

The Struggle to Save Oxford's Old Houses: Bunney and Pearce's Forgotten 1930s Survey

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SUMMARY

Between the wars, the already much depleted stock of historic houses in Oxford city centre was further eroded by university and commercial development and by local authority improvement schemes. Three bodies, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society (OAHS) and, from 1927, the Oxford Preservation Trust (OPT) were concerned to limit this destruction both by their own efforts and by collaborative action. An Oxford undergraduate, Michael Bunney, and the secretary of SPAB, Anthony Powys, separately concluded that valuable buildings were being destroyed through ignorance and both decided that a detailed record of remaining properties might help to stem the losses. Between 1931 and 1935 they worked with the artists Maresco Pearce and Hanslip Fletcher to compile the first full survey of central Oxford's surviving old houses. This article places the survey in the context of a rapidly changing city centre and describes the difficult process by which a project with several contributors was eventually completed. It examines the reasons why the report was never published, as had always been intended, and draws attention to surviving elements of the survey which are to be found in archive repositories. Providing detailed information about Oxford's old houses was sadly not enough to save many of them and the city centre today is the poorer for it. The creators of the Oxford Survey and their supporters did, however, advance the cause of building conservation and they left behind a body of work that is of enduring value.

Oxford today has around 1,500 listed buildings,¹ and it is easy to imagine that the city centre has changed little over the centuries. In a few areas that is indeed the case, but many of Oxford's most photographed university and college buildings are Victorian or later. When William Morris first came up to Exeter College in 1853, he experienced Oxford as 'a vision of grey-roofed houses and a long winding street, and the sound of many bells.'² Thirty years later, in November 1883, he condemned the 'Vulgarisation of Oxford' in the *Daily News*, appealing to university dons to save the last remaining specimens of town architecture: 'Oxford thirty years ago was full of these treasures, but Oxford "culture" cynically contemptuous of the knowledge which it does not know, and steeped to the lips in the commercialism of the day, has made a clean sweep of most of them.'³ Morris was probably unaware that the spirit of improvement had been steadily clearing Oxford's town houses since the seventeenth century. The building of the Bodleian Library's Schools Quad (1613–24), the Clarendon Building (1711–15) and the Radcliffe Camera (1737–49) all displaced older houses, and the university purchased and demolished Middle Row in Broad Street in 1667 because the houses obstructed views of the new Sheldonian Theatre.⁴ Following the 1771 Oxford Improvement Act, paving

¹ https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20192/listed_buildings/867/listed_buildings_-_overview.

² J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (1950), p. 30.

³ Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Archive (London), hereafter SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Vulgarisation of Oxford.

⁴ VCH Oxon. 4, p. 91; N. Pevsner and J. Sherwood, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974), pp. 256, 260, 264.



Fig. 1. Buckler drawing of Catte Street in 1821, showing town houses in front of new buildings for Magdalen Hall. The old properties were demolished two years later. Bodl. MS Don. A.3 (81). Image courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

commissioners embarked on a major programme of street widening which also claimed blocks of houses north and south of St Mary Magdalen church and east of St Aldate's church.⁵ In the decades before Morris arrived in Oxford, the formation of Beaumont Street (1823) cleared several houses in St Giles', new premises for Magdalen Hall (1818–22) ousted old properties in Catte Street (Figs. 1 and 2), and University College demolished the Three Tuns in the High Street, one of Oxford's finest timber-framed buildings (Figs. 2 and 3), for the New Building designed by Charles Barry (1842).⁶

If Oxford's 'grey-roofed houses' were already in retreat by the 1850s, the subsequent growth of the university and colleges and commercial development to serve a growing city certainly speeded up the process. By 1914, modern business premises had displaced all but a few older properties in Magdalen Street, George Street, Queen Street and St Ebbe's Street; east of Carfax, the character and appearance of many central streets had been profoundly altered by new university and college buildings. In c.1911, Henry Taunt noted: 'Within the last thirty years, in the High Street alone, no fewer than 36 houses and shops have been removed and replaced by the newer University buildings.'⁷ These included the Examination Schools (1876–82), the Non-Collegiate Delegacy (1887), the High Street frontage of Brasenose College (1886–1909), Oriel College's Rhodes Building (1908–11) and University College's Durham Building (1903); Oriel's development of King Edward Street in 1873 had also led to the demolition of three historic houses, nos. 108–112 High Street, as well as Swan Court behind them.⁸

⁵ *VCH Oxon* 4, pp. 188–9.

⁶ Pevsner, *Oxfordshire*, pp. 139, 211.

⁷ H.W. Taunt, *Oxford Illustrated by Camera and Pen* (c.1911), p. 213.

⁸ Pevsner, *Oxfordshire*, pp. 108, 180, 213, 265–6, 309; J. Munby, 'J.C. Buckler, Tackley's Inn and Three Medieval Houses', *Oxoniensia*, 43 (1978), pp. 123–69.



Fig. 2. Featured buildings and streets.

- 1.** Old houses in front of Magdalen Hall; **2.** Three Tuns Inn, High Street; **3.** Emberlin's, Magdalen Street; **4.** 58-59 St Giles; **5.** Kemp Hall, 130a High Street; **6.** Castle Mill, Paradise Street; **7.** Carfax House; **8.** Old Palace, St Aldate's; **9.** 69-70 High Street; **10.** Westgate House, Paradise Street; **11.** 35 Cornmarket Street; **12.** Wyatt's Yard, St Aldate's; **13.** 9-18 Merton Street; **14.** Albert Place, Castle Street; **15.** 11-13 Paradise Street; **16.** 16-17 St Ebbe's Street; **17.** Hollybush Row; **18.** Blue Pig pub, Gloucester Green; **19.** Clarendon Hotel, Cornmarket Street; **20.** 28-30 George Street



Fig. 3. Henry Taunt photograph of a drawing showing the former Three Tuns tavern in High Street in the 1830s. University College's New Building occupied the site in 1842. OHC, POX0099070. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

A few individuals regretted the disappearance of Oxford's old houses and did what they could to record them, but the destruction was generally viewed as the inevitable march of progress. Drawings by John Chessell Buckler (1793–1894), photographs by Henry Taunt (1842–1922) and Henry Minn (1870–1961), and antiquarian collections by Herbert Hurst (d. 1913) document city streets and buildings that have, in many cases, been lost or transformed out of all recognition. Hurst was among the contributors to regular meetings of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society (OAHS), drawing attention, for example, to recently-discovered knuckle-bone floors or surviving examples of pargetting in Oxford houses.⁹ The

⁹ *Oxford Architectural and Historical Society Proceedings*, 6 (1894), pp. 10–12.

OAHS, formed in 1839 to promote the study of Gothic architecture in Oxford, was slow to take up a campaigning role, and preserving the city's green setting became the major concern of the short-lived Oxford Society for the Protection of Nature and Antiquity established in 1886.¹⁰ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) became the most vociferous defender of Oxford's old buildings. William Morris, Philip Webb and others had established SPAB in 1877 to encourage the repair rather than the drastic restoration of historic buildings. From the beginning, SPAB campaigned nationally, and indeed internationally, but it also bitterly opposed Oxford Local Board's proposal to widen Magdalen Bridge in 1882. The Society's secretary, Thomas Wise, wrote to the Board, warning that its 'disastrous determination...to ruin the appearance of the main entry to Oxford will be heard of with grief and consternation, not in this country only but by all cultivated people in Europe and America.'¹¹ The widening, which was considerably more conservative than the Society feared, went ahead in 1882–3, but SPAB was alarmed again in 1890 by a Lincoln College proposal to demolish and rebuild the Mitre as a new hotel. An article in the *St James' Gazette* noted that 'the city has never moved a finger to save a single edifice of historic or architectural interest.'¹² The Mitre survived, but councillors' uncaring attitude to historic buildings was demonstrated in October 1894 when the Revd C.H.O. Daniel's criticism of the city council's destruction of seventeenth-century buildings in George Street for a new Corn Exchange was met with mocking laughter.¹³ In 1896, SPAB recorded another protest about 'Improvements at Oxford' when Margaret Woods wrote to the *Daily Chronicle* criticising proposals to clear a picturesque range of buildings at the corner of St Aldate's and Pembroke Street and replace them with 'a workhouse-like building.' Her fears were realised in 1899 when the white brick building, No. 94 St Aldate's, occupied the site.¹⁴

THE OLD HOUSES SUB-COMMITTEE

In October 1907, Charlotte Toynbee, widow of the social reformer, Arnold Toynbee, wrote to William Nicholson, the OAHS secretary, urging the Society 'to take some steps towards the preservation of the few old houses that are now left in Oxford, or they will all disappear if no action is taken.' She proposed the scheduling of old properties which would include the names of owners and occupiers and the dates when leases were due to expire. Her particular concern was the impending threat to 'the very picturesque three-gabled house' in Magdalen Street formerly occupied by Emberlin's stationery business which she described as 'the only thing of beauty left in the street and a very pretty example of old Oxford houses' (Fig. 2). She thought that a petition from the Society might encourage the owners, Magdalen College, to preserve the building. Nicholson advised Mrs Toynbee that 'a Committee had been formed to keep an eye on the old houses of Oxford,' but this has left no trace of its existence and Magdalen received no petition from the Society.¹⁵ Two years later, in November 1909, the Oxford artist George Carline met Thackeray Taylor, SPAB's secretary, to discuss the formation of a local society akin to the National Trust to defend the city's buildings. When contacted about Carline's proposal, E.H. New, a member of the OAHS, told Taylor that he had been thinking along similar lines, 'but the professional architect is all-powerful – Jackson, Champneys, Warren and local men.' He saw the value of a body which would keep watch over the general appearance of buildings

¹⁰ W.A. Pantin, 'The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, 1839–1939', *Oxoniensia*, 4 (1939), pp. 174, 189; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d. 18, ff. 57, 75, 77.

¹¹ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, hereafter *JOJ*, 4 March 1882.

¹² SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Demolition at Oxford.

¹³ *JOJ*, 6 Oct. 1894.

¹⁴ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Improvement at Oxford; OHC, OCA City Engineer's Deposited Plan 3206A.

¹⁵ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-48428#odnb-9780198614128-e-48428>, accessed March 2019; Bodl. Dep. c. 592. I am grateful to Julian Munby for this reference.

and streets and open the eyes of individuals, especially property owners, but he warned that it would need the support of architects, and university and city officials.¹⁶ Carline and New, as well as Charlotte Toynbee, were founder-members of the old houses sub-committee which the OAHS established in February 1912 'to further the preservation, where possible, of such old houses in the city as are distinctly of architectural or historic interest.'¹⁷ Its aims were to schedule all existing houses and other antiquities of value, to do all that was possible to preserve scheduled buildings from demolition or 'restoration', and to build up a record of scheduled houses and similar properties that had already disappeared. The Society sent a circular to influential local people, soliciting support for these objectives and warning that, 'if the tide of destruction is not turned, there will soon be no houses to illustrate Oxford's long civic past.' Many positive replies were received, although some were accompanied by the recognition that preservation would be difficult. The local architect, Herbert Quinton, was, for example, broadly supportive, 'subject to reason as in some cases it is impossible to retain old buildings'. W.B. Gamlen sympathised with the committee's objectives but felt that private owners could not be expected to forego the opportunity of rebuilding old premises and doubling their rent unless they received compensation.¹⁸ Meanwhile, members of the sub-committee were urged to 'look about for themselves and bring lists of houses worth preserving to the Committee.'¹⁹ Mrs Toynbee sent in a list of twelve houses that she thought particularly worthy of preservation, and she accompanied local historian Harry Paintin on a pleasant walk exploring the old buildings in St Aldate's below Speedwell Street. The schedule of historic buildings, typed on loose sheets of foolscap paper by archaeologist J.N.L. Myres' 'Lady-typist', began to grow, and soon included Littlemore Court in St Aldate's, the White House in Abingdon Road, the Plough inn in Cornmarket and Nos. 3-4 Holywell Street. The challenge that the sub-committee faced was, however, illustrated by the demolition during 1912 of two of its scheduled buildings, Emberlin's shop in Magdalen Street for Taphouse's music warehouse and Nos. 58-59 St Giles' for Pusey House; in addition, the Octagon House in Broad Street was soon to be incorporated into Hertford College 'after restoration', and development seemed likely in the near future at No. 63 Cornmarket, No. 130 High Street, and Bishop King's Palace in St Aldate's.²⁰ The sub-committee sought to arouse greater public interest by publishing a booklet describing and illustrating some of Oxford's most interesting houses and *Old Houses in Oxford* was published in May 1914, just before the outbreak of war. Meetings of the sub-committee resumed in January 1919, and *Old Houses in Oxford* was re-issued in September 1920, but development pressures soon returned. In 1921, both the sub-committee and SPAB tried and failed to persuade Barclays Bank to retain the gabled and timber-framed No. 63 Cornmarket which was demolished for an extension to the branch.²¹ A more successful campaign encouraged the city council to restore No. 130 High Street and Kemp Hall in 1930 (Fig. 2); one of the sub-committee's options for Kemp Hall was, however, to have the building re-erected on a safe site such as 'the north side of the Parks where it could stand among the trees'. A diminished band of committee members continued to meet at intervals until February 1929, but they seem to have become less active in a conservation role. When the south side of Broad Street was threatened with redevelopment in 1924, for example, the sub-committee decided that other people had already protested about the effect on old buildings and merely asked the city council to ensure that the line of the city wall was preserved intact.²² By 1930, the sub-committee was moribund, but Myres and another former member were still monitoring development. They chose not to warn the OAHS or the Oxford public about the impending

¹⁶ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Proposed Society at Oxford.

¹⁷ Bodl. Dep. d. 532, ff. 1r.-3r.; OAHS, *Old Houses in Oxford* (1914), p. 1.

¹⁸ Bodl. Dep. c. 592.

¹⁹ Ibid. Dep. d. 532, f. 5r.

²⁰ Ibid. ff. 14r.-21r., 34r.-35r.; Dep. c. 592; the schedule seems not to have survived.

²¹ Ibid. Dep. d. 532, ff. 21r., 29r., 37r., 41r.-47r.; SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Old House in Cornmarket Street.

²² Bodl. Dep. d. 532, ff. 49r.-51r., 54r.



Fig. 4. M.J.H. (Michael) Bunney, principal author of the Oxford Survey, photographed in about 1930. Image courtesy of S.E. Bunney.

demolition of the Castle Mill in Paradise Street (Fig. 2) because they judged that the late eighteenth century building was too modern; a furious Falconer Madan, formerly Bodley's Librarian, cancelled his membership of the Society in disgust after fifty years.²³

THE OXFORD SURVEY

In October 1926, M.J.H. (Michael) Bunney, the son of the architect M.F.W. Bunney, came up to Oxford to read Chemistry at The Queen's College (Fig. 4).²⁴ He found himself resident in a city

²³ *Ibid.* Dep. c. 592; Dep. c. 600.

²⁴ *The Queen's College Register* (1988), p. 46.



Fig. 5. Hanslip Fletcher drawing of Carfax in 1931, illustrating buildings on the south-east corner that were soon to be pulled down. Image courtesy of Sanders of Oxford Ltd.

centre that was now subject not only to the traditional pressures of commercial development and university and college expansion but also to extensive slum clearance and the rampant growth of motor traffic. By October 1928, Bunney was organising a group of people to record Oxford's old houses when he sought advice from M.E. Sadler, Master of University College, and H.E. Salter, the historian whose extensive documentary research had revealed so much about the development of Oxford properties. Salter expressed an interest in Bunney's scheme and agreed that, 'It would be valuable to have a list of the houses which date from before 1700.' Bunney was President of the Oxford University Archaeological Society in 1929, and he apparently made good progress on the survey before he left Oxford that year. He subsequently trained as an architect at the Architectural Association and submitted as an essay prize entry an undated typescript entitled *A Survey of the Old Houses of Oxford*.²⁵ By the autumn of 1931, Bunney had sent the completed manuscript of his survey to the Clarendon Press for possible publication. Knowing nothing about this, but well aware of the development pressures in Oxford, Anthony Powys, the secretary of SPAB, had approached the artist Maresco Pearce in July 1931 with the idea of making a record of Oxford's remaining old houses. Pearce responded positively and suggested that Powys should also ask Hanslip Fletcher, an artist well known for his drawings of London. The two artists were commissioned to record threatened houses in St Aldate's, St Giles' and Holywell at an estimated cost of £33 which was to be shared between SPAB and Oxford Preservation Trust (OPT). They travelled down to Oxford on the 7.30 a.m. breakfast train from Paddington in August 1931 and, reaching Carfax, discovered that Carfax House, a three storey Georgian brick building on the south-east corner, was about to be demolished (Figs. 2 and 5). Fletcher reported to Powys: 'I was so upset to see this was to go that I drew it at once, standing on the island in mid traffic and just as I had finished was informed I should have asked permission from the Superintendent of Police.' He also recorded the demolition of Boffin's restaurant on the south-west corner of Carfax and houses in St Aldate's that were soon to be pulled down. Pearce and Fletcher returned to Oxford in September when 'we found them destroying buildings opposite the Town Hall of some interest and made some drawings' (Fig. 6). The SPAB scheme was therefore well under way by

²⁵ Historic England Archive (Swindon), BUN01.



Fig. 6. Drawing by Maresco Pearce showing the demolition of Nos. 114–116 St Aldate's in 1931. Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. b. 250, f. 21r. Image courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

October when Myres advised Powys that Bunney had withdrawn the manuscript of his survey from the Clarendon Press and was prepared to collaborate with Powys and Pearce on a joint project.²⁶

Powys acted as the coordinator of this collaborative venture which was to include an introduction to the character and value of Oxford's domestic buildings by Pearce, a detailed survey of surviving old houses by Bunney and Pearce, and a chapter by Powys on the repair of stone buildings in the city. The resulting book was to be illustrated by Pearce's and Fletcher's drawings and by Bunney's photographs of many of the houses. Reproductions of old views seem also to have been considered for inclusion, perhaps following the example of T.W. Squires' beautifully illustrated book *In West Oxford* which had been published in 1928. Powys and Pearce decided to omit them at a late stage, presumably because of space and cost, despite Bunney's protests that they show 'how these old houses have lived through many years.'²⁷

²⁶ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Oxford Scheme.

²⁷ *Ibid.*



Fig. 7. Drawing by Maresco Pearce showing Nos. 30–28 George Street in 1932. This seventeenth-century house, the last example in the street, was demolished in 1935. Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. b.250, f. 20r. Image courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The three collaborators seem never to have been given a deadline for completion, but SPAB's *Annual Report* in 1932 confidently declared that the Society now had all the material to hand and would be publishing the book 'before long'.²⁸ In fact, there had been very little progress during the year, and SPAB was not to receive a final version of the survey until September 1935. All three men, of course, had other commitments, and Powys did not circulate his draft chapter for comment until January 1933. Bunney, as a young architect, remarked in March 1933 that he had been 'abnormally busy lately' and, in February 1935, he was apparently 'too full of work' to complete his text; for much of 1932, he was hampered by eye trouble. The contributors could rarely meet to discuss the project and they generally communicated by letter and postcard, providing a further source of delay; in one undated letter, for example, Pearce told Bunney that 'you're not good at answering letters.' The men were not based in Oxford, and both Bunney and Pearce had to schedule visits to the city, Bunney to complete his photographic survey and Pearce to do additional drawings or check facts on the ground; in 1932, for example, Pearce recorded Nos. 28–30 George Street, the last of the street's seventeenth century timber-framed houses which was pulled down in 1935 (Figs. 2 and 7).²⁹

²⁸ SPAB, *55th Annual Report to June 1932* (1932), p. 71.

²⁹ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Old Houses, George Street.

Draft chapters of the survey were eventually circulated to experts such as Salter and Myres both for peer review and for their local knowledge. As project coordinator, Powys also felt that the proposed book needed validation by a high-profile Oxford academic and asked Sir Michael Sadler to write the foreword in 1934. Sadler found the text very interesting, but he wished the writer 'to make his criticisms of the city authorities less sweeping.' He noted too that old houses sometimes had to go for better buildings, quoting the example of delightful vernacular buildings on the site of the Radcliffe Camera. All these factors helped to slow progress, but Bunney and Pearce's differences of opinion seem to have been the chief obstacle. Bunney had already compiled his survey of Oxford's old houses and clearly saw himself as the principal author of this larger work. Pearce, at least by his own account, was sympathetic and tactful and claimed to have gone against Powys's wishes in allowing Bunney 'to write up our common notes in your own manner.' His role was therefore to comment on, criticise and contribute to Bunney's evolving text. In January 1933, for example, he wrote to Bunney, trusting that he would not be offended to receive stylistic advice as well as detailed criticism about particular buildings. In a subsequent letter, he made clear that he had been conveying his personal feelings and would leave it to Powys and Myres to provide reasoned criticism when they had time. Two months later, Pearce suggested further changes to Bunney's text which were clearly rebuffed; a few days later, he wrote again: 'You really are not a very tactful young man! I'm unsure whether this is due to gaucherie or supreme self-confidence, you never tire of saying or implying that my notes are inaccurate and generally poor.' Differences over details continued until October 1935 when Pearce suggested using Powys as the final arbiter, but, at the same time, he congratulated Bunney on completing 'a grand work.'³⁰

The finished survey was certainly a major piece of work, comprising 161 typescript foolscap pages. SPAB now had a record of 523 individual houses or groups of domestic buildings erected before the early nineteenth century; by comparison, the OAHs *Old Houses in Oxford* booklet had featured just sixteen properties. The city was divided into quadrants and the buildings were described street by street within each quadrant. The architectural descriptions of the most important buildings such as the Golden Cross, the Mitre and the Old Palace in St Aldate's were prefaced by a historical introduction which might also include references to old illustrations. For these key buildings, interesting internal fixtures and fittings were also described. Where known, the ownership of each building was added to the entry. Both Bunney and Pearce presumably contributed all this information, but it must be Bunney's voice that we hear in some of the entries. He seems to have excised the criticism of the city council noted by Sadler, but he railed against the destruction or ill-treatment of old buildings. At Nos. 69–70 High Street, for example, his original entry described the eighteenth-century property as being 'of unusual interest because good brickwork is very rare in Oxford; in fact there is no other work of the same kind in the City. The fenestration of the front is delightful' (Figs. 2 and 8). Brick was very much out of favour in Oxford at the time and the domestic bursar at Magdalen College, without reference to the governing body, had the frontage rendered and re-windowed in 1932. Bunney added a note: 'Since the above was written, the front of the house has been completely covered in stucco without regard for its appearance. Both the brickwork and the stone dressings are either buried or hacked away. This is probably the worst example of needless spoliation that an old house in Oxford has suffered.'³¹ He lamented the fate of Westgate House in Paradise Street, the former home of the brewer at the Swan Brewery, another eighteenth-century brick house which had recently been covered with cement stucco and false jointing, 'a complete travesty of its appearance and lessening interest.'³² He also regretted the loss of No. 34 Cornmarket, one half of an eighteenth-century ashlar stone building with arcading over the first floor windows which sprang from Doric pilasters, an

³⁰ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Oxford Scheme; Historic England Archive, BUN01.

³¹ OHC, M.J.H. Bunney and M.C. Pearce, 'An Oxford Survey', unpublished typescript (1935), pp. 57–8.

³² Bunney and Pearce, 'An Oxford Survey', p. 130.



Fig. 8. Nos. 69–70 High Street photographed by Michael Bunney in about 1931, 'before spoliation'. The brick façade with stone dressings was rendered and re-windowed in 1932. HE, BUN01/01/093. By permission of Historic England Archive.



Fig. 9. The unusual façade of Nos. 34–35 Cornmarket Street photographed by Michael Bunney in about 1931; No. 34, on the right, was later demolished. HE, BUN01/01/076. By permission of Historic England Archive.

arrangement unique in Oxford (Figs. 2 and 9).³³ Pearce had written to Bunney in November 1933, desperate 'to get the book out before all the old buildings are destroyed', and the survey described many houses that were doomed or at risk. A building line in Pembroke Street put at risk all the old houses on the south side of the street. All the buildings on the east side of St Aldate's from Floyd's Row to Folly Bridge had been condemned. In St Ebbe's Street, Nos. 16–17 were recorded as interesting timber-framed buildings backing on to Pembroke College wall; both had been condemned and other houses below them had already gone, leaving the south wall of No. 17 as a poster site.³⁴ As SPAB had warned in 1933, slum clearance powers were being used to destroy not only 'Beastly little buildings...which should never have been built' but also 'Houses, originally well and honestly built, of whatever age and not necessarily of archaeological interest, which have descended to slum conditions through overcrowded letting and neglect.'³⁵ Bunney had a much more positive view of Oxford's neglected old properties, describing dilapidated timber-framed houses in Beef Lane as 'pleasing' and early seventeenth-century cottages in Littlegate Street as 'pleasant'. Albert Place was 'a most pleasant cul-de-sac approached through a passage under No. 8 Castle Street.' He summarised his philosophy about the value of historic buildings in comments about a row of two storey lime-washed houses at nos. 11–13 Paradise Street: 'a character which these cottages share with other old buildings of Oxford is that the material and structural methods used in their erection will not again be used for this class of dwelling. They are therefore irreplaceable' (Figs. 2, 10 and 11).³⁶

THE SURVEY REMAINS UNPUBLISHED

in the autumn of 1935, Powys was at last able to pass the complete survey, with its accompanying chapters and illustrations, to the Clarendon Press. The Press had considered Bunney's original survey for publication four years earlier, and, at that time, Myres was certain that it would look favourably on an authoritative volume about the city's old houses.³⁷ Getting copy to the Press as soon as possible was a regular theme in letters from Pearce and Powys to Bunney from October 1932 onwards, and, in April 1934, W.D. Hogarth, from the Clarendon Press, wrote to Powys, hoping to see the material that had been assembled. He warned Powys that 'One can't hope for a very wide public' for such a book and queried whether the photographs and drawings would stand for reduction to a fairly small format. Bunney subsequently sent Hogarth some of his draft text but Hogarth provided an unfavourable report in June. He considered that the work was not yet in a shape for publication and that the Delegates of the University Press were unlikely to publish it commercially. He felt that the material needed an editorial hand, perhaps from the OAHS which might then publish it as a report with possible financial support from the Delegates. This advice seems to have been ignored during completion of the work although Powys told Pearce in October 1935 that he thought the survey was too long. Pearce suggested leaving out some later buildings which Bunney had said 'were not of much importance,' but they were comparatively few in number and no further changes were made. Powys, secretary of SPAB for twenty-five years and a key supporter of the Oxford scheme, died in March 1936, three months before John Mulgan from the Clarendon Press confirmed that it regarded the survey as a record rather than a potential book and declined to publish the work. Pearce had apparently been advised earlier that the Press might publish an edited version with fewer illustrations and he considered that the principal reason for rejection was news that the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England

³³ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Nos. 33–35 Cornmarket Street.

³⁴ Historic England Archive, BUN01; Bunney and Pearce, 'An Oxford Survey', pp. 11–12, 80–1, 92–5, 112–16, 118.

³⁵ SPAB, *56th Annual Report to June 1933* (1933), p. 18.

³⁶ Bunney and Pearce, 'An Oxford Survey', pp. 104, 126–7.

³⁷ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Oxford Scheme.



Fig. 10. Condemned houses on the north side of Beef Lane, photographed by Michael Bunney in about 1931. HE, BUN01/01/160. By permission of Historic England Archive.

(RCHME) was to compile an inventory of historic buildings in the city of Oxford. SPAB failed to obtain a grant from the Pilgrim Trust towards publishing the survey in October 1936, and Bunney was still considering private publication early in 1939. In March, Pearce wrote to Bunney, saying that he was welcome to use his drawings but declining to offer any financial support because he had already spent enough and did not think their book would be worth five or six pounds.³⁸

³⁸ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Oxford Scheme; Historic England Archive, BUN01.



Fig. 11. Old houses on the east side of Littlegate Street, photographed by Michael Bunney in about 1931. HE, BUN01/01/168. By permission of Historic England Archive.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 and publication of the RCHME's inventory in the same year almost certainly put an end to hopes that Bunney and Pearce's survey would ever be published. The inventory was the product of detailed investigation by the Commission's own staff supported by experts in many fields, and descriptions of monuments were referred for revision to heads of colleges, incumbents and the principal owners of domestic buildings. The entries followed the standard format established for earlier published inventories, providing some historical background for the most important buildings and an account of any remarkable features together with a concise, mainly architectural, description. Interesting fittings were also recorded and the condition of each monument was stated. This was clearly a much more rigorous and systematic approach than Bunney and Pearce's, and the inventory covered university, college and ecclesiastical buildings as well as secular buildings; it also included monuments within the existing city boundary, not simply those in and around the city centre as Bunney and Pearce had done.³⁹ The stylistic contrast between the emotionally detached language of the inventory and Bunney's descriptive accounts can be seen in their entries for three houses in Hollybush Row (Fig. 2). The RCHME recorded:

'(173). House, Nos. 2 and 3 on the E. side of Hollybush Row, 20 yards S. of Parkend Street, is of two storeys with attics; the walls are of stone and the roofs slate-covered. It was built probably late in the 17th century and some of the windows have solid frames with a mullion and transom. Condition – Fairly Good.

³⁹ Royal Commission on Historic Monuments England, *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of Oxford* (1939), pp. xiii–xvii.

(174). House, No. 31 Parkend Street, at the E. corner of Hollybush Row, is of two storeys with attics; the walls are of stone and the roofs are slate-covered. It was built probably late in the 17th century. Condition – Fairly Good.⁴⁰

Bunney described them as follows:

‘Hollybush Row. 1, 2, 3. These pleasant cottages form an almost uniform group. Their walls are of coursed rubble, lime-washed. They have two storeys and an attic. They were probably built early in the 17th or late in the 16th cent. There are several old windows; No. 1 has an old sash window on the ground floor and on the first floor are three plain mullioned and transomed windows with modern glazing. This cottage also has a brick chimneystack on a stone base. Nos. 2 and 3 have old mullioned and transomed windows on the first floor. They are partly filled with lead glazing. On the ground floor of No. 3 is another window of this kind. The roofs are steeply pitched and have two hipped dormers; at the back there is one gabled dormer. The roofs here are covered with Stonesfield slates. Between Nos. 2 and 3 there is a good brick chimneypiece on a stone base. No. 2 is said to have been inhabited by three generations of the one family through 132 years. Owner: Hall’s Oxford Brewery.⁴¹

Clearly, there was a difference of opinion here about the date of these cottages and the brief RCHME summaries were usefully supplemented by ground plans and a photograph in the Royal Commission’s archive, but Bunney’s wordier entry provided valuable additional information about properties that have since been demolished. Where Bunney and Pearce remained unchallenged by the RCHME inventory was through their coverage of Oxford’s eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century houses including even Nos. 30–33 Paradise Square which were not in fact built until the 1840s (Figs. 2 and 12).⁴² The terminal date for inclusion in the inventory was 1714, and that largely explains why the RCHME recorded 197 secular buildings in the central area as opposed to more than 500 in the Bunney and Pearce’s survey.⁴³ The inventory was also of course too late to include the many old properties which had been demolished since Bunney and Pearce recorded them a few years earlier.

THE CONTEXT: ATTITUDES TO OXFORD’S OLD HOUSES IN THE 1930S

The compilation of the Oxford Survey was supported by three bodies, SPAB, the OAHS and OPT, which all had an interest in the fate of the city’s historic buildings. The chief impetus behind the foundation of OPT in 1927 was, however, the urgent need to save the city’s green setting from unsympathetic development and, in November 1931, the OAHS argued that the Trust ‘was not always interested in houses *qua* houses.’ The Society appointed a sub-committee of three men, Myres, Salter and the local architect and city councillor, H.S. Rogers, to liaise with the Trust on domestic buildings.⁴⁴ Both SPAB and OPT welcomed this development and *The Times* on 2 February 1932 noted ‘a fresh safeguard for Oxford’s ancient buildings....Constant vigilance is needed because development and reconstruction are taking place so rapidly in Oxford.’⁴⁵ Myres was the key link between the three bodies, explaining in a letter to Powys in February 1932 that the sub-committee was ‘really a resurrection of an old department of this society’s work, which since the formation of the Oxford Preservation Trust has fallen rather

⁴⁰ RCHME, *City of Oxford*, p. 177.

⁴¹ Bunney and Pearce, ‘An Oxford Survey’, p. 134.

⁴² R.J. Morris, ‘The Friars and Paradise: An Essay in the Building History of Oxford, 1801–1861’, *Oxoniensia*, 36 (1971), pp. 91–2.

⁴³ RCHME, *City of Oxford*, pp. xv, 162–84.

⁴⁴ Bodl. Dep. d. 558, pp. 146, 151.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 2 Feb. 1932.



Fig. 12. The south-west corner of Paradise Square, photographed by Michael Bunney in about 1931. HE, BUN01/01/173. By permission of Historic England Archive.

into the background. We are now co-operating with Oxford Preservation Trust and hoping to influence their policy in desirable directions.⁴⁶ The city council's proposal to demolish the Blue Pig in Gloucester Green (Figs. 2 and 13) for a car park in 1932 was an early challenge to this co-operation. The OAHs tried and failed to persuade the city council to retain the late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century central portion of the pub which it described as 'one of the most interesting and picturesque buildings in the heart of Oxford.' Prompted by Myres, Powys wrote to the city council on behalf of SPAB in August 1934, seeking to have a building of outstanding value retained as waiting rooms for the car park and bus station or as a shop with a tea room upstairs. OPT, however, chose not to become involved in the controversy and the city council decided to demolish the Blue Pig in October. Rogers wrote to Powys, bitterly criticising fellow councillors for 'their failure to take any other than a present day purely selfish point of view. They are not even awake to the fact that these minor beauties together combine in making a city which attracts visitors who presumably increase their takings.' Presumably at the instigation of Powys, D.B. Harden, assistant keeper of antiquities at the nearby Ashmolean Museum, visited the Blue Pig during demolition in July 1935 and found nothing at all worthy of preservation, declaring that 'its room is more valuable than itself.'⁴⁷

Contrasting opinions were again evident in 1936 when Canon R.R. Martin, rector of St Michael at the Northgate Church, began a spirited campaign against the city council's proposal to clear old houses on the north side of Ship Street (Fig. 14). Advised by Myres, OPT

⁴⁶ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Old Houses Sub-Committee, 1932.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Blue Pig; OPT Archive (Oxford), Trustees Minute Book 1927–35, p. 221.



Fig. 13. Gloucester Green frontage of the Blue Pig pub, photographed by Henry Taunt in 1907. Despite protests, the building was demolished for a car park in 1935. OHC, POX0105586. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

decided in March that the buildings were picturesque but ‘were not of sufficient architectural merit to justify them in opposing their demolition.’ Martin received a similar response from SPAB, but the Society soon took up his cause, stating that its initial letter had reflected the views of OPT. In April 1936, OPT was embarrassed into providing SPAB with a considered opinion of the Ship Street houses, mentioning its interest in plans for the street and adding that it wished to collaborate with the Society in preparing a catalogue of old Oxford buildings worthy of preservation. OPT commissioned the OAHS old houses sub-committee, which now comprised Myres, E.T. Long and P.S. Spokes, to compile a new list which took *Old Houses*



Fig. 14. Maresco Pearce drawing of Nos. 9–13 Ship Street in 1931. A spirited campaign delayed the city council's plans to demolish these houses and the street was ironically saved by the outbreak of War in 1939. Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. b. 250, f. 17r. Image courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

in Oxford as its nucleus and added a selection of the properties recorded by Bunney and Pearce. The report was completed in October 1936 and approved by OPT in January 1937;⁴⁸ it was subsequently published in the OAH's new journal *Oxoniensia* and as an appendix to OPT's *Annual Report* for 1936/7. The compilers included fifty-nine individual houses and ten groups of houses, and their stated aim was to have listed 'all those houses, and only those which, irrespective of size or situation, retain, whether internally or externally, features of real architectural distinction belonging to any period up to the end of the eighteenth century.' They emphasised that these properties were 'not all that we should like to preserve, but all that we think there is any real hope of preserving.'⁴⁹ Notable absentees from the list included Nos.

⁴⁸ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Broad Street & Ship Street; OPT Archive, Trustees Minute Book 1935–40, pp. 40, 46–7, 55, 67, 77.

⁴⁹ J.N.L. Myres et al., 'Old Houses in Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), pp. 196–201; OPT, *Tenth Annual Report* (1936/7), pp. 16–18.



Fig. 15. Town houses in Broad Street opposite the Clarendon Building, drawn by Hanslip Fletcher in 1933. These houses were demolished for the New Bodleian Library, now the Weston Library, in 1936–7. Image courtesy of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

35–47 Broad Street which were at the time being demolished for the New Bodleian Library (Fig. 15). OPT had been aware of this proposed development in March 1929 and a letter was sent to the chairman of the Hebdomadal Council (the chief executive body of the university) expressing the Trust's hope 'that instructions would be given to the architect to preserve the beautiful frontage of the old buildings as far as possible.' Hebdomadal Council warned the Trust against writing to the newspapers and the trustees were told in June that the time was not ripe for seeking more information about the new building. OPT seems to have accepted Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's new building as a *fait accompli* and the university perhaps secured the tacit support of the OAHs by promising that the demolition would be accompanied by a full archaeological excavation.⁵⁰ W.A. Pantin's pioneering investigation into the history and archaeology of the site confirmed that the houses dated mainly from c.1600 to 1650 and 'were just the sort commonly judged by their exteriors, and dismissed out of hand, and allowed to be destroyed as being of no particular architectural character.'⁵¹ The list of houses to be preserved also omitted those in Ship Street despite their great charm 'because they did not appear quite to satisfy the rather high standards of architectural quality which we felt bound to set ourselves.'⁵² The battle to save Ship Street continued, however, and SPAB won a reprieve in 1939 while it commissioned a feasibility study for re-conditioning the houses. The city council decided to proceed with demolition anyway, but work was postponed at the outbreak of war and later abandoned.⁵³ SPAB also championed another significant group of old houses, Nos. 9–18 Merton Street, which faced demolition in the late 1930s for a new History Faculty Library (Fig. 2). OPT declined to support SPAB's campaign because these houses were not

⁵⁰ D. Radford, *The Archaeology of Oxford in Twenty Digs* (2018), p. 16.

⁵¹ OPT Archive, Trustees Minute Book 1927–35, pp. 45, 49, 55; W.A. Pantin, 'The Recently Demolished House in Broad Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 2 (1937), pp. 173, 199.

⁵² J.N.L. Myres et al., 'Old Houses in Oxford', p. 197.

⁵³ SPAB Archive Oxford Files: Broad Street & Ship Street.

on the OAHS list, but they were saved in 1938 after an exchange of properties between the university and University College enabled the new library to be built further west.⁵⁴

Inspired by Woolworths' threat to demolish the Clarendon Hotel in Cornmarket Street (Fig. 2) for a new store, SPAB arranged a meeting at its London offices in February 1940 to discuss the future of Oxford's buildings. Maresco Pearce was one of the invitees and remarked that the city needed 'some form of generalised protection...against commercial or other exploitation (in so far as these are destructive of beauty and historic interest as they are almost bound to be)'. Charles Fenby, editor of the *Oxford Mail*, felt that Oxford people had failed and he hoped to see an outside organisation such as SPAB 'devoted to the preservation of all that is characteristic in central Oxford, combining with this interest in the decent planning of the new Oxford'. The meeting agreed that OPT should encourage the city council to promote a parliamentary bill protecting the ancient parts of Oxford, but, despite claims by Sir Richard Livingstone that good progress was being made in June 1940, nothing more was heard of the proposal.⁵⁵ In the post-war years, Oxford's old houses remained as vulnerable as ever and, until buildings listed under the Town and Country Planning Acts secured statutory protection, their numbers continued to diminish. Of the 523 houses and groups of properties recorded by Bunney and Pearce in the early 1930s, around 200 (38.2 per cent) have since been demolished, most of them in the area west of Carfax. Bunney and Pearce's survey and the accompanying drawings and photographs therefore stand out as an important record of a civic Oxford that we have largely lost.

AFTERWORD

Michael Bunney served overseas with the Royal Air Force during the Second World War but, on his return to RAF Fraserburgh in Scotland in November 1944, he wrote to Walter Godfrey at the National Buildings Record (NBR) in All Souls College, Oxford, offering to let him see 'the survey of old houses in Oxford that I made as an undergraduate and after from 1928 to 1935... I tried to get it published before the War but no-one would do so without financial backing. I don't want to make money out of it, but I have no wish to spend any more on it.' Godfrey expressed an interest in seeing and, if practicable, copying the Oxford material, and Bunney duly delivered his report in February 1945, promising to send on his photographic negatives if they were required. Cecil Farthing, deputy director of the NBR, eventually returned Bunney's report and photographs in October 1952, apologising for the long delay and confirming that the survey had been typed for their files.⁵⁶ Following Bunney's death in 1997, his son and daughter deposited his Oxford survey collection, comprising copies of the report, correspondence, photographic prints and negatives, in what is now the Historic England Archive at Swindon.

Maresco Pearce's drawings of Oxford buildings made as part of the survey were deposited in the Bodleian Library (MS Top. Oxon. b. 250). SPAB's London offices contain several Oxford drawings by Maresco Pearce and Hanslip Fletcher and the SPAB Archive retains correspondence files relating to the Oxford survey and other local issues. The initial impetus for research into the Bunney and Pearce survey came from a typescript copy of their report, with no indication of authorship, in the Oxfordshire History Centre. This copy belonged to Peter Spokes (1893–1976) and was lodged in Oxfordshire's Local Studies Library following his death. Spokes was a former member of the OAHS old houses sub-committee, a lifelong recorder of local vernacular buildings and a city councillor who served as Lord Mayor of Oxford in 1968/9.

⁵⁴ OPT Archive, Trustees Minute Book 1935–40, pp. 80, 148.

⁵⁵ SPAB Archive, Oxford Files: Oxford Special Committee.

⁵⁶ Historic England Archive, BUN01.

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