

St Aldate's Widened and 'Improved': The Making of a Modern Oxford Street

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SUMMARY

St Aldate's today throngs with tourists and intending bus passengers, and Christ Church and the late Victorian town hall feature in many classic Oxford views. The street is now perhaps best known for the exploits of Colin Dexter's fictional detective, Inspector Morse, at the 1930s city police station, and for real-life reports of ongoing criminal trials at the Crown Court in the converted Morris Garages building across the road. Few people now live in St Aldate's, and just thirteen listed houses remain in a street which pre-dates the formation of the burh of Oxford in about 900 and was substantially built up between Carfax and Folly Bridge by 1279. Some of these properties fell vacant during the late-medieval period when Oxford experienced economic decline, and Cardinal Wolsey's property acquisitions for Cardinal College transformed the area just inside the south gate in the 1520s. From the seventeenth century, St Aldate's became crowded with houses both on and behind the street frontage and this article examines why it became the focus for many 'improvements', especially from the 1770s. These were designed to cope with increasing traffic levels and, in some cases, to improve the views of major buildings. Public health concerns provided a further justification for official intervention in the late nineteenth century, and slum clearance, road widening and the creation of new views in the twentieth century accounted for many old houses that were deemed, at best, quaint or picturesque. This article exposes the uncertain and at times incoherent process by which the street has been changed and describes unrealised housing and town planning proposals which might have given us a very different St Aldate's.

St Aldate's now betrays few signs of its ancient origins, but it formed part of a significant north-south crossing at Oxford in Anglo-Saxon times which utilised a chain of alluvial islands to cross the River Thames flood plain and is generally thought to have given Oxford its name. This crossing arguably existed by the end of the seventh century, at around the time that St Frideswide (d. 727) became abbess at a monastery on the site of what was to become St Frideswide's Priory, today's Christ Church and Christ Church Cathedral. Excavations around the cathedral, at St Aldate's church and St Ebbe's church have revealed burials and other archaeological evidence pointing to settlement on the gravel terrace well before the Saxon *burh* at Oxford was formed in c.900.¹ The upper end of St Aldate's was then brought within the defensive earthen rampart with a south gate across the road just north of the modern Brewer Street. This was perhaps the 'old gate' after which St Aldate's church, first recorded in the early twelfth century, and the street are thought to have been named, although other derivations have been suggested.² In the late eleventh century, Robert d'Oilly, the sheriff of Oxford

¹ A. Dodd (ed.), *Oxford Before the University* (2003), pp. 12–19; B. Durham, 'The Thames Crossing at Oxford: Archaeological Studies 1979–82', *Oxoniensia*, 49 (1984), pp. 79–87; J. Blair, 'St Frideswide's Monastery at Oxford: Archaeological and Architectural Studies', *Oxoniensia*, 53 (1988), pp. 60–2; R. Tyler, 'Archaeological Investigations During the Refurbishment of St Aldate's Church, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 66 (2001), pp. 371, 386–407; J. Moore, 'St Ebbe's Church, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 69 (2004), p. 422; J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994), pp. 63–4, 146–8, 168.

² *VCH Oxon.* 4, p. 373.

appointed by William I, upgraded the Thames crossing into a substantial stone causeway at least 800 metres long, the Grandpont or great bridge which still survives beneath the modern road surface. Trill Mill Bow, an arch opposite the end of today's Rose Place, formed the northern limit of this causeway, which soon became the focus of ribbon development outside the south gate. Houses were first built on the east or downstream side which was protected from flooding and then, by c.1200, on the west side after the land had been raised. By 1279, both sides of the modern St Aldate's between Carfax and Folly Bridge were substantially built up.³ The portion of the street within the town walls was in St Aldate's parish, but St Michael at the Southgate was the parish church for the extra-mural suburb from the twelfth century until 1525 when it was closed and demolished for Wolsey's Cardinal College.⁴

Medieval tax returns indicate that St Aldate's was one of Oxford's more prosperous parishes. It had a substantial Jewish community in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with a synagogue on the east side of the street opposite Pembroke Street. The former home of Moses the Jew became Oxford's guildhall in 1229 and the synagogue became an inn with shops in front after the expulsion of the Jews in 1290. The upper end of St Aldate's was the town's fish market, with permanent stalls outside the guildhall, and it therefore became known as Fish Street.⁵ The lower end of the street outside the south gate was known as Grandpont or Grampound, and later as Bridge Street. It seems generally to have been less prosperous and documentary evidence, supported by Ralph Agas' map of Oxford in 1578 (Fig. 1), indicates that some plots fronting the street fell vacant during Oxford's economic decline in the later-medieval period.⁶ The slaughtering of cattle in Slaying Lane, the old name for Brewer Street, perhaps gave the area an unsavoury reputation, but the wealthy Smith family of brewers was not deterred from building several fine houses there in the early seventeenth century.⁷ The Oxford economy was booming at this time and gaps in the street frontage had been filled by January 1644 when a census of 'strangers' during the Civil War recorded 408 Royalist officers, soldiers, courtiers and servants billeted in the parish.⁸ David Loggan's map of Oxford in 1675 (Fig. 2) emphasises the built-up nature of the area, which now included back-land development in courts and rows.⁹ This trend intensified in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the renewed growth in the population of Oxford. In 1750, Isaac Taylor's map of Oxford (Fig. 3) recorded a population of 719 living in 130 houses in Fish Street and Bridge Street, whereas the 1821 census listed 1,871 people in St Aldate's parish and Grampound tithing.¹⁰

CLEARING OBSTRUCTIONS

W.M. Wade described St Aldate's in 1818 as 'a street worthy of Oxford, spacious, handsome and cheerful'.¹¹ He was almost certainly referring to the street above Brewer Street where the process of widening had commenced in the 1520s when Thomas Wolsey acquired properties on both sides for the building of his Cardinal College and the almshouses opposite. That work involved the partial demolition of the medieval south gate, a major bottleneck in the street which was finally cleared away after the remainder fell down in 1617.¹² Further widening followed in 1666 after the St Aldate's frontage of Christ Church, apart from Tom Tower,

³ Ibid. p. 26; Durham, 'The Thames Crossing', pp. 93–5.

⁴ VCH Oxon. 4, p. 397.

⁵ C. Roth, *The Jews of Medieval Oxford*, OHS ns 9 (1951), pp. 87–8, 98–100; VCH Oxon. 4, pp. 27–8, 37, 477; H.E. Salter, *The Oxford Deeds of Balliol College*, OHS 64 (1913), pp. 91–9.

⁶ VCH Oxon. 4, pp. 31, 88, 477.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 97, 475; H.E. Salter, *Survey of Oxford*, vol. 2, OHS ns 20 (1969), pp. 35–8.

⁸ M. Toynbee and P. Young, *Strangers in Oxford* (1973), p. 10.

⁹ VCH Oxon. 4, pp. 92–3.

¹⁰ Bodl. (E) C17:70 Oxford (207); VCH Oxon. 2, p. 223.

¹¹ W.M. Wade, *Walks in Oxford* (1818), p. 271.

¹² H.E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, OHS 100 (1936), p. 77; VCH Oxon. 4, p. 303.

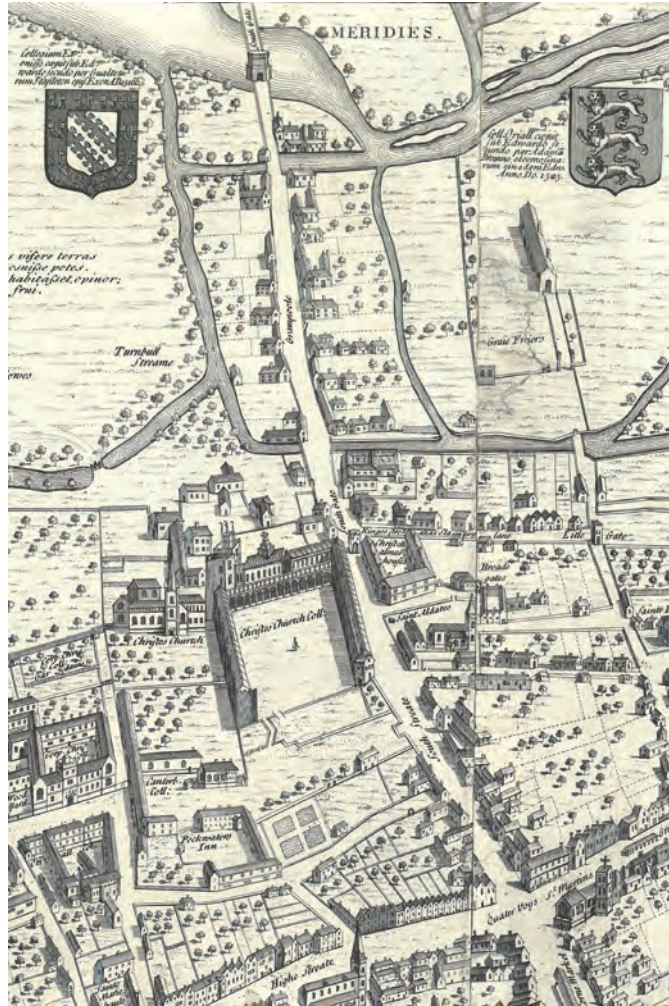


Fig. 1. St Aldate's in 1578 from Robert Whittlesey's 1728 re-engraving of Ralph Agas's map of Oxford. Image courtesy of John Leighfield.

was at last completed (Fig. 2). Old buildings in front of it were demolished and the ground was added to the street; an old wall running north to the Bull Inn was also demolished and rebuilt further back, creating the wider paved area where people now wait for buses. In 1694 Christ Church carried out a similar improvement to the south, demolishing two small houses between the south-west corner and Cutler's Gate and replacing them with a stone wall set back from the road.¹³ The Oxford Improvement Act of 1771 provided the impetus for further substantial change, setting up a body of paving commissioners to supervise paving, cleaning, lighting and general improvement in the city.¹⁴ At the top end of St Aldate's, their work included transferring the fish market into a new Covered Market in 1774 and removing the Carfax Conduit as an obstruction to traffic in 1787 despite a protest that it formed a noble termination to High Street. The paving commissioners also turned their attention to

¹³ H.E. Salter, *Survey of Oxford*, vol. 1, OHS ns 14 (1960), pp. 229, 233.

¹⁴ VCH Oxon. 4, p. 232.



Fig. 2. St Aldate's in 1675 from David Loggan's map of Oxford. Image courtesy of John Leighfield.

Folly Bridge, demolishing Friar Bacon's Study, the former 'new gate' in the town's medieval defences, in 1779. The obsolete gate had been converted into a house early in the seventeenth century, an apparent act of folly which led to the South Bridge being re-named Folly Bridge. During the eighteenth century, the house was occupied by the manager of the adjacent city waterworks, but the archway beneath was a serious obstruction on the Abingdon Road which had been turnpiked in 1755.¹⁵ In 1834–5, after prolonged negotiations with Christ Church, the commissioners cleared a row of old houses which projected into the street east of St Aldate's church. As part of that improvement, Christ Church demolished the north range of the Christ Church almshouses to create a more convenient approach to Pembroke College, today's Pembroke Square (Figs. 4 and 5).¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 285, 303; H.E. Salter, *Oxford City Properties* (1926), p. 103.

¹⁶ *VCH Oxon.* 4, pp. 188–9; J. Curthoys, "'To Perfect the College...,' the Christ Church Almshouses, 1546–1888," *Oxoniensia*, 60 (1995), pp. 38–9; Salter, *Oxford City Properties*, pp. 363–5.



Fig. 3. St Aldate's in 1750 from Isaac Taylor's map of Oxford. Image courtesy of John Leighfield.

RIVER AND RAIL TRAFFIC

Folly Bridge in around 1800 was both narrow and decayed, and the early eighteenth-century wharf house north-east of the bridge restricted the width of the highway. The paving commissioners had insufficient funds to rebuild the bridge, but the city obtained an Act of Parliament in 1815 which enabled it to do so between 1825 and 1827. The work included re-shaping the wharf and building the premises now occupied by the Head of the River pub (Fig. 6). A new basin was created west of the bridge, and the city waterworks was transferred to a new building at the north-west end of this basin. The old course of the River Thames running north-west towards the Shire Lake was stopped-up, making room for a new street leading to the waterworks, later known as Isis Street (Fig. 5).¹⁷ The river trade was then at its height, and Frederick King recalled that 'huge wagons with heavy loads went rolling along

¹⁷ VCH Oxon. 4, p. 292; OHC, Oxford City Archive (hereafter OCA), O.2.35 (22); OCA, Town Hall OCA3/1/Y14/14/5.



Fig. 4. Buckler drawing of houses in front of St Aldate's church demolished in 1834–5. Bodl. MS Don. a.2 (16). Image courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

the street, the weightiest traffic of all coming up to Folly Bridge by boat and being discharged out of several neighbouring wharves.¹⁸ The former National School was a major obstacle to these vehicles, projecting into the street on the west side of St Aldate's near the site of today's Thames Street. It had been built in 1813 to take the boys of the university's Greycoat Charity School, founded in 1708, and many more besides, but closed c.1829 when the Greycoat School moved to new premises in Jericho.¹⁹ In 1833, the paving commissioners decided to widen the street by eighteen feet from the school to a point north of Mr Archer's house. A local tailor, Mr Williams, is said to have pulled down the school and adjoining houses and erected houses on the new frontage. Thames Street, a *cul-de-sac* of terraced houses leading to wharves and warehouses, was laid out across the old bed of the river at the same time (Fig. 5).²⁰

This development left unaltered much of the lower part of St Aldate's, which was described in 1851 as 'wholly out of harmony with the upper part, being inconveniently narrow, tortuous, and by no means well paved or pitched.'²¹ Writing in about 1890, councillor Moore recalled that the street there had been so confined that 'two vehicles could scarce pass abreast. I was ridden over by a stage coach and four more than sixty years ago there.'²² The danger and inconvenience were a direct consequence of the development of the medieval suburb

¹⁸ F. King, 'Reminiscences of Oxford during the Past Seventy Years', *Proceedings of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society*, 6 (1894), pp. 5–6.

¹⁹ *VCH Oxon.* 4, pp. 444–5; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d. 503, ff. 59r., 116r.; Bodl. G.A. Oxon a. 64 (349).

²⁰ OHC, OCA, R.6.6, ff. 25–6; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d. 503, f. 59r.; Bodl. (E) C17:70 Oxford (1).

²¹ *Report of Evidence...into the State of Sewerage, Drainage and Water Supply of the University and City of Oxford* (1851), p. 59.

²² Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d. 503, f. 3r.



Fig. 5. Courts and yards in St Aldate's from the Ordnance Survey 1:500 plan surveyed in 1876.



Fig. 6. Benjamin Badcock's plan of Folly Bridge in 1827 showing the layout of the old wharf with the proposed new one (today's Head of the River pub) superimposed. Oxford City Archive, 17257/D7. Image courtesy of Oxford City Council.

of Grandpont beside the Norman causeway which was just four metres wide. Rising levels of traffic and increasing public health concerns now began to generate calls for road-widening and the clearance of unhealthy properties in this densely settled area. As trade on the River Thames collapsed with the spread of the railway network, the Oxford and Burcot commissioners obtained statutory powers in 1843 to sell off the Folly Bridge wharves and devote part of the proceeds to widen 'the lower end of St Aldate's or St Toll's where traffic has greatly increased in recent years, and is still increasing, and where it would be a work of great public utility'.²³ The sale took place on 3 July 1844, less than a month after Oxford's first railway station opened to the south-west of Folly Bridge and briefly made St Aldate's the principal approach to the city.²⁴ A toll-house was erected at the north-west corner of Folly Bridge, and receipts from the station's passenger and goods traffic were such that the outstanding debt on

²³ OHC, OCA, P.5.23, p. 323.

²⁴ Bodl. G.A. fol. B 71 (132); *Oxford Chronicle*, 15 June 1844 and 27 Sept. 1850.

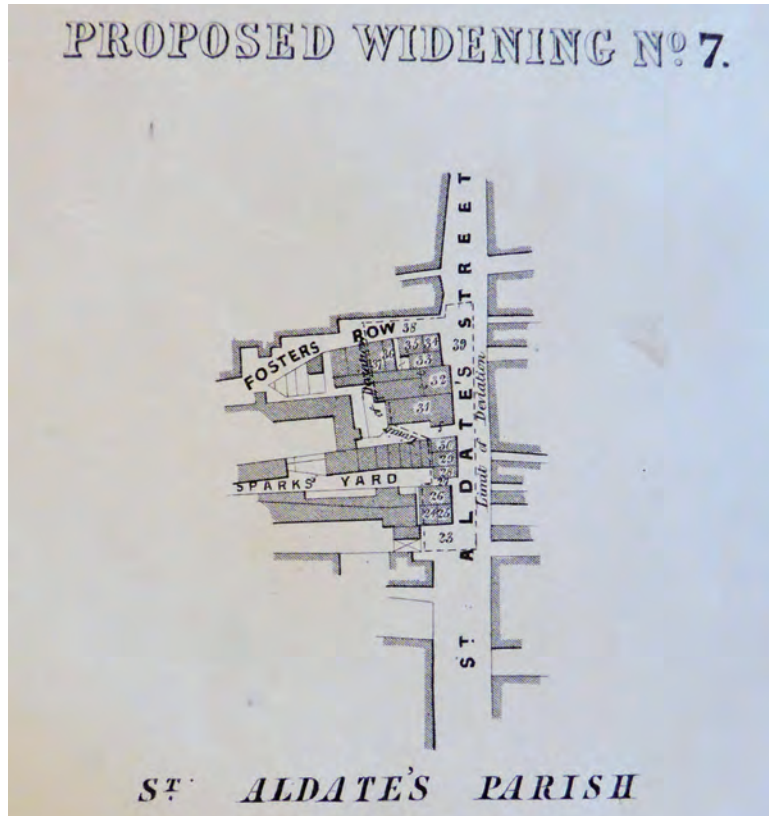


Fig. 7. Macdougall Smith's proposal for widening the west side of St Aldate's south of Speedwell Street in 1854. Bodl. G.A. Oxon. b. 168, map 3 (part). Image courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

the bridge was paid off by September 1850.²⁵ The report of MacDougall Smith's enquiry into the sanitary condition of Oxford in 1851 remarked on 'the great extension of the traffic by means of omnibuses and other vehicles plying between the railway and the heart of the City' and called for the demolition of an unsightly block of houses 'which project so clumsily on the line of way on the west side of the street just below Mr Hitchings's residence.'²⁶ MacDougall Smith included this block to the south of Foster's Row, later known as English Row, in his subsequent plan of suggested improvements in 1854 and the paving commissioners set back these frontages in the late 1850s (Figs. 5 and 7). Pressure to widen St Aldate's diminished for a time after the Great Western Railway moved its passenger station to Botley Road in 1852 and its goods station to Osney Lane in 1872.²⁷ Nevertheless, suburban development south of Folly Bridge from the 1840s added to the volume of local traffic and, when the city's horse tramway was extended down St Aldate's on the way to New Hinksey in 1887, there was room for only a single line in part of the street below Christ Church.²⁸

²⁵ OHC, OCA, O.4.10, p. 20; OCA, P.5.23, pp. 290–308.

²⁶ *Report of Evidence*, p. 59.

²⁷ OHC, OCA, R.6.9, p. 299; OCA, 2/1/C9; *VCH Oxon.* 4, p. 295.

²⁸ Bodl. G.A. Oxon. b. 168, f. 3r., map 7; OS Map 1:2500 Oxon XXXIX.3 (1900); M. Graham, 'The Suburbs of Victorian Oxford', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis (1985), pp. 105–18.

HEALTH CONCERNS

Reports on the cholera epidemics in Oxford in 1832, 1849 and 1854 drew attention to squalid living conditions in the city's poorer suburbs where the death toll was highest. The comparatively small parish of St Aldate's had 11 cases of cholera in 1832, 6 per cent of the city's total, 14 in 1849 (9.7 per cent), and 36 in 1854 (10.5 per cent).²⁹ The 1851 sanitary enquiry drew attention to 'little heaps of ashes, vegetables, straw, and various kinds of household refuse' lying about in English's Yard; numerous families in Water Lane Yard, off Speedwell Street, lived among smith's shops and stables which generated 'rubbish of an offensive character'; the road surface in Thames Street was 'simply a strip of naked earth', and residents had to flounder through mud to their homes without a single street light.³⁰ The paving commissioners lacked both the powers and the will to tackle Oxford's growing public health issues, and these were inherited in 1865 by a local board, another joint city and university body, which was established under the provisions of the Local Government Act of 1858. Thames Conservancy prohibited the discharge of sewage into the river in 1867, a decision which forced the board to institute a main drainage system for the city between 1873 and 1880.³¹ Alfred Winkfield, the board's medical officer of health, appointed in 1872, and his inspector of nuisances, Thomas Hull, ensured that all old properties were connected to the new sewers and to the city water supply, and, in the 1880s, they began to serve repair notices on the owners of very dilapidated houses. Notices relating to houses in Green Dragon Yard, on the east side of St Aldate's south of Christ Church, and in Carter's Yard, were issued in 1883, and those in Green Dragon Yard were to be demolished after closure in 1884 (Fig. 5). Work on clearing insanitary yards and courts continued until Winkfield retired in 1902, but his successor, Arthur Ormerod, warned that more extensive clearance and rebuilding would ultimately be necessary.³²

St Aldate's at the beginning of the twentieth century was a bustling residential and commercial street (Figs. 8 and 9). Two major buildings had recently transformed the upper part of the street, the grandiose General Post Office (of 1880, by E.G. Rivers) on the site of the fourteenth-century Ducklington's Inn, and the town hall (1893–7, by Henry Hare) which occupied the site of its eighteenth-century predecessor and the former Blue Boar inn.³³ Redevelopment at No. 94 St Aldate's and Nos. 1–4 Pembroke Street (1913) replaced a picturesque group of old properties with a tall brick edifice which one critic described as 'a workhouse-like building'.³⁴ Some of the buildings opposite the town hall were now simply business premises, but many properties lining the street below Christ Church were still wholly or partly residential, with the upper floors of shops and pubs occupied by the proprietors' families or let to tenants.³⁵ Behind these frontages, the old courts and yards had probably been deserted by all who could afford to move to the suburbs, but they continued to offer cheap rented accommodation for Oxford's small army of low-paid or under-employed workers. Poor sanitary conditions in many of these houses were now evident not just to public health officials but also to local clergymen and to women volunteering as health visitors with the Oxford health committee of the Sanitary Aid Association from 1905.³⁶

²⁹ H.W. Acland, *Memoir on the Cholera at Oxford in 1854* (1856), pp. 37–8.

³⁰ *Report of Evidence*, pp. 59–60.

³¹ VCH Oxon. 4, p. 239.

³² *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health of the City of Oxford* (1875), p. 9; (1880), p. 10; (1883), p. 11; (1884), p. 12; (1902), p. 7.

³³ J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974), pp. 302–3.

³⁴ Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Archive (hereafter SPAB), Oxford, Oxford Files: Oxford, Improvements at.

³⁵ TNA, RG 13/1384/11, ff. 41–57.

³⁶ *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health of the City of Oxford* (1906), p. 9; L. Peretz, 'Infant Welfare in Inter-War Oxford', in R. Whiting (ed.), *Oxford: Studies in the History of a University Town since 1800* (1993), p. 134.



Fig. 8. Henry Minn photograph showing the east side of St Aldate's in 1910 from the Plough Inn (right) to the three storeyed Green Dragon pub beneath Tom Tower. The police station now occupies the site of the Plough. Bodl. G.A. Oxon a. 64, p. 120 (397). Image courtesy of The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



Fig. 9. The west side of St Aldate's looking towards Carfax, photographed by Henry Taunt in 1907. OHC, POX0106100. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

PUBLIC IMPROVEMENTS

The future of St Aldate's was one of the challenges which faced the Oxford county borough council when it took over the sanitary and highway functions of the local board in 1889. The council appointed a public improvements committee in 1900, and in February 1912 ordered the committee 'to consider without delay the possibility of effecting an improvement in St Aldate's Street, either by the widening of the thoroughfare or by the reconstruction of the road surface.' The city engineer was instructed to prepare a plan for widening the roadway to sixty feet, and the committee preferred this option to the forty-five foot width which he proposed as a more conservative alternative in May. The town clerk reported that Christ Church was in favour, and he was asked to ascertain how many houses and people would be displaced by the scheme; armed with that information, he was to confirm the procedure for displacing occupiers with the local government board. At a subsequent committee meeting in November 1913, he reported that the council would have to prepare a plan for re-housing all those who would be displaced before the board would promote a provisional order to authorise the scheme. All thought of improvement ceased during the war, but, in January 1919, the committee was ordered to prepare an architectural competition for the east side of St Aldate's from a point opposite Rose Place to St Aldate's School (Fig. 5).³⁷ H.V. Lanchester FRIBA MTPI was appointed as assessor and detailed specifications and instructions were prepared for the competing architects. These confirmed that the council intended to widen St Aldate's and reserve plots sixty feet deep along the frontage for new buildings. The competition was for cottages on the land behind, which were to be planned 'with the strictest economy as they are for those in receipt of low wages and it is desired to provide as many houses as the site can reasonably accommodate.' Stone and slate were considered to be too costly and architects were advised that 'rough cast walls and tiled roofs might be most in harmony with the surroundings.' Architects would be free to ignore council byelaws concerning the width of streets and Ministry of Health guidelines advocating only twelve houses to the acre. By early September, the city engineer had sent out details to 156 potential competitors.

Harold Falkner, an architect in Farnham, received details of the competition and alerted the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) to the fact that condition fourteen implied that none of the existing buildings on the site were deemed worthy of preservation. A.R. Powys, the Society's secretary, sought local advice, but E.H. New, for the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, reported that, 'on the east side of the street there is no building of real value though the general effect is picturesque.' The architect, E.P. Warren, was aware that plain exteriors could sometimes mask historic interiors, but thought that 'this side of the street would be no loss.' His undergraduate son, Peter, was more dismissive, writing from the Gridiron Club in October: 'In my opinion none of the houses is worth saving. They are most of them squalid and the rest of a very ordinary description, at best inoffensive. On the other hand the new scheme will open up a very pleasant view of the Ch. Ch. [sic.] façade.' William Weir identified four interesting buildings when he visited the site for SPAB in November, but advised the Society not to oppose the scheme because the only loss would be a 'pleasing quaintness' provided that the new buildings were worthy of the neighbourhood.³⁸ Competition entries were due to be submitted by 20 October 1919, but, in the previous month, the public improvements committee decided to ask the eventual winner to extend his scheme to the rest of the east side of the street and the whole of the west side, presumably below Rose Place. Lanchester produced preliminary sketch plans for this proposal at the October meeting when he announced the result of the competition which had attracted sixty-five entries. He placed first the scheme submitted by Manchester architects, Halliday Peterson and Agate, with two London firms, Massey and Morgan, and Herbert Manchip coming second and

³⁷ OHC, OCA, GG.3.8, pp. 149, 152, 164, 204–9.

³⁸ SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's.

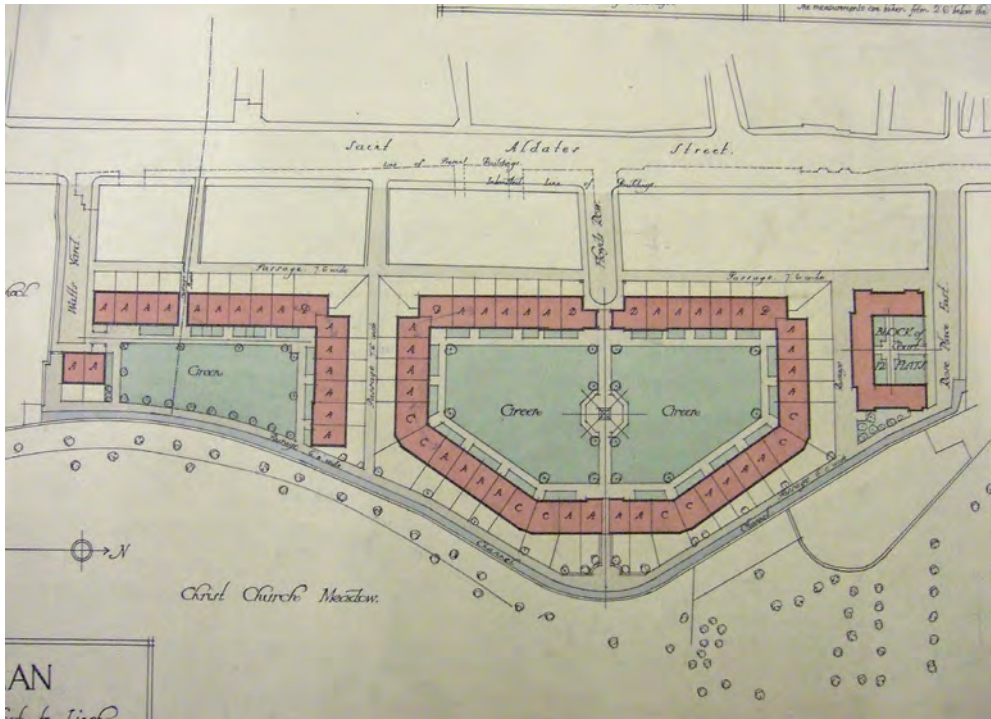


Fig. 10. Unsigned plan for redeveloping land east of St Aldate's, thought to be the winning entry by Manchester architects Halliday Peterson and Agate in the City's 1919 competition. Oxford City Archive, 8504/D11. Image courtesy of Oxford City Council.

third.³⁹ Unsigned plans in the town hall archives showing cottage housing in a series of linked courtyards are thought to be the winning entry which the council approved in December 1919 (Fig. 10).⁴⁰ Halliday Peterson and Agate do not appear to have been asked to extend their scheme to the rest of the street, and, in April 1920, the city estates surveyor estimated that acquiring the properties originally identified would cost £38,000. He envisaged the east side of St Aldate's being set back to the building line which the council had approved in 1919; this would provide about thirty-three building plots twenty feet wide on the street frontage and space for fifty-six cottages in blocks of eight at the back. In view of delays and difficulties raised by the Ministry of Health, the public improvements committee recommended that the council should proceed without government support.⁴¹ No further progress was made, however, and Christ Church was blamed for refusing to sell college land at the northern end of the site when the city council finally abandoned the scheme in June 1923.⁴²

The treasurer of Christ Church, G.J. Hutchinson, continued to favour a street improvement but, in February 1922, he informed the public improvements committee that the governing body would only consider making the necessary strip of land available if the city undertook to widen St Aldate's immediately between the college and Floyd's Row. The city estates surveyor was instructed to negotiate with the relevant owners and, in May, he estimated that the total purchase price would be £19,850; Christ Church would be left with a 150 foot frontage and

³⁹ OHC, OCA, GG.3.8, pp. 214–22.

⁴⁰ OCA, Town Hall OCA3/1/Y5/1/11.

⁴¹ Ibid. City Engineer's Strongroom 6299; OHC, OCA, GG.3.8, pp. 228, 234–41.

⁴² *Oxford Chronicle*, 8 June 1923.

the council would retain approximately one acre of land which could generate income.⁴³ The properties involved included three of the four identified by William Weir in 1919 as being the most interesting buildings on the east side of the street, namely two-storey stone outbuildings belonging to Christ Church, the Green Dragon inn next door which had been rebuilt in 1796, and the former Wheatsheaf and Anchor pub at No. 15A where a Georgian front masked an older structure (Figs. 5 and 8).⁴⁴ In November 1922, purchase negotiations were still ongoing, and, although the Green Dragon was demolished in May 1924, site clearance was not completed until June 1925.⁴⁵ When members of the city's town planning sub-committee met the treasurer of Christ Church near the site of the Green Dragon in July 1924, he referred to a suggestion that the college should use the land to form a new approach to the Broad Walk. Initially, this proposal may just have been viewed as an enhancement but, despite a donation of £500 from the King of Siam, Christ Church was at the time struggling to raise funds for thirty extra rooms as a practical war memorial. Dean White now proposed to use the money for a memorial garden and, although contributors to the fund gave the idea a mixed reception, the governing body approved the scheme.⁴⁶ Harold S. Rogers, a local architect and city councillor, prepared a plan for the garden by December 1925 which envisaged uncovering Trill Mill Stream as 'a new and charming feature' (Fig. 11).⁴⁷ Ultimately, however, Christ Church employed John Coleridge to form the Memorial Garden along similar lines in 1926–7, and his design included a discreet rubble stone garage with a stone slate roof and a handsome screen to St Aldate's.⁴⁸ Critics were quick to praise the new views of Christ Church and R.T. Gunther, the historian of science and a fellow of Magdalen College, wrote to *The Times* celebrating the fact that demolition opposite had let some light into the 'little dark shop' at No. 84 St Aldate's made famous by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.⁴⁹

The city was left to consider how best to develop the surplus land between the Memorial Garden and Floyd's Row. In February 1924, the public improvements committee received a solicitor's enquiry on behalf of a client wishing to build business premises and flats on the site and had to admit that it was not in a position to reply. The committee agreed in March that the land should be let on seventy-five year building leases and it became a temporary public car park while the property and estates committee advertised for bids. The prominence of the site ensured that the proposed development attracted national attention and *The Builder* in October 1925 found it astonishing that the city would allow 'somewhat second-rate shops' to be built there and 'condemn St Aldate's to be a mean street until A.D. 2000'.⁵⁰ As a constructive contribution to the debate about developing the site, the Oxford architect, Gilbert T. Gardner, published a scheme in April 1926 which envisaged leaving a twenty foot strip of land undeveloped beside the Christ Church boundary while building a three-storey block of six shops with flats above on the remainder (Fig. 12).⁵¹ In June 1927, *The Architect and Building News* proposed a scheme by A. Trystan Edwards and Thomas Rayson which would be 'in consonance and sympathy with the venerable buildings in its immediate vicinity.' This would provide an urban street façade of shops with flats or undergraduate hostels above, and ultimately perhaps extend as far as Folly Bridge.⁵² The city engineer, J.F. Richardson, promoted the idea of a long curving colonnade of shops in the spring of 1928, and, amidst this barrage

⁴³ OHC, OCA, GG.3.8, pp. 262–6, 277.

⁴⁴ SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's.

⁴⁵ OHC, OCA, GG.3.8, pp. 291–2, 344; GG.3.9, pp. 9–10; *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 7 May 1924.

⁴⁶ OHC, OCA, FF.1.2, p. 337; J. Curthoys, *The Cardinal's College: Christ Church, Chapter and Verse* (2012), pp. 301–2; Christ Church Archives, BR3/1/1.

⁴⁷ *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 2 Dec. 1925.

⁴⁸ J. Curthoys, *The Cardinal's College* (2012), p. 302; Christ Church Archives, Maps Ch Ch 45; Oxford Preservation Trust, *Second Annual Report* (1927/8), p. 15.

⁴⁹ Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d. 503, f. 129r.

⁵⁰ *The Builder*, 16 Oct. 1925, p. 551.

⁵¹ *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 7 April 1926.

⁵² *The Architect and Building News*, 10 June 1927, pp. 980–2.

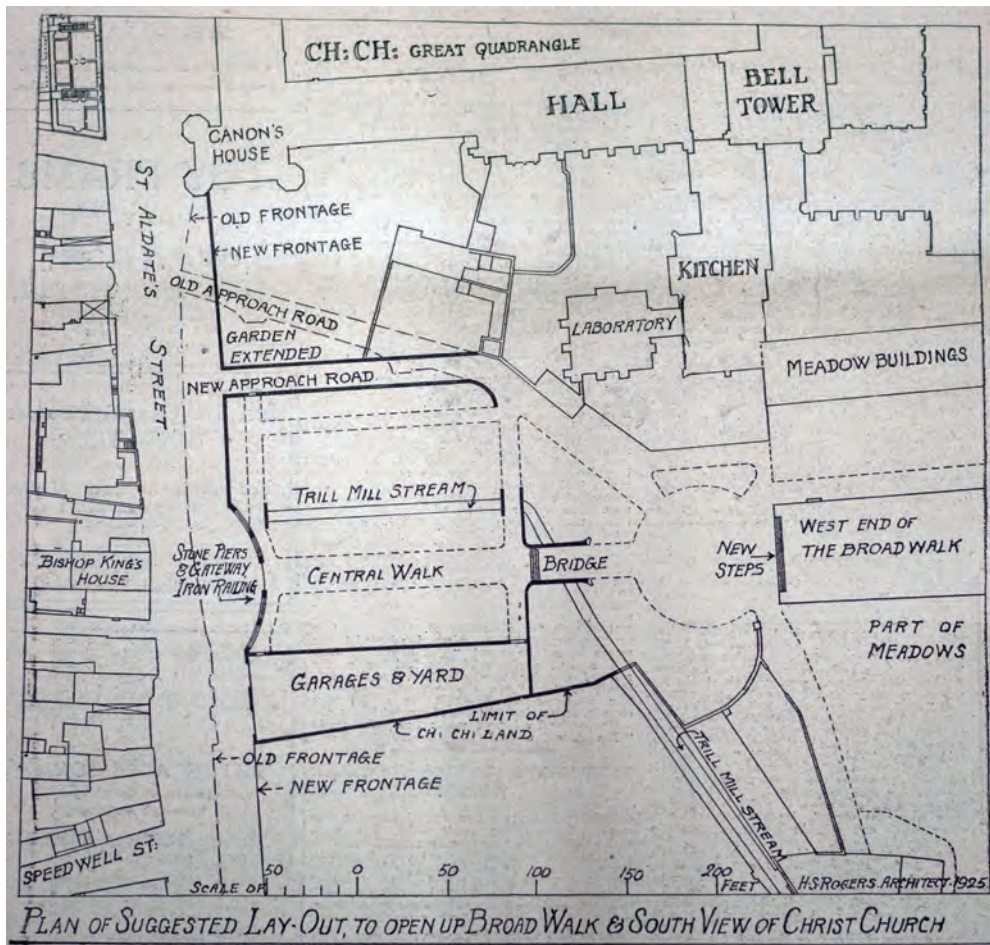


Fig. 11. Initial plan for Christ Church Memorial Garden by the Oxford architect, Harold S. Rogers, in 1925. The plan also shows the widening of St Aldate's at this point. OHC. POX0042571. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

of suggestions, the city's town planning committee sought the advice of the recently-formed Oxford Preservation Trust concerning the architectural treatment of the site. The Trust's adviser, A.S.G. Butler, recommended extending the Memorial Garden screen on to the city's land and leaving half the site clear to preserve views of Christ Church; a handsome four-storey building would occupy the rest, designed in a 'L-shape with most of the structure towards the rear of the site.'⁵³ The city agreed to sell the land to the university in 1929 after rejecting a bid to erect an ice rink, garage and public hall on this highly sensitive site.⁵⁴ The university considered selling the land to Oxford Preservation Trust in 1931, but ultimately followed the advice of the Trust's adviser by leaving the front undeveloped when Sir Hubert Worthington's new building for St Catherine's Society was erected in 1936.⁵⁵

⁵³ Oxford Preservation Trust, *Second Annual Report* (1927/8), pp. 15–17.

⁵⁴ OHC, OCA, GG.1.8, pp. 121–3, 196.

⁵⁵ Oxford Preservation Trust, *Trustees Minute Book 1927–35*, p. 175; G. Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide* (1998), p. 291; SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's.

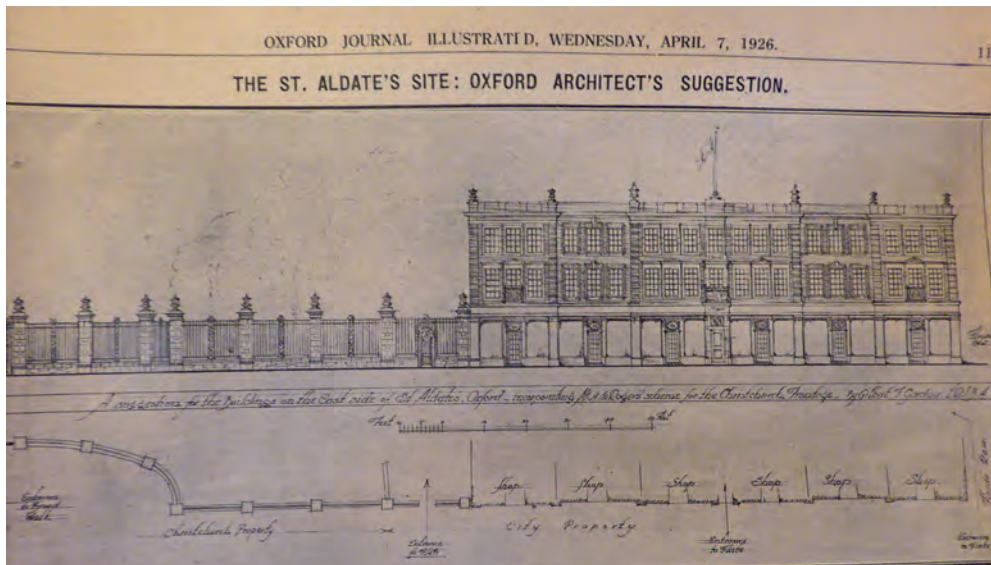


Fig. 12. Scheme suggested by the Oxford architect Gilbert T. Gardner in 1926 for developing the City Council's land between Christ Church Memorial Garden and Floyd's Row. OHC, POX0043027. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

SLUM CLEARANCE

The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919 was concerned with building 'Homes for Heroes' rather than demolishing insanitary houses, but Oxford's medical officer of health, Arthur Ormerod, had long advocated an extensive slum clearance programme. It is tempting to speculate that he encouraged the rectors of St Ebbe's and St Aldate's and eight other ratepayers to send a petition on 2 October 1919, complaining about 'the unhealthiness of the area' and urging him to make official representations about it.⁵⁶ Ormerod duly forwarded the letter to Alderman Gray, the chairman of the housing and town planning committee, and, within a fortnight, he provided the committee with a shortlist of five areas that the council might declare unhealthy under the Housing and Town Planning Act 1890. Two of these areas, English Row and the west side of St Aldate's, contained eighty-three houses and a population of around 350 people,⁵⁷ and the committee decided to merge them while slightly reducing their size. The revised scheme covered Nos. 69–74 St Aldate's, English Row itself and properties in several nearby yards south of Speedwell Street and was to displace 242 people from sixty-three houses (Fig. 5). The city engineer, Joseph Wilkes, sought to add Wigmore's Dairy premises at Nos. 77 and 78 St Aldate's and properties on the south side of Speedwell Street, partly to make the scheme 'more efficient' but also as the first step towards a proposed new road between south Oxford and the railway stations which would 'relieve the traffic in the centre of the town.'

The radical proposal attracted objections from eighteen of the thirty-one affected property owners and some of these objectors attended or were represented at the Ministry of Health's official inquiry held in the town hall in June 1923. A few protested that the demolition of cottage property would threaten their livelihoods, but the commonest complaint was that owners would only receive the site value, not the market value, for property that had been

⁵⁶ OHC, OXFO 309.1 SALD.

⁵⁷ OHC, OCA, FE.1.1, pp. 145, 150, 175–9.

deemed insanitary. The solicitor acting for Mr Pumphrey, owner of Nos. 65–9 St Aldate's, argued that the medical officer had been under pressure to condemn satisfactory houses in order to avoid paying proper compensation. Henry Osborn King, the owner of No. 1 Speedwell Terrace, later wrote to Captain Bourne, the MP for Oxford City, denouncing a scandalous attack on private property which meant that a perfectly good house for which he had been offered £350 a year ago was now worth only £50. Ormerod admitted that some properties had only been condemned because of 'the general congestion' and claimed to have 'considered dealing with individual houses, but found it was going to be too complicated and unsatisfactory.' After visiting the site, the ministry's inspector found no reason to disagree with Ormerod, noting that: 'In the main the houses are very old, badly arranged with bad living and sleeping accommodation situated in narrow courts and alleys.' He approved the slum clearance scheme, but recommended that the council should not be allowed to use it to acquire 'first class property' for Wilkes's proposed road. The Ministry of Health accepted his report and the City of Oxford (English Row Improvement Scheme) Order was approved in February 1924.⁵⁸

The city council now began the lengthy process of acquiring properties and re-housing the occupants. Five years earlier, the public improvements committee's architectural competition for the other side of St. Aldate's had envisaged providing cottages for people on low incomes. In December 1924, the housing and town planning committee recognised the rising economic value of city centre property by recommending that residents displaced by the English Row scheme should be re-housed elsewhere and that the cleared site should be used for commercial purposes.⁵⁹ The Ministry of Health approved the council's plans for forty-eight houses on a site south of Weirs Lane off Abingdon Road in June 1926 and the first properties were ready for occupation the following March.⁶⁰ As early as February 1925, representatives for W.R. Morris were expressing an interest in the English Row site and plans for new premises for Morris Garages Ltd., attracted controversy in June 1930. W. Randolph wrote to *The Observer*, criticising the clearances in St Aldate's as 'gratuitously sweeping and iconoclastic' and suggesting that the garage should be less dangerously and less conspicuously sited behind reconditioned façades. SPAB forwarded to him an assurance by Oxford Preservation Trust that 'the street elevation of the Garages will be inoffensive', but Randolph was not convinced. In January 1933, he wrote to the Society, deploring the destruction of an interesting group of old houses for 'a heavy Classical garage façade incongruously combined with expanses of plate-glass windows'; he feared that no-one inside or outside Oxford was prepared to stand up to Sir William Morris (Fig. 13).⁶¹

The Housing Act of 1930 obliged local councils to clear all remaining slum housing and provided further subsidies to re-house their inhabitants. In Oxford, the Act led to the declaration of a hundred clearance areas, covering 806 houses and 2,852 people, by the end of 1939. During the 1930s, the city council built 1,049 council houses, primarily for re-housing purposes, in new estates at Barton, Cutteslowe, New Marston, Rose Hill and Wolvercote. Nine clearance areas were declared in St Aldate's during these years, covering most of the remaining courts and yards behind the street frontage.⁶² A.L. Rowse was an undergraduate in Oxford in 1923, and described St Aldate's as 'the wretchedest poor quarter that there is in Oxford; the main street is bad enough but the courts and alleys are worse, dismal shanties with roofs all askew and walls cracking, no drainage, no gardens, all the washing hung out on lines across the alleys.'⁶³ A photograph of Carter's Yard in the mid 1930s confirms the existence of

⁵⁸ TNA, HLG 47/489.

⁵⁹ Ibid. HLG 47/489; OHC, OCA, EE.3.8, p. 93.

⁶⁰ TNA, HLG 47/490; OHC, OCA, EE.3.8, pp. 273–4, 346.

⁶¹ OHC, OCA, EE.3.8, p. 97; SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's; *The Observer*, 15 June 1930.

⁶² *Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health for the City of Oxford (1931–1939/40)*.

⁶³ A.L. Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford* (1964), pp. 62–3.



Fig. 13. Publicity photograph by Oxford Photocrafts showing the new Morris Garages building in St Aldate's in 1932. OHC, POX0124626. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

real squalor (Figs. 5 and 14), but SPAB had campaigned against wholesale slum clearance in several cities and commissioned a survey of Oxford's threatened domestic architecture in 1931 to serve as a record and encourage the retention and refurbishment of significant buildings. Michael Bunney, a young architect and joint author of the survey, inspected all the properties in the city centre built before the early nineteenth century, including fifty-three surviving houses in St Aldate's and its courts and yards. He admitted that the few remaining cottages in Carter's Yard were very dilapidated, but described Shepperd's Row as 'a very pleasant row of late 17th century cottages facing south'; Wyatt's Yard was 'a row of very pleasing late 17th century cottages of coursed rubble, two storeys and an attic in height (Figs. 5 and 15).' In 1934, Maresco Pearce, the survey's other author, met the city's medical officer of health, G.C. Williams, to argue the case for keeping old buildings in St Aldate's and St Thomas's. Williams was sympathetic and charming, and asked for a list of good buildings in these threatened areas; having received a copy of the draft survey, he acknowledged merely that it was interesting. Demolition continued apace and, by 1939, all the courts and yards on the east side of St Aldate's had been cleared except the early nineteenth-century King's Row north-east of Folly Bridge. On the west side, the picturesque Littlemore Court, where, according to local legend, Sir John Tenniel had stayed while illustrating *Alice in Wonderland*, had also been demolished (Fig. 5).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ OHC, OXFO 720, M.J.H. Bunney and C.M. Pearce, 'Oxford Survey', unpublished report (1935), pp. 92–106; SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's; G. Tyack, *Oxford Architectural Guide* (1998), p. 297; above, pp. 85–106.



Fig. 14. Carter's Yard photographed in about 1935 as evidence for a Clearance Order inquiry. OHC, POX0063879. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

A BUSY MAIN ROAD

The need to widen St Aldate's was never disputed during the 1920s, but the extent of the widening was hotly debated. The building line approved by the city council in 1919 envisaged a road forty feet wide with pavements ten feet wide on both sides; this width would be achieved by setting back the east side of the street through major improvement schemes or over a period of time as properties were rebuilt.⁶⁵ In 1922, the place of St Aldate's in an increasingly busy national road network was confirmed when it became part of the Ministry of Transport's A34 route between Oxford and Winchester.⁶⁶ There were calls to re-consider the width of the street, and the housing and town planning committee recommended the city

⁶⁵ OHC, OCA, GG.3.8, p. 206; City Engineer's Strongroom, 6299.

⁶⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A34_road#History_and_renumbering, accessed 2018.



Fig. 15. Wyatt's Yard, photographed by Michael Bunney in about 1931. HE, BUN01/01/150. By permission of Historic England Archive.

council to widen the roadway to sixty feet in February 1925. This again envisaged widening on the east side only, but, in the same month, the committee also suggested using the impending English Row clearance to prescribe a ten foot widening on the west side. The council opted for a road fifty feet wide in 1925, despite the city engineer's call to add an extra twenty feet, but it continued to come under pressure from those who were for and against widening the road. In 1924, the city engineer had argued for a wider road with no buildings on the east side, anticipating that 'the effect of this would be to give a striking approach to Oxford from the south.'⁶⁷ *The Architect and Building News* in June 1927 saw St Aldate's as a potential rival for Princes Street in Edinburgh, with the road widened, every building on the east side cleared away and 'a splendid vision of park and meadow and great trees by the river.'⁶⁸ In July 1928, the city council again debated the building line on the east side of the street, preferring a lesser curve which would provide for a maximum width of eighty feet to a deeper curve or a straight line offering a road sixty feet wide. The matter was still under review in July 1929 when representatives from Oxford Preservation Trust advised the highways committee that they supported a curved frontage rather than a straight line and that the Trust would, if necessary, provide financial support to achieve that end.⁶⁹ The city council finally approved the lesser curve for the east side of St Aldate's in May 1930 and, in June, it opted to set the frontage on the west side back twelve feet. Both SPAB and Oxford Preservation Trust had expressed fears that widening the west side of St Aldate's would threaten the historic Bishop King's Palace

⁶⁷ OHC, OCA, EE.3.3, pp. 36-7, 108, 110; SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's.

⁶⁸ *The Architect and Building News*, 10 June 1927, p. 980-2.

⁶⁹ Oxford Preservation Trust, *Third Annual Report* (1928/9), p. 8; OHC, OCA, EE.2.4, p. 329; V.2.6, p. 280.

and Littlemore Hall, but they were reassured that the new building line would only apply to properties that were being pulled down and rebuilt.⁷⁰

The gargantuan Morris Garages premises had destroyed the domestic character of St Aldate's below Speedwell Street and cleared sites opposite soon attracted other large-scale non-residential developments. A new stone-fronted city police station designed by the city estates surveyor, H.F. Hurcombe, was built in 1938 on the corner of Floyd's Row where other civic buildings, a labour exchange (1936, Ministry of Works/P.M. Stratton) and a coroner's court and mortuary (1939) were also erected.⁷¹ Towards Folly Bridge, a site with an extensive frontage to St Aldate's attracted rival proposals in 1937, one by Odeon Cinemas and Hall's Oxford Brewery Ltd., for a cinema and a first-class hotel and the other by the Post Office for a telephone exchange. Fifteen St Aldate's traders wrote to *The Oxford Times*, stating that the removal of so many residents from the area was already hitting their business and arguing that the telephone exchange would have 'a gloomy and deadening effect on the southern approach to Oxford'. Oxford city council rejected the proposal, but Odeon Cinemas subsequently pulled out of the alternative scheme and the Post Office used its compulsory purchase powers to acquire a site which included St Aldate's school in 1939. No progress was made before the outbreak of war but the scheme presaged what the local traders had foreseen as 'a long stretch of blank buildings from Folly Bridge to the Town Hall'.⁷²

The upper part of St Aldate's was less drastically altered between the wars but the Carfax improvement and new office buildings changed its character as well as its appearance. The north-west and north-east corners of Carfax had been set back and rebuilt between 1896 and 1901, but the southern corners became a serious barrier to the rising tide of motor traffic, including buses, in the 1920s. Marygold House, a restrained stone-fronted block for the Glyn, Mills & Company bank, occupied the south-west corner in 1930–1 and the city council consulted the architects Ashley and Newman to ensure that the new council office building on the opposite corner (1931–2) would form a symmetrical pair.⁷³ Casualties of these developments included wine cellars from the fourteenth-century Swindlestock Tavern and Boffin's half-timbered café (1871) on the south-west corner and Carfax House, a three-storey late eighteenth-century brick building occupied by Wyatt's the drapers, on the opposite corner. Old properties opposite the town hall were demolished in 1931 for a branch of Lloyd's Bank. The bank was designed by Gilbert T. Gardner in his characteristic neo-Georgian style and stone-fronted as the city council now preferred for city centre buildings. Gardner also designed Therm House at Nos. 117–119 St Aldate's (1939), showrooms and office premises for the Oxford and District Gas Company, as modern commercial buildings took over this part of the street (Fig. 16).⁷⁴

POST-WAR ST ALDATE'S

Since 1945, the physical fabric of St Aldate's above Christ Church has experienced little change. The late Victorian town hall had been judged inadequate and outmoded in the 1930s, and Thomas Sharp, the city's planning consultant, noted in 1948 that 'Corporation Departments... are now scattered in many parts of the city, in makeshift quarters. The present building is too cramped to be capable of adaptation, and it is very necessary that a new one be built at an early date.' Sharp's solution was to build a new town hall at the west end of Queen Street, and to

⁷⁰ OHC, OCA, V.2.8, pp. 138, 256; Oxford Preservation Trust, *Fifth Annual Report* (1930/1), pp. 15–16; OHC, OCA, EE.3.8, p. 131; SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's.

⁷¹ *The Oxford Times*, 12 Feb. 1937, 18 Nov. 1938; OHC, City Engineer's Plan, 1290/9895.

⁷² *The Oxford Times*, 5 Nov. 1937, 12 Nov. 1937, 11 Feb. 1938, 11 March 1938, 22 June 1939.

⁷³ Sherwood and Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974), p. 306; OHC, OCA, V.2.8, p. 114.

⁷⁴ SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. b. 250, f. 21r.; OHC, OCA, City Engineer's Deposited Building Plan 5208 (New Series); *Ibid.* 8662 (New Series).



Fig. 16. Architect's drawing by Gilbert T. Gardner in 1937, showing Therm House, his proposed showroom and offices for Oxford and District Gas Company in St Aldate's. OHC, POX0063678. Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council.

demolish most of the frontage of the old one, retaining just the central portion as an entrance to the main hall upstairs (Fig. 17).⁷⁵ His vision was never realised and, with changing attitudes to Victorian architecture, the town hall was eventually listed and became a much-appreciated feature of the street. In complete contrast to the upper part of St Aldate's, the area below Christ Church experienced a period of turmoil in the post-war years. It was blighted by a succession of inner relief road schemes which had distant origins in the city engineer's plan for a new road from St Aldate's to the railway station in 1923. Part of that scheme, the Oxpens bypass, from Osney Lane to New Street, St Ebbe's was opened in 1931 and the city engineer's strategic highways plan in 1935 proposed continuing that road through St Ebbe's to Thames Street; a detailed route featured in the St Ebbe's redevelopment plan sent to the Ministry of Housing in 1939. The city engineer was also considering a road from St Aldate's through Christ Church

⁷⁵ T. Sharp, *Oxford Replanned* (1948), pp. 139–43; OCA, Town Hall OCA3/1/Y8/76/2.

Meadow to Iffley Road in 1935 and the dean of Christ Church was aware of the threat two years later.⁷⁶ In 1941, the local architect Lawrence Dale proposed Christ Church Mall, a relief road from Iffley Road which would keep to the southern edge of Christ Church Meadow and emerge at a roundabout in St Aldate's opposite Thames Street; from there, a new road through St Ebbe's would link up with Oxpens Road.⁷⁷ Thomas Sharp, the city's planning consultant, preferred a northerly route across the meadow for his Merton Mall in 1946 (Fig. 17). This road was to squeeze between the recently built St Catherine's Society building and Christ Church Memorial Garden to a major new roundabout in St Aldate's called Christ Church Square; from this point, a widened Speedwell Street would lead to Oxpens Road and the railway stations.⁷⁸ In the ensuing controversy over Oxford's inner relief roads, both routes found official favour at different times before the idea of a road across Christ Church Meadow was finally abandoned in 1965.⁷⁹ That decision saved the east side of St Aldate's from further damage and much through traffic was diverted away from the road following the building of Donnington Bridge in 1962 and completion of the Oxford ring road in 1965.⁸⁰ The continuing need to relieve traffic congestion in central Oxford did, however, lead to major change on the west side of St Aldate's. Near Folly Bridge, Thames Street was transformed in 1967 from a mid nineteenth-century *cul-de-sac* into a major road through St Ebbe's to Oxpens Road. Speedwell Street was also widened and realigned in the late 1960s to form part of the new road system around the cleared St Ebbe's district.⁸¹

Most of St Aldate's older domestic buildings had been lost by 1939 when the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments England inventory recorded just seven properties built before 1714. The post-war listing process identified twenty properties of architectural or historic interest in the street by 1954.⁸² Growing official recognition counted for little against the post-war background of resumed slum clearance and road widening, and new planning proposals. Thomas Sharp's Christ Church Square, for example, would have retained Bishop King's Palace, now known as the Old Palace, but condemned properties to the south, including Littlemore Hall, which the Royal Commission had included in its inventory (Fig. 17).⁸³ Nos. 31–32 St Aldate's were also included in the inventory and the adjoining block, Nos. 33–34, was listed in 1954, but these houses had been scheduled for demolition since the late 1920s in order to complete the widening of the east side of the street. The archaeologist David Sturdy investigated them in 1961 and confirmed that they were late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century properties, 'simple well-built houses for workmen, which survive much altered,' but they were demolished in 1967.⁸⁴ Six houses on the supplementary list, Nos. 76–81 St Aldate's, were pulled down when Speedwell Street was widened.⁸⁵ Plans for a new magistrates' court in Speedwell Street in 1967 led to the city council serving compulsory purchase orders on the owners of four houses in Union Place, off Clark's Row, simply to create a more spacious setting around the building. Michael Bunney had described Union Place in the early 1930s as a 'row of very good uniform mid-eighteenth century three storeyed cottages'

⁷⁶ OCA, Town Hall, City Engineer's Strongroom, 6404, 18827, 18883; Oxford Preservation Trust, Trustees Minute Book 1935–40, p. 114.

⁷⁷ Carfax [pseud.], *Christ Church Mall, a Diversion* (1941), pp. 5, 8.

⁷⁸ Sharp, *Oxford Replanned*, pp. 110–11, 115.

⁷⁹ P.G. Beresford, 'St Ebbe's 1955–1985', unpublished report (c.1987).

⁸⁰ VCH Oxon. 4, pp. 286, 289.

⁸¹ Oxford City Council, *Council Reports* (1967/8), p. 525.

⁸² RCHME, *An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the City of Oxford* (1939), pp. 174–5; Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG), *List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest: City of Oxford* (1954), p. 30; MHLG, *Supplementary List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest: 1485/11/A* (1954?), p. 4.

⁸³ Sharp, *Oxford Replanned*, illus facing p. 152; RCHME, *Inventory*, pp. 174–5.

⁸⁴ RCHME, *Inventory*, pp. 174–5; MHLG, *List*, p. 30; D. Sturdy, 'Houses of the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, 26/27 (1961/2), pp. 323–6; *Oxford Mail*, 2 June 1967.

⁸⁵ MHLG, *Supplementary List*, p. 4; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d.503, f. 127.



Fig. 17. Part of Thomas Sharp's proposed central development plan in 1946, showing Christ Church Square in St Aldate's. Oxford City Archive, 10695. Image courtesy of Oxford City Council.

(Figs. 5 and 18),⁸⁶ and one owner, Peter Cousins, objected to the order on the grounds that the houses formed an architectural group with nearby listed eighteenth-century Clark's House. At the subsequent inquiry, the ministry inspector supported the city council, noting that, 'if the houses were left, the backs of them would face the entrance to the court and washing might be left hanging outside.'⁸⁷

The city council adopted a 'balanced transport policy' in 1973, effectively ending the long debate about urban motorways in Oxford. In the same decade, the rapid spread of conservation areas across the city marked a growing appreciation of the value of Oxford's older houses as well as its iconic university and college buildings. This change of heart helped to save Salter's Yard at Folly Bridge which was successfully converted into a pub, the Head of the River, in 1977 and the group of nineteenth-century houses on Folly Bridge island.⁸⁸ It came too late, however, for Isis Street where the former city waterworks, latterly a council depot, and three storey terraced houses (c.1830) were cleared in 1970–1 to make way for a 200-bed

⁸⁶ Bunney and Pearce, 'Oxford Survey' (1935), p. 106.

⁸⁷ *Oxford Mail*, 3 Jan. 1968.

⁸⁸ Oxford City Council, *European Architectural Heritage Year: the Improvement of the Folly Bridge Area* (1975), single folded sheet; *Oxford Mail*, 27–28 July 1977.



Fig. 18. Union Place off Clark's Row, photographed by Michael Bunney in about 1931. HE, BUN01/01/152. By permission of Historic England Archive.

hotel.⁸⁹ This scheme for the land south of Thames Street came to nothing after the foundations had been completed, and the site was eventually redeveloped in 1983–4 with terraced houses and warehouse-style apartments, retaining the 1844 toll-house as a shop.⁹⁰ Other cleared sites in St Aldate's were gradually filled, although large office buildings such as Speedwell House (1972–4, Olins John Associates) and Saxon Beck (1990, Spiromega Partnership) bore no resemblance to the narrow frontages that characterised the old street.⁹¹ After the Morris Garages building closed in 1975, the main part of the frontage was retained when the site was redeveloped as the Crown Court with a plain ashlar stone façade to the south.⁹² On the other side of St Aldate's, a gap left for the southerly Christ Church Meadow Road was eventually occupied by council flats at South Bridge Row and Trill Mill Court (1989). These were criticised for a dreary brick street elevation which the city council preferred to painted plaster because it would be cheaper to maintain.⁹³ Local planning controversy extended also to the treatment of listed buildings by colleges. In 1985, after a lengthy planning battle, Christ Church was permitted to replace No. 89 St Aldate's, an eighteenth-century house, with a building of similar appearance while converting an important surviving group of houses into

⁸⁹ Oxford City Council, Council Book 1970/71, pp. 35, 181, 276–80.

⁹⁰ D. Bowie, *The Folly Bridge Hotel Controversy 1972–8* (1978), pp. 1–12; *Oxford Mail*, 18 Oct. 1979; Oxford City Council Planning Applications, 82/00843/NFH; Oxford City Council, *The Former Toll-House, Folly Bridge* (1982), single folded leaf.

⁹¹ Oxford City Council Planning Application, 70/22787/A_H, 71/22971/AH_H, 88/00409/NFH.

⁹² Ibid. 82/00148/CFH; *The Oxford Times*, 31 Oct. 1975.

⁹³ *Oxford Mail*, 27 Oct. 1978, 15 Dec. 1978, 22 Dec. 1978; Oxford City Council Planning Application, 76/00545/DH_H.

student accommodation.⁹⁴ Nine years later, Hertford College secured permission to demolish the listed Nos. 41–43 St Aldate's, three-storey brick houses built in about 1830, provided that the new student block, Warnock House, was modelled on them.⁹⁵

CONCLUSION

When asked for his opinion about St Aldate's houses that were threatened with demolition in 1919, E.P. Warren remarked: 'It's not what you lose but what we get that counts.'⁹⁶ What we have got in the street today are several of Oxford's most iconic buildings and some very memorable views – Tom Tower from Pembroke Square, the town hall and Tom Tower from Cornmarket, and Christ Church Dining Hall and Wolsey Tower from the Memorial Garden. Important historic houses such as the Old Palace and Littlemore Hall have been preserved and St Aldate's was spared from becoming a key intersection on the city's inner ring road. At the same time, it is difficult not to conclude that twentieth-century 'improvements' tore the heart out of this ancient street, exiling most residents and businesses from a key part of central Oxford. Whereas earlier improvers had been content to widen the road and set back frontages, large areas were now cleared without a coherent design strategy that might have made the street 'worthy of one of the great approaches to the city.'⁹⁷ The delightful Christ Church Memorial Garden emerged out of the rubble as a fortuitous consequence, but today's St Aldate's below Speedwell Street reflects the policy vacuum all too well. We have lost the dramatic spectacle of Tom Tower looming above the rooftops of old St Aldate's (Fig. 8) without gaining what visionaries hoped would be a road to rival Princes Street in Edinburgh. The supreme irony is that today's over-widened street leads on to Folly Bridge where the carriageway width was determined in the 1820s.

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⁹⁴ *Oxford Mail*, 25 Feb. 1982, 9 March 1984, 14 June 1985; Oxford City Council Planning Application, 81/00595/L, 81/00596/NFH, 82/00942/L, 82/00943/NFH, 84/01084/L, 84/01083/NFH.

⁹⁵ *Hertford College Magazine*, 82 (1995–7), p. 29; http://public.oxford.gov.uk/online-applications/files/14E362F922BB8D38007A23D6099AAC07/pdf/94_00219_NFH--23400.pdf ; <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/60440?docPos=2>; http://public.oxford.gov.uk/online-applications/files/5A5A0968A4A607412F3AA6A0BDEC27A8/pdf/94_00218_LH--23399.pdf, accessed Dec. 2018.

⁹⁶ SPAB, Oxford Files: St Aldate's.

⁹⁷ Oxford Preservation Trust, *Fifth Annual Report* (1930/1), p. 16.