

# OXFORD HISTORIC URBAN CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

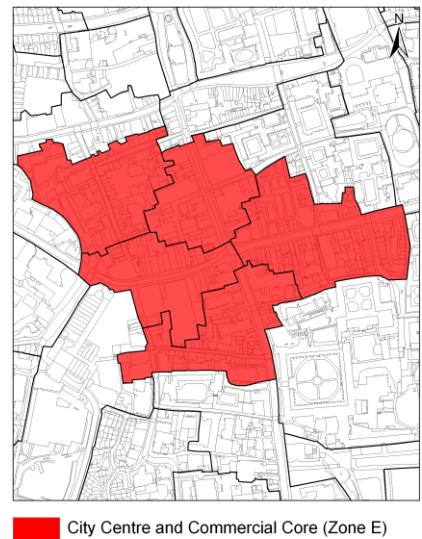
## HISTORIC URBAN CHARACTER AREA 15: CITY CENTRE AND COMMERCIAL CORE- PEMBROKE STREET AND ST ALDATES

### The HUCA is located within broad character Zone E: City centre and commercial core.

The broad character zone consists of the central historic core around Carfax crossroads linking main axial north-south and south-west Late Saxon streets. The zone forms a coherent central area in the city where the roads, lanes and tenements broadly reflect a history of medieval to modern commercial activity.

#### Summary characteristics

- Dominant period: 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Designations: Three Grade II\*, twenty-four Grade II listings. Central Conservation Area.
- Archaeological Potential: Potential for complex urban archaeology relating to Saxon, medieval and post-medieval settlement and commercial activity. Contains part of a distinct axis of early churches which may represent a settlement axis pre-dating the foundation of the Late Saxon burh. The area is notable for the survival of 17<sup>th</sup> century town houses along Pembroke Street. Previous archaeological investigation in this area have been limited to small scale interventions.
- Character: Modern mixed offices and shop units, Post-medieval town houses, medieval churches, large 19<sup>th</sup> century Town Hall
- Spaces: The area has been densely developed, there is little tree and vegetation cover aside from isolated small garden plots.
- Road morphology: St Aldates is straight historic axial road to the river crossing which may be of prehistoric origin. St Ebbes and Pembroke streets of the Late Saxon Burh. Pembroke Street is noticeable for following the axis of early churches rather than the more rectilinear grid of the central burh.
- Plot morphology: Mixture of large regular and large irregular plots for commercial and civic buildings, with good survival of the medieval tenement pattern.
- The natural topography of the area is Summertown-Radley Terrace rising



© Crown Copyright and database right 2011. Ordnance Survey 100019348.

#### HUCA 15 OAP Characterisation

Townhouses	20th century Colleges
Mixed townhouses/shops	Indoor market
Narrow plots	Modern shopping centre
Victorian Townhouses	Mixed Shops/Offices
Mixed Housing & Shops	Offices post 1945
Private housing 1945-1980	Banks pre 1945
Church pre 1086	Inns pre 1800
Church pre 1800	Leisure
Church post 1800	Medieval long distance route
non conformist chapel	Medieval medium distance route
Schools & Colleges pre 1945	Lane
Civic	Alley
Medieval Colleges	Modern Roads
Post Medieval Colleges	Square or Place
19th Century Colleges	

gently from a height of 61m OD in the south to 65m OD in the north.

- Survival of townscape elements:
    - Late Saxon street grid with potentially early elements.
    - Good medieval tenement plot survival.
    - Multiple listed buildings of medieval to modern date, including a coherent group of well preserved 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings along Pembroke Street.
    - Notable Norman church fabric surviving within churches that originated in the Saxon period.
    - The 15<sup>th</sup> century cellar of Falcon Inn survives as the plate room of the Town Hall
    - Modern Art Oxford is housed in a part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century City Brewery (Hanley then Halls).
    - 18<sup>th</sup> century and Victorian pubs include The Old Tom, St Aldates Tavern (with cart access) and the Royal Blenheim (1889).
    - Survival of stone built former stable range behind former St Aldates Tavern.
    - Wooden early 20<sup>th</sup> century post box on St Aldates.

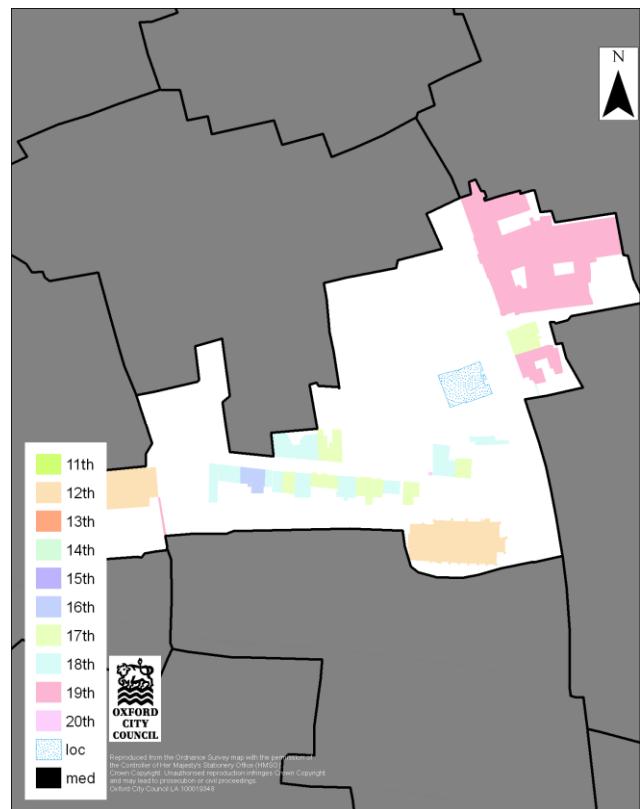
## Description

**Description:** A mixed use commercial and civic area in the southern part of the historic core, encompassing the Town Hall and City Council Office building (St Aldates Chambers), pubs, large modern shop units, historic town houses, heritage and art centres, the central post office, and two historic churches. Overall building density is high, with continuous frontages opening onto the street. The area is located on the south facing slope of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Thames gravel terrace.

The area is located on St Aldates the main north-south axial route through the town, and includes the historic side streets of Pembroke Street and part of St Ebbes Street. Pembroke Street is narrow and high sided with narrow pavements, it preserves a coherent area of stuccoed and rendered 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century townhouses. Many of these are in use as offices or as student accommodation. St Aldates represents a slightly less coherent area of stone built civic and commercial buildings with greater variety of design and scale.

St Aldates Chambers is a massive four storey office range, although presents a deceptively small street frontage to St Aldates. The monumental facade of the Town Hall dominates the northern end of St Aldates, and conceals structures and rooflines to the rear which form the scale of its rear office block and the distinctive front.

The small tree lined Churchyards of St Aldates and St Ebbes provide limited public open space along with a small tree lined court on Blue Boar Street. A number of narrow tarmac car parks and a



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

and eclectic and non-uniform arrangement of the town hall complex. The remaining buildings are shops. The central post-office also also notable for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century wooden post box located to its

paved courtyards belonging to Pembroke College provide private open space within the area. There is noticeable amount of Street furniture on St Aldates, mostly relating to bus stops.

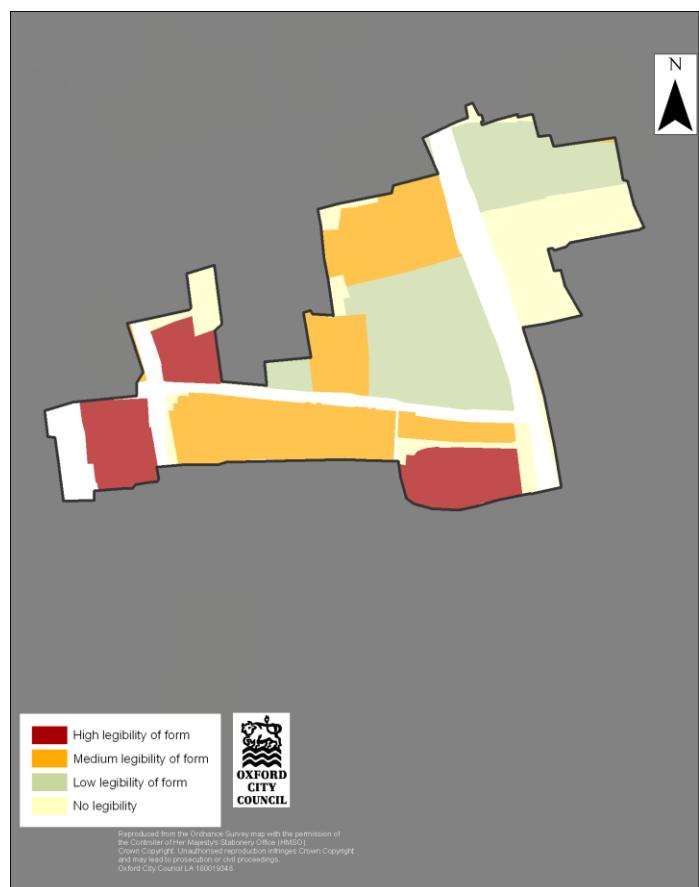
### Historical value- means of connecting with the past

Oxford may have its origins as a middle Saxon trading settlement or religious centre (minster) located close to a crossing point over the Thames. Documentary records indicate that a defended burh was established at Oxford by the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. St Ebbes and St Aldates were early Saxon saints and the churches that bear their name have their origins in this period, although the earliest recorded fabric in each is Norman in date. These two churches along with a church that stood on the site of the current Christ Church Cathedral to the east, appear to have formed an important early east-west axis for the town, the significance of which remains to be fully established.

After the initial shock of the Norman Conquest the town appears to have recovered quickly. The Norman period saw major investment in religious buildings and infrastructure projects including the construction of a stone causeway across the river crossing and floodplain (The Grandpont). Despite the disruption of the Conquest and the later conflicts of the Anarchy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century the town appears to have done well with trade in cloth and leather goods driving economic growth in the 12th and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The tenement pattern evolved in this period with subdivision of Late Saxon and Norman plots, especially along the desirable street frontages associated with the weekly market. This extended along the streets leading off the central crossroads at Carfax (the name either deriving from the French ‘quatre-face’ or a corruption of the Latin ‘quadrifurcus’ both meaning four forks or crossroads). These tenements can be plotted with some confidence from 13<sup>th</sup> century records (notably the 1279 Hundred Rolls). The top end of St Aldates houses the stalls of the fish market (hence it previously being known as Fish Street).

The character area is notable for its association with the medieval Jewish community, known to have been in residence from the late 11<sup>th</sup> century until their expulsion in 1290, with a strong concentration along St Aldates where the synagogue was located (the site of the former synagogue now lies under Christ Church). From the late 13th century and 14<sup>th</sup> century the cloth trade faltered and disruptions to navigation of Thames and the arrival of the Black Death in 1349 combined with other factors to suppress the local economy. An educational tradition of teaching canon and Roman law had been cultivated locally in the 12<sup>th</sup> century through the activities of the religious houses and courts. The University subsequently emerged in the late 12<sup>th</sup> as travel to the more established continental Universities became problematic for aspirant students. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century the academic halls of the University and its fledgling colleges (founded with endowments from rich benefactors) had taken root. The depressed economy opened up opportunities for further expansion, with colleges taking advantage of low land prices to expand, especially to the north and east of the town away from the market area.

In the late medieval period the frontages of the main streets centred on Carfax would have been occupied by narrow shop frontages within halls often at right angles to the street or set back parallel to the street behind a range of



### Assessment of medieval tenement survival

shops or courtyard. Few traces of extant medieval structures now survive in this character area as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century economic growth driven by the University and colleges led to substantial rebuilding. A process well illustrated by the town houses located along Pembroke Street.

The late 18<sup>th</sup> century saw renewed efforts to re-organise the city and reduce street clutter. The Carfax street market was moved to a permanent indoor market off High Street in 1773. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the area comprised narrow post-medieval tenements along Pembroke Street with mixed post-medieval and 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic and commercial properties along St Aldates. The 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS Town Plan (1876) records two further churches, a chapel, two schools, a library, the old town hall and corn exchange in the character area. A total of seven inns and pubs are also recorded. The construction of the current Town Hall in the 1890s resulted in the removal of several medieval and post-medieval structures and can be seen as an assertion of civic pride and authority in a town historically dominated by the University from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The library adjoining the Town Hall complex later became the city museum and one of the structures many interesting features is its incorporation of part of the 15<sup>th</sup> cellar of the Falcon (Knapp Hall) which survives as the muniment room.

The road systems and the churches of St Aldates and St Ebbes are important elements of the Late Saxon town morphology. The churches of St Ebbes and St Aldates are good illustrations of Norman investment in church infrastructure. Pembroke Street provides an excellent illustration of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century rebuilding of the town. The mixed shops, pubs and Town Hall on St Aldates building provide a good illustration of the expansion of Victorian and Edwardian commerce and of civic largesse. The Town Hall notably illustrates renewed civic confidence that resulted from the acquisition of Borough status in 1889. The re-used brewery warehouse, now Modern Art Oxford, is a rare survival of the one significant local Brewing and Malting industry that was located in the southern and western parts of the town.

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

The character has potential for significant urban Saxon, medieval and post-medieval remains relating commercial and settlement activity in the vicinity of the history market place. The Urban Archaeological Database records forty-eight archaeological events for this area mostly building records and small scale interventions. Notable discoveries include eight Late Saxon burials at St Aldates Church.

#### Aesthetic value- sensory and intellectual stimulation

The St Aldates section of this character area is dominated by the grand Jacobean style town hall complex, opened in 1897, this is complemented by simpler four storey stone fronted buildings on the west side of the street with mixed brick, timber and stone built structures located further to the south. Pembroke Street contains a pleasing mix of 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century stuccoed town houses and later brick and stone built offices and houses. Despite widespread college ownership and use of many buildings as offices Pembroke Street is a notable area of domestic architecture in a city dominated by monumental collegiate architecture.



Modern Art Oxford



Pembroke Street looking east

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

The character has value as a historic focal point of civic and commercial activity in the city. It contains the Town Hall complex which continues to be heavily used by community groups and contains the Council Chamber where city council meetings are held. In addition to its democratic function, the Town hall incorporates a public café, shop, gallery and the City Museum. The character area also includes Modern Art Oxford and the Oxford Story Museum. The two churches within the area have distinctive and large congregations.

**Version: 18/2/2012**

