ 11 George III, cap. 19, 1771, 49, 61.

³⁶ 21 George III, cap. 47, 1781, 95-6.

³⁷ O.C.A., FF2. 1a Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1772-1835, 90.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

Richard Baxter to help, and then to succeed, Tubb.⁴¹ The problems of traders forestalling the market by buying goods before they reached it, by buying and selling goods amongst themselves, by selling meat on Sundays, or by selling goods in their own shops and houses also seem to have receded, for a time, after 1797. The decision in 1795 to make every weekday an open market day for commodities except butchers' meat, and then in 1797 to remove this exception,⁴² must have stimulated trade and necessitated reorganisation and new building.

In May 1797, Mr. Parsons, a carpenter, successfully submitted an estimate for building a lean-to 51 feet long on the west side of the market, and in July it was decreed that the fish market should be transferred to this structure.⁴³ A separate shed for butter sellers, complete with rails "to keep off the people", was built by John Green in 1800, and in the same year, Thomas Slatter was instructed to extend the lean-to 25 feet to Jesus College Lane.⁴⁴

Development in the first two decades of the 19th-century continued in the same vein. In July 1808, John Hudson contracted to build 48 new stalls in four blocks of twelve, which apparently replaced 8 old stalls in the open part of the market. The stalls on the west side were to be for sellers of pork, bacon, etc., and those on the east side for gardeners.⁴⁵ In 1812 Hudson was employed to repair and alter the butchers' market and to make a new avenue, and he was doing more roofing and repair work three years later.⁴⁶ In 1816, sellers of gingerbread, thread, cotton, etc., were transferred to a point north of the butchers' market and near Hudson's new avenue, while sellers of eggs, vegetables, etc., on the west side of the market who had been causing "injury and annoyance" to the butchers were moved to the south wall.⁴⁷ In a further attempt at rationalisation, the fish market was transferred to the east side of the market, near the Mitre Hotel, in 1817.⁴⁸ The only space remaining was against the outer walls of the market, and this was gradually occupied by a series of sheds and stalls between 1826 and 1828.⁴⁹

By the 1820's however, it was becoming clear that the market was outgrowing its site altogether, and in 1823 the committee began a lengthy series of negotiations which were to lead to its expansion. The property immediately to the west of the market was owned by Edward Latimer, who, in 1823 expressed himself willing to dispose of all or part of his land for the purpose of enlarging the market.⁵⁰ The parties failed to agree terms, however, and in 1828, when Latimer again offered the freehold of the whole of his premises, the committee decided that it would treat for only the back portion. Latimer's price was again thought to be too high, and the committee rejected his offer.⁵¹ Further negotiations in 1832 and 1835⁵² were no more successful, and the committee's attention was then diverted by Hudson's belief

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 102-4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100, 111.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105-6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 120-1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 140-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 151, 155.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 157-8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 185, 199, 201, 209.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 226.

that the market would be better extended eastwards to Turl Street. Property owners there expressed opposition to this plan, however, and the committee was compelled to resume negotiations with Latimer for the rear part of his premises.⁵³ Again, no mutually acceptable price could be put on the land, and the committee declined any further discussion,⁵⁴ putting their faith in compulsory purchase powers which were included in the Act of 1835. Apart from renewing the committee's original powers, this Act also enabled it to enlarge the market, and to borrow up to £20,000 for the purpose.⁵⁵

Armed with these fresh powers, the committee confidently resumed negotiations with Latimer, but in 1836 attempts to purchase the whole of Latimer's property broke down after the committee had received what was felt to be an excessive valuation of £15,200 for it.⁵⁶ Once again, sights were lowered and the committee sought to buy the rear premises only;⁵⁷ a furious Latimer wrote to the committee berating members for their inconsistency: "they set out on a magnificent (*sic*) scale to make a market place creditable to themselves and to the university and city of Oxford and then they dwindle into insignificance Public works are carried out with a spirit, energy, liberality etc., on a scale of magnificence (*sic*) which does credit to the parties in every town in England but Oxford, but this famed city which ought to be an example to all the kingdom is notorious for having its public works executed on a stingy, narrow-minded, diminutive contemptible (*sic*) scale which must be owing to a want of exertion on the liberal portion of a committee over little minds to whom the above epithets might be applied." Latimer concluded by refusing to assist in negotiations with his tenant in the premises that the committee now required,⁵⁸ and the latter changed its course again in October 1836, deciding that, perhaps, the public might be better served by a total reconstruction of the market on its existing site.⁵⁹

Charles Fowler, architect of London's Hungerford Market, was called in to advise the committee, and predictably condemned the inconvenience and irregularity of buildings which "have been erected at different times, according as the increase of business required". He suggested a total remodelling of the market with a large central entrance from High Street, and side galleries on the east and west sides to increase the available space by one-sixth. He estimated the cost of his buildings, which were to be of "the utmost simplicity throughout", and yet "quite compatible with solidity and good appearance", at about £11,500.⁶⁰ The committee approved the plan after a sub-committee had visited Fowler's new market in Exeter and returned full of admiration for the "architect's excellent and judicious design".⁶¹ In December 1836, Fowler was asked to submit detailed working drawings and specifications for estimates, which he delivered in January 1837.⁶² Just as advertisements

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 253, 256-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 269-70.

⁵⁵ 5 and 6 Will. IV, 1835, *passim*.

⁵⁶ O.C.A., FF2, 1 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1835-64, 45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57-8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 65-76.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 97-101.

for tenders were to be sent out, the question was raised as to whether the Act of 1835, which had been passed to permit the extension of the market, could legally be used to rebuild it on its original site. This unforeseen difficulty caused Fowler's scheme to be abandoned "for the present" in March 1837,⁶³ and it was never revived.

Now, at last, fully aware of its legal and financial limitations, the committee was forced back to the negotiations with Latimer for the rear portion of his premises. By March 1838, Latimer had possession of most of the site, his tenant having left, and he offered to sell the land for £6,200. The committee offered only £4,800, and made £5,000 their final offer, without considering, for example, Latimer's request for permission to run waste water across the land to Market Street. Latimer denounced the commissioners' behaviour as "a most unreasonable thing . . . Do they fancy because I am a wine merchant that I am to bottle it?"⁶⁴ Latimer's indignation achieved nothing, however, and the deeds of purchase were at last signed on 22nd August 1838,⁶⁵ no less than fifteen years after the first negotiations. In November 1838, Latimer offered to make available part of the rest of the site so that the committee's newly-purchased land could be reached from High Street, but this initiative was unsuccessful.⁶⁶

In February 1839 the committee placed advertisements inviting architects to submit designs for a market building in the new area. Fowler was asked to compete,⁶⁷ but, having had to wait two years for his original account to be paid,⁶⁸ he resisted the temptation to do so. Of the three designs submitted, the committee chose that by Thomas Wyatt junior, insisting, however, upon an iron roof, and on piers of stone rather than iron.⁶⁹ In July, Thomas Hartley of Westminster secured the contract to build the New Market at an estimated cost of £3,975.⁷⁰ By November, Hartley had received two instalments of £500 as work progressed, but he was then forced to ask for an extension of six weeks because of the bad weather and because the iron roof had to be cast in London.⁷¹ In January 1840 he complained about "the navigation on the Thames having been stopp'd nearly the whole of the last six weeks", making it impossible for him to move the roof, paving, or sand, which depended on water transport. The committee accepted his reasons for the delay, and, in February, gave him the contract for external ironwork to the nineteen new butchers' shops. At the same time he was building a new beadle's house in the north-west corner of the New Market.⁷²

With the letting of the new shops on 24th March 1840,⁷³ the committee was able to concentrate its attention upon the widening of Market Street, and upon the growing number of butchers who defied the Mileways Acts by selling from their own shops and houses. The idea of building an avenue from Cornmarket Street into the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 154-6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 206-8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 221-5. For the position of the new market, see plan on p. 83, above. I am grateful to Miss Edith Gollnast for drawing the plan.

⁷³ O.C.A., FF2. 1 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1835-64, 228.

market was raised and abandoned in 1839,⁷⁴ but the erection of a more imposing and less congested entrance by way of Market Street was gradually achieved. The south-west end of the street (1842-4) and the north-west end (1845-9) were set back and rebuilt in accordance with plans by H. J. Underwood.⁷⁵ The problem of butchers selling meat outside the market was more intractable, and prosecutions, or repeated threats of prosecution, seem to have made little headway against offenders, some of whom had set up regular shops.⁷⁶ In 1848 twenty-seven butchers sought permission to sell meat outside the market, but their petition was rejected as the committee struggled to retain its monopoly.⁷⁷ The battle continued into the 1880's, but became an increasing irrelevance as Oxford's population grew and the city spread far beyond its 18th-century limits. In 1886 attempts to prosecute Charles Wiblin for opening a butcher's shop at no. 31, St. Giles' were abandoned, it being decided that this and the remote suburban shops could no longer be opposed.⁷⁸

In the meantime, adaptations of the market to changing circumstances had continued to take place. The fish market was removed from its position in the south-east corner to the north-west corner in 1850, following a letter from Mr. Venables of the Mitre Hotel, complaining of the stench "arising from the fish aggravated by the putrefaction of the entrails and scales thrown down some drain sewer or cesspool".⁷⁹ In 1854 the Farmers' Club asked for part of the market to be converted into a Corn Exchange, because of "the inconvenience in consequence of there being no fixed or settled place for holding the Oxford Weekly Corn Market". Even at this late date, corn samples were still being displayed at Carfax or in the Roebuck Hotel in Cornmarket Street.⁸⁰ The committee suggested separating the New Market from the old part and obtaining an Act of Parliament forbidding the holding of a corn market elsewhere in the city: the farmers, however, preferred to come into the market as soon as possible, and regardless of the proposed works.⁸¹ A sub-committee was therefore appointed to provide temporary facilities, and the farmers guaranteed to pay a rent of £100 a year for the use of the apparently unprofitable main avenue of the New Market between 12 and 2 p.m. on Saturdays.⁸² The Corn Exchange was first held there on 6th January 1855,⁸³ and its temporary nature did not prevent business from increasing beyond all belief as local railway facilities developed. By 1860, however, it was being complained of as inconvenient, and in 1861 farmers threatened to return to Carfax, protesting that "the avenue is used indiscriminately, and people are huddled together and pushed and incommoded in a way which is not seen or felt in any place in England assuming the name of a Corn Exchange".⁸⁴ The modest suggestion that the avenue might be closed to the public while the Exchange was in progress gave way to more ambitious schemes which involved building a new Corn Exchange above the vegetable market facing Market Street, or on the site of a house

⁷⁴ Ibid., 209-15.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 255-70, 289-318.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 309.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 312-3.

⁷⁸ O.C.A., FF2. 4 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1878-87, 313-5.

⁷⁹ O.C.A., FF2. 1 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1835-64, 327-33.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 378.

⁸¹ Ibid., 380-1, 384.

⁸² *J.O.J.*, 2nd February 1861.

⁸³ Ibid., 6th January 1855.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 2nd February 1861.

in Turl Street which James Morrell had offered for the purpose.⁸⁵ Neither of these plans was thought to provide sufficient space, however, and the city's offer to build a Corn Exchange in the Town Hall Yard and to let it at a rental of £125 a year was accepted at a public meeting at the Star Hotel on 30th March 1861.⁸⁶ This building, designed by S. L. Seckham and completed in 1863, took the Corn Exchange out of the Covered Market after only eight years.

During the last fifty years of the 19th-century, the open areas of the market were gradually roofed over, a new avenue was built, and reconstruction obliterated the surviving remnants of Gwynn's original market. In 1846 George Wyatt roofed the east avenue, and in 1853 the roof was extended over the north end of the avenue.⁸⁷ Roofing work north-east of the New Market in 1854/5 covered in part of the open area used for the display of fruit and vegetables.⁸⁸ More substantial change took place after the hurriedly arranged purchase of nos. 11-12 High Street for £8,300 in February 1875.⁸⁹ In May H. J. Tollit was asked to prepare a block plan for a new avenue beneath these houses, and shops in the area behind.⁹⁰ The committee then resolved to dispose of the unwanted houses on the street frontage, but had to wait until June 1880 before Elizabeth and Edward Beaumont purchased them for £6,800.⁹¹ By May 1881 plans by Frederick Codd and Mr. Gardiner for the new avenue and 19 shops had been approved, and the tender of Thomas Selby to build these, and an upper storey for the Market House, for £1,529 was accepted in June. The task was completed by November, when the shops were let;⁹² for convenience, the avenues were then numbered 1 to 4 from west to east.⁹³

Then followed a long programme of extensive reconstruction, affecting all the older portions of the market. In 1884, the roof at the south end of the market was repaired at a cost of £335.⁹⁴ Two years later, the low roof of Avenue 3 north of the Central Cross Avenue was replaced by a high timbered roof designed by E. G. Bruton.⁹⁵ A fire in this Central Avenue in 1886 led to its reconstruction, again under Bruton's supervision, in 1886-7.⁹⁶ The central portion of Avenue 4 was rebuilt in 1888,⁹⁷ and the new work was extended north to Market Street in 1898.⁹⁸ Progress continued unchecked under the supervision of the Markets and Fairs Committee of the Oxford City Council, which took over from the old city and university joint committee in November 1889. The south portion of Avenue 4 was rebuilt in 1892,⁹⁹ and by 1893 only the southern section of Avenue 3 remained to be reconstructed. The Market Surveyor, W. H. Castle, reported that the wood framing was dilapidated, the ventilating louvres were largely unusable, the shopfronts would soon

⁸⁵ Ibid., 23rd March 1861.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 6th April 1861.

⁸⁷ O.C.A., FF2. 1 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1835-64, 301, 356.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 382-3.

⁸⁹ O.C.A., FF2. 2 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1865-79, 29.

⁹⁰ O.C.A., FF2. 3 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1871-8, 134.

⁹¹ O.C.A., FF2. 4 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1878-87, 86.

⁹² Ibid., 124, 129, 140.

⁹³ Ibid., 136.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 318.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 323.

⁹⁷ O.C.A., FF2. 5 Mkt. Cttee. Min. Bk. 1887-97, 90.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 163.

need repair, the slates were crumbling, and "the whole construction of the roof is bad, the timbers being weak, and not framed in the usual manner, in parts they are simply spiked together".¹⁰⁰ Total rebuilding of this area took place in 1894,¹⁰¹ and in 1895 the north end of Avenue 2 was altered.¹⁰² Work inside the market was completed in 1897 with the rebuilding of the fish market,¹⁰³ but, in 1901-2, the Market House and skin yard to the north-west of the market were converted into shops known subsequently as nos. 1-3 Market Buildings.¹⁰⁴

Despite the subsequent consolidation of smaller shops and stalls into bigger ones, and the addition of modern façades, the Covered Market still retains much of its Victorian character and appearance. Amidst architecture of international repute, the Covered Market barely rates a mention in Oxford guide books, but it is both useful and ornamental. The mere fact that it still flourishes, in spite of drastic post-war changes in the pattern of retailing, is a modest tribute to the joint city and university committee which was largely responsible for its present form.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 187-8.

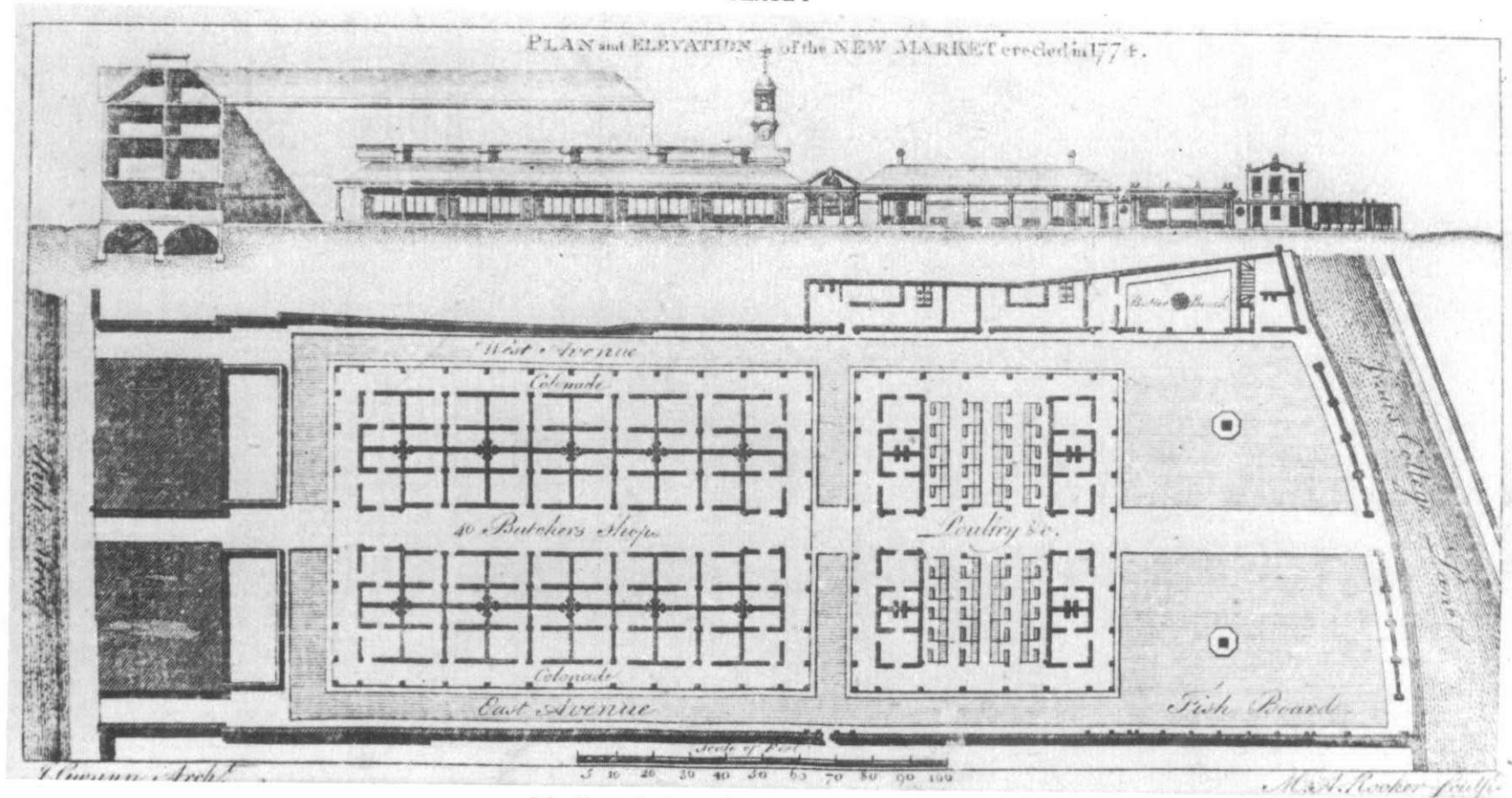
¹⁰¹ Ibid., 238.

¹⁰² Ibid., 322.

¹⁰³ O.C.A., FF2. 6 Mkts. and Fairs Cttee. Min. Bk. 1897-1907, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 142. These buildings were demolished in 1967.

PLATE I



John Gwynn's plan and elevation of the Market, 1774.