Diverse Oxfordshire by Malcolm Graham, Oxford (2010)

PART ONE: THE COUNTY

The Setting

The Oxfordshire landscape has great visual diversity, featuring 'something of everything that is characteristic of this part of southern and midland England'. The county includes part of the Cotswolds to the north-west, extends to the Berkshire Downs in the south and shares the Chilterns with Buckinghamshire in the south-east. The river Thames flows sinuously through the county for eighty miles and is joined by many tributaries, including the Windrush, the Evenlode, the Cherwell, the Ock and the Thame, along the way. Highlights of any journey along or beside the Thames will include the bridges at Radcot, Newbridge and Swinford, distant views across Port Meadow towards Oxford, the riverside at Abingdon, picturesque Clifton Hampden and the memorable downland scenery around the Goring Gap, as well as the regatta reach at Henley. A host of smaller rivers – the Dorn, the Glyme, the Swere and the Ray, to name but four – make their own contribution to the local landscape. The underlying geology of Oxfordshire lies very much across the grain of this part of England and geological formations cross the county from the south-west to the north-east. If you travel just fifty miles from Henley to Banbury, you cross the Chalk hills of the Chilterns, go down into the Kimmeridge Clays of the Vale of Oxford, over the Corallian Limestone of the Oxford Heights and down again into the Oxford Clay Vale. You then continue through the Oolitic Limestone of the Cotswolds and on to the golden-brown Lias Limestones or ironstones of North Oxfordshire. These are very varied landscapes and they led to different settlement patterns, encouraged different farming methods, gave rise to the development of different industries and supplied the vast range of traditional building materials that are among the glories of Oxfordshire.

1 Oxfordshire Past

Neolithic farmers started to change the local landscape in around 2500 BC, using primitive ploughs to clear native woodland so that they could grow crops and raise livestock. They were probably largely nomadic at first but they later gathered together in stable communities and co-operated in the tasks of clearing forests, sowing and harvesting crops and tending the animals. Their collective activity is still evident across Oxfordshire through causewayed enclosures, religious sites and burial mounds. A causewayed camp at Abingdon, excavated most recently in 1982, seems to have served as a communal seasonal meeting place. There were two main types of religious sites, the cursus, consisting of parallel banks and ditches running for some distance, and the henge, a circular ditch and bank with entrances and inner circles of pits or timber uprights. Both have been found in Oxfordshire – for example, at Dorchester – and the so-called King's Men, at the magical Rollright Stones, form one of the country's finest stone circles, dating from around 2000 BC. Long barrows are spectacular survivals in the Cotswolds and in the Berkshire Downs, where the chambered burial mound Wayland's Smithy has been dated to around 2800 BC. Sometimes the earth mound has vanished, leaving the stones of the burial chamber exposed; the Whispering Knights at the Rollright Stones are a case in point. Bronze Age people buried their dead in small cemeteries surrounded by a ring ditch and sometimes covered by a round barrow. These features are most obvious on the Berkshire Downs, particularly at Lambourn Seven Barrows, where there are in fact more than twenty! Long- distance trade developed during the Bronze Age and the Ridgeway, sometimes described as England's oldest road, and the Icknield Way through the Chilterns were formed at this time to transport rare and precious metals and import luxury goods such as Irish gold and Danish amber. The stunning White Horse hill figure at Uffington has now been dated to the late Bronze Age (c.1000 BC), when it was once thought to date from the Iron Age or indeed from the years after King Alfred's victory over the Danes at Ashdown in 871. Oxfordshire is studded with Iron Age hillforts, built from c.500 BC onwards. Uffington Castle, Segsbury Castle and Sinodun Hill are spectacular examples; Dyke Hills near

Dorchester and Cherbury Camp near Pusey are similar structures on low ground, relying on water or marshland for protection.

The Roman conquest in AD 43 led to the building of the first small towns in the area, Dorchester and Alchester, near Bicester. Dorchester was located at the strategic crossing of the river Thames on the road from Silchester to Towcester. Alchester, built initially as a fort in AD 44, evolved into a town at the junction of that road and Akeman Street, a more important route linking St Albans and Cirencester. Akeman Street survives in part as a modern road but you can trace much of its course through Oxfordshire on public rights of way. Four centuries of Roman rule also left a legacy of villas and farmsteads, particularly in the north and west of the county. North Leigh Roman villa, dating from the second century, is the best surviving local example and consisted of ranges of rooms around a central courtyard; it retains a fine fourth-century mosaic floor in geometric pattern. An important pottery industry flourished to the east of the site of Oxford between the first and fourth centuries and its products have been found in Scotland, Paris and Bruges. Archaeological excavations since the 1960s have provided much information about the industry and a kiln from the Churchill Hospital site at Headington is displayed in the Museum of Oxford.

Saxon settlers arrived in numbers in the Oxford area during the fifth and sixth centuries. Some clearly made for existing communities and life went on, for example at Dorchester, where the former Roman town became a missionary centre for the south of England in 634, after St Birinus converted Cynegils, King of Wessex, to Christianity there; Alchester, by contrast, was abandoned. Other Saxons, like all early settlers, chose to make their homes in well-watered sites and they launched the development of many of today's villages and towns. Settlements like Chinnor, Aston Rowant, Lewknor and Crowell grew up at the spring line below the Chiltern escarpment, where water seeping through the chalk hit the impermeable Greensand or Gault Clay. The place name Crowell literally means 'crow spring' and place-names ending in '-ey' come from the Old English word for island, implying a settlement surrounded by water for at least some of the year. Osney, Binsey, Hanney and Pusey are just a few such places around Oxford

and in the Vale of White Horse. By the later sixth century, the Oxford area was part of the Saxon kingdom of Wessex but, with the rise of Mercia to the north-west, it became disputed territory for two hundred years. Oxford came into being as a town during this period, although there is plenty of evidence of earlier settlement on the site. St Frideswide, sometimes said to have been the daughter of a king, established a religious house where Christ Church now stands in the early eighth century. Oxford also lay on an increasingly important route from the Midlands to the South of England, the ancestor of today's A34, and this road crossed the Thames flood plain by a series of causeways and fords stretching from St Aldate's to the foot of Hinksey Hill. Abingdon, another place with long continuity of settlement, began to grow as a town after the foundation of Abingdon Abbey in 675. Danish attacks began to threaten the Saxon kingdoms from the 860s and, after King Alfred and his son Edward the Elder pushed the Danes back, both Oxford and Wallingford were laid out in around 900 as fortified towns or burhs behind earthen ramparts. Oxford is first mentioned by name in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 911, when 'King Edward took possession of London and of Oxford and of all the lands that owed obedience thereto.'

South of the river Thames, Wessex had long been divided into counties or shires and Asser referred to the birth of King Alfred in 849 'at the royal estate called Wantage in the district of Berkshire'. Oxfordshire came into being in around 1007, during a period of crisis when the Danes threatened to take over the country and the creation of shires led by a sheriff – or 'shire-reeve' – provided a means of organizing the defence of burhs such as Oxford. The new county had a strange sprawling shape, narrowing to just seven miles wide near Oxford, with the river Thames forming a very definite natural boundary to the south. To the west, the county bordered the Mercian heartland and, to the east, there seems simply to have been a pragmatic division of land between Oxfordshire and neighbouring Buckinghamshire. The new arrangements could not prevent the Danes from sacking Oxford in 1009 and Cnut, son of Sweyn, King of Denmark, became King of England in 1016, after the death of the Saxon King Ethelred the Unready. The county structure survived, however, and has been adapted over the centuries to remain the upper level of local government in England outside major urban areas.

Oxford recovered its prosperity by the middle of the eleventh century and was among the largest towns in England in 1066. The Saxon tower of St Michael at the Northgate church and, it is now argued, St George's Tower on the western edge of the town were built to strengthen Oxford's defences during this time. The invading Normans in 1066 ignored Oxford but William and his army swept through Wallingford on their way to London after the battle of Hastings. Robert d'Oilly, a Norman adventurer, became the new king's sheriff in Oxford, building Oxford castle in 1071. The motte-and-bailey castle became a dominant feature in Norman England and you can see local examples with significant remains at Wallingford, Deddington, Middleton Stoney and Chipping Norton as well as Oxford; other castles, some of them built during the civil war in King Stephen's reign, have left fewer traces and Banbury Castle is recalled only in the naming of its modern shopping centres. The Normans founded major new religious houses such as Osney Abbey and Eynsham Abbey or refounded on a larger scale older establishments such as Abingdon Abbey and St Frideswide's Priory in Oxford. They also built or added to many local churches, creating particularly fine examples at Iffley and Cassington.

Oxford suffered in the early years of the Norman period and more than half of its houses were described as 'waste' in 1086. Demolition on the castle site was partly responsible but the town might also have suffered an unrecorded disaster such as a fire or a serious disruption to trade. Recovery was swift and Robert d'Oilly probably speeded the process by rebuilding in stone the Saxon causeway south of Oxford in the late eleventh century. His Grandpont or great bridge was part of the A34 until the 1960s and still carries modern traffic along the Abingdon Road. King Henry I built a King's House, sometimes called Beaumont Palace, outside the town wall at Oxford in around 1130 and both King Richard I (1157) and King John (1167) were born there. Cloth and leather provided the mainstay of the town's economy and, as technological change led to a decline in the town's cloth industry in the thirteenth century, the growth of the University provided a new source of income for the townspeople. By 1300 there were perhaps 1,500 scholars in Oxford at a time when the population of the

town was around 5,000. The University was very much a cuckoo in the nest and the mutual interdependence of Town and Gown did not prevent violent episodes such as the St Scholastica's Day riot on 10 February 1355, which left six scholars dead and twenty-one injured. Nobody troubled to record casualties among the townsfolk.

The Norman kings inherited seven extensive royal manors in Oxfordshire and created the large royal forests of Wychwood, Shotover and Bernwood for hunting purposes. Wychwood was a royal forest by 1086 and, at its largest extent in the late twelfth century, the forest covered about 160 square miles, much of the present West Oxfordshire District. The king had hunting rights over these large areas and there were strict rules governing the use of the forests, only parts of which were actually wooded. King Henry II preferred the greater seclusion of Woodstock Manor, where he established a remarkable menagerie, a twelfth-century forerunner of today's Cotswold Wild Life Park near Burford. Woodstock was also the scene of Henry's romance with Rosamund Clifford, 'Fair Rosamund', who, according to different versions of the tale, was either poisoned by the king's jealous wife or ended her days at Godstow Abbey near Oxford.

Outside the royal forests, the countryside looked very different from today's hedged fields. There were great open fields where each man's holdings were in scattered strips and ploughing these strips produced a ridge and furrow effect you can still see in the Oxfordshire landscape, for instance at Shenington, South Newington and even in South Park, Oxford. As the population grew, woodland clearance continued and new villages were established, many of them on comparatively poor agricultural land. Crucially too for the subsequent history of the county, some large landowners launched the development of new towns to provide revenues from rents and market dues. Some of these developments – at Thame, Witney and Banbury, for example – were planned additions to existing communities while others – Henley, Chipping Norton and Woodstock – were entirely new. Most of these new towns became flourishing market centres for the surrounding countryside and today they are some of Oxfordshire's major population centres; others, like Deddington or Newland in Witney, ultimately

failed to compete with nearby market towns and settled into quieter roles as enlarged villages or suburbs.

The Black Death in 1348, wiping out perhaps a third of the population, had profound effects in both town and countryside. Vacant sites in the centre of Oxford became rubbish dumps and the haunt of undesirables, allowing the University to begin a process of expansion which continues to this day. William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, acquired the site of New College in 1379 and agreed that the college would maintain for ever the thirteenth-century town wall, which became its boundary. The Lord Mayor and City Councillors still make a triennial inspection of the wall, the finest remaining stretch of Oxford's medieval defences, to confirm that it is in good condition. Depopulation in the county led to the abandonment of many settlements on marginal land. Seacourt, on the Thames floodplain north of Botley, was a typical example, flourishing from the mid thirteenth century but completely abandoned by 1400. The profits from raising sheep and selling their wool encouraged landowners to enclose open fields, destroy existing villages and turn more land over to pasture. This process was arguably much easier in villages already weakened by the loss of population and Oxfordshire retains many, often hugely atmospheric, shrunken or deserted medieval villages, places such as Hampton Gay, Widford and Bix. The wool trade brought prosperity to religious houses such as Abingdon Abbey and Osney Abbey and to Cotswold towns such as Burford and Witney, where rich merchants endowed churches or chantry chapels.

Oxfordshire experienced all the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. The human cost included the burning at the stake of the Protestant Martyrs, Bishops Latimer and Ridley and Archbishop Cranmer, in Broad Street, Oxford, in 1555–6. Local Catholics executed for their faith included George Napier, who was hanged at Oxford in 1610. The dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII paved the way for many opportunists to acquire properties which they and their successors developed into some of Oxfordshire's finest estates; John Croke, for example, took over Studley Priory and Sir John, later Lord, Williams Thame Abbey. Many fine buildings were quarried away for their building materials and Osney and Rewley Abbeys, the Greyfriars and Blackfriars

in south and west Oxford, were soon reduced to pathetic fragments. St Frideswide's Priory in Oxford found a new use as Wolsey's Cardinal College, later Christ Church, and the priory church became the cathedral church of the new Oxford Diocese in 1546. Great Tom, a medieval bell from the crossing tower of Osney Abbey, was removed to Christ Church, and, in recast form, it still rings out a curfew at five past nine every night, 9 o'clock Oxford time. Dorchester Abbey Church is a rare instance where, thanks to a wealthy local man, Richard Beauforest, an entire monastic church was turned over to parochial use. Many church furnishings were destroyed as idolatrous, but significant survivals include wall paintings at parish churches in Chalgrove, South Newington and South Leigh and stained glass at Dorchester Abbey, Christ Church Cathedral and some Oxford college chapels. The passing of the religious houses left private individuals to take on responsibility for education and for the care of the sick and the poor. In 1559, for example, Lord Williams provided in his will for a free school at Thame, which has evolved into a comprehensive school for the town. Charles Lyster in 1613 left money for almshouses at Mapledurham which are still in use today.

Increased building activity in the county in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflected growing prosperity. The new rich made wealthy by trade or association with the royal court built grand houses in the countryside. Sir Richard Blount, for instance, commissioned work on Mapledurham House, one of Oxfordshire's largest Elizabethan houses, in about 1585. Chastleton House, now a National Trust property, was built between 1603 and 1614 by Walter Jones, a Witney wool merchant. There was also much rebuilding in towns as merchants expressed civic pride and demonstrated their own success by erecting new market buildings, shops and houses. Notable examples include the mid-sixteenth-century Tolsey at Burford and the Witney Butter Cross of about 1600, which had a cupola added in 1683; distinctive town houses include nos. 126 and 131a High Street, Oxford, and nos. 85–87 High Street, Banbury. Many older timber-framed buildings were replaced or re-fronted in local brick or stone and new classical ideas began to influence house frontages, creating highly picturesque streetscapes, like those in High Street, Burford, or Holywell Street, Oxford. Rebuilding spread more slowly to rural areas but here too better-off farmers began to demonstrate their wealth

and status through substantial farmhouses. These structures, usually of local stone in the north of the county and timber-framed or brick-built in the south and west, give great character to villages such as Adderbury and East Hagbourne.

The Civil War in the 1640s brought disruption to Oxfordshire as to the rest of the country. Oxford was effectively the capital of Royalist England and headquarters of the king's army from 1642 to 1646. King Charles I lodged at Christ Church and Queen Henrietta Maria at Merton College. The city was filled with soldiers, courtiers and their ladies. Defensive earthworks designed by the Dutch engineer, Bernard de Gomme, were built around Oxford but they were not seriously tested during the brief siege of Oxford in 1646 and scarcely any trace of them survives today. Royalist garrisons occupied local towns – although Parliamentary forces seized Abingdon in 1644 – and many large houses became fortified outposts during the war. Colonel Francis Windebank was executed in Oxford in 1645 after surrendering Bletchington House to Cromwell's Parliamentary forces without a struggle. The battle of Chalgrove Field in 1643 was inconclusive but the great Parliamentarian John Hampden died later in Thame from wounds he sustained there. Royalist forces won the battle of Cropredy Bridge near Banbury in 1644 but this success did not ultimately affect the outcome of the war and it was quickly overshadowed by crushing defeat in the north at the battle of Marston Moor. The county has few physical remains of this traumatic period, which ended with the execution of King Charles I in 1649 and the establishment of the Commonwealth. Faringdon parish church still lacks the spire which was destroyed during the Parliamentary siege in 1645. The most poignant survival, emphasizing the effect of the war on ordinary people, is perhaps the name 'Anthony Sedley, prisner' carved on the lead font in Burford church. Sedley was among the Levellers, Parliamentarians whose beliefs foreshadowed those of modern socialists and who unsuccessfully challenged Cromwell's authority in May 1649. Around 350 Levellers were briefly imprisoned in Burford church and three ringleaders were shot in the churchyard as a warning to the others.

The appearance of Oxfordshire began to change dramatically during the eighteenth century. This was the golden age of making parks, some – like Blenheim – occupying the same land as medieval parks, while others such as Nuneham Courtenay involved the enclosure of productive farmland, the diversion of public roads, the clearance of villages and the rebuilding of houses. Queen Anne gave John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, the royal manor of Woodstock and funds to build a palace as a reward for his great victory over the French army at Blenheim in 1704. John Vanbrugh, the Duke's chosen architect, assisted by Nicholas Hawksmoor, created one of Europe's most remarkable Baroque palaces and devised a formal approach from the north, using the Grand Bridge and linking causeways to cross the little river Glyme. As built between 1708 and 1725, the Grand Bridge soared like a viaduct above a canalized river, with 33 rooms within the structure, one large enough 'for a ball if there was an occasion', as Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, remarked sardonically in 1716. When Capability Brown landscaped Blenheim Park between 1764 and 1774, he created an inspired setting for the bridge, flooding its lower stages by damming the river Glyme to create a lake. Nuneham Park stemmed from a decision by Simon, first Earl Harcourt, in 1756 to move the family seat from Stanton Harcourt to Nuneham Courtenay, a small village above the Thames with distant views towards Oxford. The old village and church were demolished and the tenants removed to new brick cottages on the main road. Nuneham has therefore been suggested as the Sweet Auburn of Oliver Goldsmith's poem The Deserted Village written in 1770. Lord Harcourt's new house, built in 1757, was designed by Stiff Leadbetter and the surrounding gardens, in part landscaped by Capability Brown between 1779 and 1782, were among the most celebrated of their time. Other dramatic Oxfordshire eighteenth-century parkland landscapes can be seen at Rousham, Shotover and Wroxton.

Parliamentary enclosure transformed much of the Oxfordshire landscape from the mid eighteenth century. Major landowners and agricultural improvers wanted more efficient and profitable use of the land, with each individual's holdings set in rectangular fields, not scattered among the plots in large open fields. The enclosure process cost money – an Act of Parliament had to be obtained and the land had to be fenced, drained and

extensively reshaped. Wealthier land holders could view these costs as long-term investment but the poorer farmer and those reliant on common rights did not have that luxury. Resistance to enclosure was most evident on Otmoor, where villagers from the seven towns or parishes around the moor enjoyed extensive common rights over the land. Many rioters were arrested for breaking down the new enclosures and, on 6 September 1830, an armed escort took forty-four ringleaders off to Oxford gaol. St Giles's Fair was in full swing when the convoy arrived in Oxford and fairgoers embarrassed the authorities by releasing all the prisoners. The enclosure of Otmoor went ahead anyway, as it did across much of the county. The physical implications were massive and, at Milton-under-Wychwood for example, straight hedgerows were planted, tracks and streams were diverted to bring more land into use, the village green was partly enclosed and new farms were built outside the village centre. When Cowley Field, just outside Oxford, was enclosed in 1853, forty-seven rights of way were stopped up and replaced by footpaths alongside main roads; the land was divided into large fields, which were soon planted with houses rather than crops.

Transport improvements began to make an impact on the countryside. From the 1550s, most roads were the responsibility of the parishes through which they passed but the appalling condition of the roads around Oxford led to the passing of a Mileways Act in 1576. This statute accepted that traffic from outside the city did most of the damage and made parishes within five miles of Oxford contribute towards the maintenance of the city's main roads or mileways. Stones marking the ends of these mileways can still be seen in Marston Road and Old Road. The turnpike road system, extended to all main roads in the eighteenth century, was based on the principle that users should pay the cost of road maintenance through tolls. Turnpike trusts, whose members had a practical and financial interest in better transport, managed the roads, setting up toll-houses and gates and often making substantial improvements to the road network. Thus, the present alignment of the A40 at Stokenchurch replaced the earlier route in 1824 and Cumnor Hill provided an easier gradient for horse-drawn vehicles than the old turnpike road in 1827. Journey times were much reduced and Arthur Young commented in 1813

on the huge improvement in Oxfordshire's roads since the 1770s, when 'they were in a condition formidable to the bones of all who travelled on wheels.'

Water transport was often a better option for heavy or fragile goods and the river Thames was made navigable upstream to Oxford by 1635 with the building of new pound locks. The whole river became a busy highway in the eighteenth century and the waterways around west Oxford were reshaped in 1790 to provide the direct north-south route still in use today. Between 1769 and 1790, the Oxford Canal was built from Coventry to Oxford, primarily to bring cheaper coal from midland collieries. The Wilts and Berks Canal, from Semington on the Kennet & Avon Canal to Abingdon, was completed in 1810 with a branch to Wantage. The coming of the railways to Oxfordshire soon challenged the primacy of both road and water transport. The Great Western Railway's main line from London to Bristol passed through the south of the county in 1840 and, following the building of a branch from Didcot to Oxford in 1844, a network of lines evolved, putting much of Oxfordshire within easy reach of a station. The railways had a dramatic effect on the local landscape, striding across valleys on viaducts and plunging through tunnels. John Ruskin, Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, was one contemporary who deplored the development, thinking back nostalgically to winding country lanes and setting his undergraduates to restore the road through North Hinksey in 1874 as an exercise in the picturesque.

Oxfordshire was largely bypassed by the Industrial Revolution and J. M. Falkner observed in 1899 that 'Oxfordshire was fated never to be an industrial county.' There were traditional industries, of course, notably perhaps stone quarrying in the context of the local landscape. Taynton limestone was certainly being quarried by 1086 and the Burford quarry was in use by 1526. Stone from these and other local quarries was used in hundreds of local buildings and monuments. Merton College in Oxford was using Taynton stone by 1310 and Christopher Wren ordered stone from Taynton for the rebuilding of St Paul's Cathedral in London in the late seventeenth century. Stone from the Headington quarries was used in the Oxford area from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, the earliest recorded use of Headington stone being at New

College bell tower in 1396/7. Stone slates were produced in Oxfordshire in medieval times and, by the late sixteenth century, slate-makers at Stonesfield had perfected the technique of using frost to split the local sandy limestone. Until about 1900, this industry supplied roofing slates that are among the glories of the Cotswolds. Brick-making developed in south Oxfordshire by the fourteenth century and early brick buildings include the chapel tower at Stonor (1416/17) and Ewelme school and almshouses (1437). Bricks were made at Nettlebed until the early twentieth century and an eighteenth-century brick kiln has been preserved there. Most of the county's traditional trades and industries grew almost entirely out of the products of agriculture and stock rearing. William Camden described Banbury's major products as cheese, cakes and ale in 1610 and the last two remained important until recent times. The cloth trade was first recorded in Banbury in the thirteenth century and, during the eighteenth century, both the town and nearby villages such as Shutford became well known for the manufacture of a velvety cloth known as plush. The Witney blanket industry evolved out of the flourishing cloth industry as a specialized product in the early seventeenth century, exploiting both the wool of local sheep and the clear waters of the river Windrush. Early's, the best-known makers of Witney blankets, could later claim to be 'Covering the World' with their blankets, and their business continued until 2002. William Bliss began cloth-making in Chipping Norton in 1758 and the business went from a cottage industry to the factory system during the 1790s. By 1870, it had some 700 employees and the remarkable Bliss Tweed Mill at Chipping Norton, designed by George Woodhouse of Lancashire, was built in 1873. The scale of the enterprise was highly unusual in Oxfordshire and a lengthy pay dispute in 1913-14 brought unsettling images of industrial unrest to the rural county. Bliss's business remained a feature of the locality until 1980 and the mill has since been converted into luxury apartments. Local demand encouraged the making of agricultural equipment in Banbury, and other iron foundries, with a national or even an international market for their products, developed during the nineteenth century at Oxford, Wallingford, Wantage and East Challow.

The population of Oxford grew from around 11,000 in 1801 to nearly 50,000 a hundred years later. The city accounted for just 10.6% of the county's population at the beginning

of the nineteenth century, rising to 27.2% by 1900. While people in rural areas increasingly looked to towns and cities for work, or indeed emigrated, Oxford continued to grow as the market centre for its agricultural hinterland and as the provider of goods and services to the university. Following mid-century reform, the university began to grow substantially and the number of students coming up each year rose from 389 in the 1850s to 905 by the 1900s. New college and university buildings – for example, the High Street frontage of Brasenose College, built between 1887 and 1911, and the Examination Schools of 1876–83, both designed by Thomas Graham Jackson – were a physical consequence of this growth. Oxford dons were permitted to marry and live outside their colleges after 1877, stimulating suburban development, especially in North Oxford. The railway network also encouraged the growth of a residential population attracted simply by the appeal of the place. Oxford remained resolutely non-industrial, however, and Samuel Sidney described the city in 1851 as being 'so decorously clean, so spotlessly free from the smoke of engines and the roar of machinery'. In 1865, the Great Western Railway proposed to site a large carriage-building works on City Council land in West Oxford. Some individuals in the university supported the scheme because it would strengthen Oxford's economy and St John's College positively welcomed the chance to develop their North Oxford estate more quickly. University opinion was generally hostile, however, and fears were expressed that the city's character would be ruined. The railway works was eventually sited at Swindon and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Oxford University Press, a traditional business equipped now with steam-powered printing presses and 700 employees, was still one of the city's major employers.

The enterprise of one man, William Morris, later Lord Nuffield (1877–1963), transformed Oxford into an industrial city within a couple of decades. Morris was raised in East Oxford, became a cycle maker at 16 and, at the age of 35 in 1912, acquired an old Military College in Cowley to start the production of Morris cars. The scale of his operations was initially too small to arouse anxiety – just 1,300 cars were produced in the first two years – and the car factories were outside the city boundary until 1929. After making munitions during the First World War, Morris swiftly expanded his output

of cars and, in 1930, Morris Motors Ltd sold 58,436 cars and accounted for 34.4% of British car sales. He also encouraged the building of the Pressed Steel Company factory on a neighbouring site in 1926 to supply car bodies in huge quantities. The two enterprises were employing nearly 10,000 people by 1939, attracting workers from all over the county and much further afield. The population of Oxford rose to 80,539 in 1931 and to an estimated 107,000 in 1941, when the city was flooded with evacuees and war workers. New housing estates swept up to the city's extended boundaries and beyond them to Botley, Kennington and Kidlington. Traffic management became an issue, leading to the building of the first sections of the Oxford bypass in the 1930s. Commercial development and slum clearance made significant physical changes in the city centre; so too did University expansion, not least because of massive donations by Lord Nuffield. The pace of change encouraged growing concern for the fabric of the city and its precious setting. The Oxford Preservation Trust was formed in 1926, with strong support from the University and colleges, to acquire significant sites to save them from development and protect crucial views of the city, such as the one from the old golf course at Boar's Hill. Campaigners fought to save individual historic buildings from demolition and Cornmarket Street was given a rubber road surface in 1938 in a pilot scheme to protect old buildings from vibration caused by heavy traffic. The experiment was not a success since the road became a skating rink when it rained!

Rural Oxfordshire was affected, albeit to a lesser extent, by change in the years leading up to the Second World War. Industry played a part as the manufacture of MG sports cars moved from Oxford to Abingdon in 1929 and forward-looking councillors in Banbury encouraged the Northern Aluminium Company (NAC) to open a factory there in 1931. The MG Car Co. was employing around 350 people in 1939 and, after a substantial extension in 1938, the NAC had a workforce of around 800. Growing traffic levels led to road improvements which included a new alignment of the A40 from Headington to Eynsham in 1935, the building of a Benson bypass and the reconstruction of the Oxford to Bicester road. Council housing, often designed in a consciously vernacular style, provided limited numbers of new properties for rent in Oxfordshire towns and villages, and private firms built housing estates where demand was strong.

Ribbon development of semi-detached houses or bungalows, garages along main roads and advertisement hoardings in the countryside were among the modern features attacked locally by the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England, founded in 1926.

Although Oxfordshire was spared from extensive bombing during the Second World War – around 4,100 bombs fell in the area of the present county, killing 30 people and injuring 85 – the conflict had many local repercussions. The county became an important military training area and supply base. Some twenty-five Royal Air Force (RAF) airfields and depots were added to the five prewar airfields at Abingdon, Benson, Bicester, Brize Norton and Upper Heyford. A huge Central Ordnance Depot covering 12.5 square miles was built near Bicester in 1941–2, supplementing the existing Ordnance Depot at Didcot. Temporary camps were built all over Oxfordshire to house troops, supplies and prisoners of war. Local industries, both large and small, were converted to war production and, as male employees were drafted into the forces, large numbers of women went into major factories at Oxford, Abingdon and Banbury. Women were also involved as Land Girls in the struggle to feed the nation, which saw old pasture, wasteland and golf courses turned over to the growing of crops. Evacuees and refugees from the London area and elsewhere were rehoused in the comparative safety of Oxfordshire for much of the war and some government departments, businesses and schools were also relocated to the county. For tens of thousands of people, life was disrupted and Oxfordshire became home to Canadian, Polish, French, American and other Allied troops, to Italian and German prisoners of war, to Irish war workers and to many other foreign nationals. After D-Day, in June 1944, vacated army camps took on a new role as prisoner-of-war camps and resettlement camps for families which had escaped from the devastation in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Awareness of the plight of people in other countries led in 1942 to the creation of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam), which was soon to have an impact across the world. War work at Oxford University also included research which led to the first clinical use of penicillin in 1941 and the introduction of antibiotics.

Postwar Oxfordshire shared in the national vision of building a better Britain but resources were scarce and progress slow. At the end of the war, Allied troops and most evacuees returned home and life began to return to normal but many foreign nationals had nowhere to go and some remained in temporary camps for several years. The county's housing stock was run down and insufficient, forcing homeless people to occupy disused army camps and airfields such as Mount Farm, near Dorchester, and Chalgrove. In Oxford, there was a surge of council-house building at Rose Hill and Barton to try to meet the demand for housing. Manufacturing industry across the county switched to peace-time production with a strong emphasis on winning the export orders which were needed to rebuild the country's shattered economy. The Cowley factories offered comparatively high wages at a time when there was a national labour shortage and they attracted workers away from low paid jobs at the Oxford colleges or on the railways and buses. The new National Health Service, introduced in 1948 to provide free health care from the cradle to the grave, also struggled to recruit and keep staff at local hospitals. Desperate employers were therefore encouraged to look overseas, both to Europe and to the Caribbean, to fill vacancies. During these years, when basic food rations were at times even lower than they had been during the war, secondary education for all was introduced, following the Education Act of 1944. A new planning system in 1947 aimed to direct future development in everyone's best interests and, in this context, Oxford City Council commissioned Thomas Sharp to prepare a plan for Oxford. His recommendations, published as Oxford Replanned in 1948, envisaged sympathetic treatment of much of the historic city centre, accompanied by wholesale clearance in St Ebbe's and St Clement's. He backed a relief road across Christ Church Meadow and aimed to limit the future growth of Oxford by relocating the Cowley motor industry, which had, he argued, come to Oxford 'only because Lord Nuffield lived here. The great Nuffield works are an extension of a shed in a back garden. The Pressed Steel works are an extension again of those.' All this was hugely controversial and it led to a debate about the city's future which continues to this day.

Against the international backdrop of the Cold War, Oxfordshire continued to change both physically and in character. Defence installations continued to be very prominent

features in the county and they became major employers. American bombers were based at RAF Brize Norton between 1951 and 1965, after which the airfield became the major transport facility for the Royal Air Force that it remains today. The United States Air Force also occupied RAF Upper Heyford from 1950 until 1994 and, with the arrival of F111 planes in 1971, it became the largest American tactical fighter base in Europe. Other local military airfields such as Abingdon and Benson remained operational, as did the Army Ordnance Depots at Didcot and Bicester. Disused airfields provided land for new science-based industries which have since become key drivers of the Oxfordshire economy. RAF Harwell in 1946 became the site of the Atomic Energy Research Establishment (AERE) and AERE took over HMS Hornbill, a disused Fleet Air Arm airfield, for Culham Laboratory in 1960. The county's traditional industries faced new challenges, and business mergers led to the loss of old-established breweries such as Hitchman's in Chipping Norton and Hunt Edmunds in Banbury. Local quarries and brickworks could not compete with larger firms and the gloving industry around Woodstock fell victim to cheaper, machine-made products and changing fashion. In urban shopping centres, national chains began to oust local businesses and, in Oxford for example, Badcock's, Webber's, Elliston's, Cooper's and Cape's had all vanished from the scene by 1974. Rising imports of motor vehicles began to affect the market share of the British Motor Corporation, of which Morris Motors was now a part, and led to the decision to launch the highly successful Mini in 1959. The growing numbers of vehicles on the roads in the 1950s and 1960s made highway improvement a priority. The Oxford bypass, begun in the 1930s, was finally completed in 1966 but building major new roads in the city excited furious opposition and the City Council eventually opted for traffic restraint, introducing England's first park-and-ride bus service in 1973. A motorway through Oxfordshire from London to Birmingham was proposed in 1965 and, after bitter controversy about the route of the M40 through the Chilterns, the section from Stokenchurch to Wheatley was built in 1971-2. Road transport was very much in the ascendant and there was little national enthusiasm for modernizing the railways. Some local lines, such as the Banbury and Cheltenham railway, closed to passengers in the 1950s and more cutbacks followed Dr Beeching's report Re-shaping Britain's Railways in 1963. Capacity was seriously reduced even on some retained routes such as the

Cotswold Line in order to save money. Planning issues came to dominate the local news during this period and the Oxford Green Belt, the first outside London, was announced in 1956 to safeguard the environs of the city. Major battles raged around proposals such as those to extend ironstone quarrying in North Oxfordshire in the 1960s or build a huge gasholder in Abingdon in 1966-8. Interested parties fought to preserve historic buildings from demolition, although campaigns to save the Clarendon Hotel in Oxford in 1954 and Banbury's Original Cake Shop in 1968 both failed. Energetic slum clearance policies pursued in towns, and especially in Oxford, also raised concerns about the destruction of communities, although many residents welcomed the move to modern houses on new estates like Blackbird Leys. Most council and private house-building was located in extensions to existing towns and villages but Berinsfield was an entirely new village, built by the local council in 1958 to replace huts on the site of Mount Farm airfield, which had provided poor-quality temporary accommodation since the end of the War.

The Local Government Act of 1972, coming into force on 1 April 1974, provided the administrative and physical context for the recent history of Oxfordshire. The Act recast the structure of local government outside the major cities, introducing a two-tier system, with county councils taking responsibility for strategic services such as education, highways and social care, while district councils had powers over local planning, housing, recreation and other matters. The reorganization brought two striking changes for Oxfordshire, the first being the revision of ancient boundaries to incorporate the Vale of White Horse into the new county. The Vale had been part of Berkshire since the ninth century but it was argued that the area now looked to Oxford rather than Reading and, against the wishes of many traditionalists, the change went ahead. The other significant alteration saw Oxford lose its County Borough role and responsibilities it had built up, in some cases, over centuries. Oxford City had already seen its electricity undertaking and its waterworks nationalized and its police force subsumed into the Thames Valley Police in 1968. The population of new Oxfordshire, based on the 1971 census, was estimated at 505,000 and that figure rose to 607,300 by 2001. In order to preserve the setting of Oxford, most development was concentrated

in the market towns of Oxfordshire after 1979 and there was a substantial expansion of housing around Banbury, Bicester, Didcot and Witney. Greater Leys, an extension to Blackbird Leys in the 1990s, was the main addition to Oxford's urban area and a modern North Oxford suburb was created near the Oxford Canal, largely occupying former industrial sites.

Transport issues continued to generate a lot of debate in new Oxfordshire. The extension of the M40 to Birmingham, described at the time as the last motorway, was a source of controversy in the 1980s and an ingenious protest campaign, which included the sale of 3,500 small plots in a field christened Alice's Meadow, helped to divert the chosen route away from Otmoor. The motorway was completed and linked to the improved A34 in 1991, placing Oxfordshire firmly at the heart of the nation's road network. With ever more cars on the roads – the number of cars in Oxfordshire increased by 78% from 175,000 in 1981 to over 300,000 by 2001 – and the growth of long-distance commuting, the local transport infrastructure came under increasing strain. Bypasses improved life in Dorchester and Faringdon, to name just two places, and major relief roads were built at Banbury, Bicester, Didcot, Thame and Witney. Other communities like Burford, Marcham and Woodstock were denied bypasses because of uncertainties over the route or funding shortfalls. In Oxford, Park & Ride was extended to five sites around the city and most traffic apart from buses and taxis was excluded from Oxford city centre during the day in 1999. Bus deregulation in 1986 led to a duplication of routes, particularly in Oxford, and contributed to the large number of buses in the city centre. Bus services, particularly on the main routes to and from Oxford, have been much improved in recent years, providing a realistic alternative to the car for many commuting journeys. A special service linking Park & Ride car parks with Headington hospitals has been introduced to reduce congestion in Oxford. Rail improvements, determined on the basis of national rather than local priorities, have been more tentative. The line from Oxford to Bicester Town, part of the old Varsity line between Oxford and Cambridge closed to passengers in 1968, was reopened in 1989 but ambitious further plans have still to be realized. Much more encouraging progress has been achieved since 1996 on the Chiltern Railways route from Banbury

through Bicester North to London, which has been transformed from a run-down shadow of its former self into a busy commuter line.

Postwar employment trends in Oxfordshire accelerated with the continuing growth of science-based and high-tech industries and the decline or disappearance of older firms. Oxford became the home of a second major university in 1992 when Oxford Brookes University evolved out of Oxford Polytechnic and soon established itself as one of the country's most successful new universities. Oxford Instruments, founded by Sir Martin Wood in 1959 to manufacture superconducting magnets, was one of the first spin-out companies from research at Oxford University and became Oxfordshire's major success story, winning twelve Queen's Awards for technology and exports. Research Machines, to name just one other significant local business, grew from small beginnings in 1973 to become the country's leading supplier of ICT to schools, universities and colleges. Government laboratories have played a part in transforming the county's economic base. Part of the old Culham airfield site was chosen for the JET (Joint European Torus) project in 1978, making Oxfordshire the home of the country's fusion research programme and the world's largest fusion experimental facility. AEA Technology was formed as a private business in 1985 and began to develop the Harwell site for multi-tenant occupation. Milton Park from 1987 transformed a trading estate on an old RAF depot into one of the largest concentrations of high-tech business in the region. The end of the Cold War brought about the closure of RAF Upper Heyford and the departure of American service personnel. RAF Abingdon closed in 1992 because of reductions in defence spending but the Army now occupies the site as Dalton Barracks and RAF Brize Norton has become busier than ever in recent years. The roll call of lost traditional industries includes long-established local breweries such as Morland's in Abingdon, Morrell's in Oxford and Brakspear's in Henley, but the splendid Victorian Hook Norton Brewery still flourishes. The Pavlova Leather works in Abingdon closed down in 1994 and Early's, the last blanket-makers in Witney, ceased trading in 2002, bringing to an end an industry that dated back to the sixteenth century. The local motor industry also faced increased competition in a global market and the MG sports car factory at Abingdon closed in 1980, just after workers and their families had celebrated the firm's

half century in the town. The huge Cowley complex, latterly part of the nationalized British Leyland Motor Corporation, was sold off and the Oxford Business Park was built in the 1990s on the site of Morris Motors' North and South Works. BMW acquired the old Pressed Steel factory with the Rover Group in 1994 and, having sold off the rest of the firm in 2000, they redeveloped the site for the manufacture of the highly successful Mini, an up-to-date version of the 1960s icon. The local retailing scene has followed the national trend and the development of out-of-town superstores since the 1970s has clearly affected trade in urban and suburban shopping centres and led to the decline of small shops. Bicester Village, a development of retail outlets on the edge of Bicester, opened in 1995, and with its proximity to the M40, it quickly become a top tourist attraction. Traditional shopping destinations have fought back – for example, through the Woolgate Centre in Witney and the Castle Shopping Centre and the Castle Quay Centre in Banbury. The Clarendon Centre in 1984 and the redevelopment of the Debenham's site between 1999 and 2000 demonstrated continuing faith in Oxford as a shopping centre. The eating-out phenomenon has given a new life to many town centre premises and there are more specialist food shops, reflecting both the growing ethnic minority population and appetites broadened by increased overseas travel.

As the pace of change has intensified, efforts to conserve the county's heritage have assumed a higher priority. Listed building legislation and Conservation Areas have provided a way to check the demolition of historic buildings and the unsympathetic treatment of their setting. Effective monitoring has required, and still needs, the constant vigilance of district and parish councils, concerned individuals, local groups and national heritage organizations. The derelict Bliss Tweed Mill at Chipping Norton was eventually converted into luxury apartments in 1992 and other former breweries, mills and workhouses have been successfully adapted to residential use. New developments in sensitive locations across the county have generally echoed the spirit of the place; thus, much of new Witney has been built in a Cotswold style and Banbury's Castle Shopping Centre crucially retained the frontages of historic buildings in the Market Place in the 1970s. Development pressure, from road and house building, from gravel extraction and from intensive farming, has undoubtedly diminished the county's natural

environment and Dutch elm disease in the 1970s killed thousands of hedgerow trees that adorned the landscape throughout the year. Wildlife can sometimes adapt successfully to change, however, and you can now see here buzzards, little egrets and collared doves which would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. Since flooded gravel pits and reservoirs have made parts of Oxfordshire like an inland sea, the county has also become more attractive to seagulls. Farmoor reservoir, built between 1962 and 1976, now has a colony of cormorants and is a key staging post for migrating birds.

2 Oxfordshire Present

Oxfordshire today has an estimated population of 635,500 but the county still looks remarkably green from the air or indeed from high vantage points such as White Horse Hill or Shotover. Some 140,000 people live in Oxford and about 150,000 more in the country towns of Abingdon, Banbury, Bicester, Didcot and Witney, which have grown markedly in the past thirty years. Almost half the population still lives in settlements with fewer than 10,000 people and, despite Oxfordshire's position in the heart of England, it remains the least densely populated county in the South-East. Oxfordshire offers a host of opportunities and, in the hubbub of the modern world, it retains many precious corners where you can find peace and quiet.

Oxfordshire is part of three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – the Cotswolds, the Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs – which together account for about a quarter of the county. There are, in addition, four national nature reserves, many local nature reserves, over a hundred sites of special scientific interest and seven special areas of conservation. Two national trails, the Thames Path and the Ridgeway Path, pass through the county and there are many local trails such as the Oxfordshire Way using the extensive network of public rights of way. Maintaining, interpreting and trying to enhance this rich heritage is an ongoing challenge for many bodies and individuals. Local farmland has been managed intensively for food production since the Second World War and this has led to the reduction of wildlife habitat. An Environmental Stewardship

scheme is now encouraging farmers to manage their land in a more environmentally sensitive way. The Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust is working to re-create flower-rich wetland meadows in the Upper Thames floodplain at its Chimney Meadows reserve near Bampton. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) acquired part of Otmoor in 1997 and is in the process of restoring the vast wetland area which existed there before drainage in the nineteenth century. The RSPB has also led a project to reintroduce red kites to Oxfordshire and these exciting birds can often be seen in the Chilterns near the M40 and further afield. The Northmoor Trust, based at Little Wittenham, manages a nature reserve, a conservation farm and new broadleaved woodland dedicated to forestry research; in 2006, the Trust opened a highly innovative landscape interpretation centre. The Wychwood Project in West Oxfordshire aims to enhance features of the landscape in the former royal forest. Welcoming and informing the public is a key feature of all local reserves and English Nature has developed a series of trails, including one suitable for the disabled, at the Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve. Since 1993, the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum has worked to co-ordinate all this vital conservation activity.

Oxford has a universal reputation as a city with an unparalleled collection of historic buildings in a green setting and Blenheim Park is a recognized World Heritage Site. In the county as a whole, there are over 13,000 listed buildings and more than 200 conservation areas. It is a measure of how far we have come that the demolition of Oxford's Clarendon Hotel in 1956 or Banbury's Original Cake shop in 1968 would now be unthinkable. Former workhouses, once routinely destroyed as symbols of a cruel past, have been successfully restored at Chipping Norton and Thame. You can regret the passing of old breweries at Abingdon, Henley and Oxford but at least these historic buildings now have a long-term use as housing. The conversion of Oxford Castle from a dismal prison to a vibrant new quarter of the city between 2001 and 2005 has been without a doubt the most dramatic recent conservation project in the county. Listed buildings are not safe from any eventuality but losses are now exceptional. Oxford's former London, Midland & Scottish railway station, built in 1851 using the same prefabricated system as the Crystal Palace in London, stood in the way of road

improvements and the Saïd Business School. Demolition in 1999 was only allowed on the condition that the station was dismantled and re-erected at the Quainton Railway Centre near Aylesbury, where it can now be seen. Conservation area status generally ensures that the main characteristics of a village, street or area are preserved and any list of local triumphs might include the North Oxford Victorian suburb, threatened with unsuitable blocks of flats in the 1970s, and the picturesque village of Great Tew, where thatched ironstone houses were literally falling down forty years ago. Preserving views has sometimes proved more difficult since the full impact of change may only be evident when it is too late. Inappropriately sited buildings and industrial estates have therefore compromised some views of Oxford but local conservation groups won a recent planning battle against a proposed University Library store at Osney, which threatened views of Oxford from the western hills.

A hundred years ago, Oxfordshire lay at the centre of a low pay area and many local people were moving away or emigrating in search of a better life. The rapidly expanding motor industry changed all that in the 1920s but there were still fears after the Second World War that the local economy was too reliant on this one business. The heady days of the 1960s, when the Oxford motor industry employed some 27,000 people, are now long past but the BMW plant at Cowley is still a significant employer with a workforce of around 4,000 people. The Oxfordshire economy today is now broadly based with a major emphasis on printing and publishing, education, health and the high-tech industries. Printing and publishing has always been closely linked with Oxford University, although Cheney's printing business in Banbury was founded in 1767. Oxford University Press is the largest publisher in Oxfordshire but other major firms based here include Pearson Education (incorporating Heinemann), Elsevier Ltd and Blackwell Publishing Ltd. As a result, Oxfordshire now has the largest concentration of printing and publishing businesses in the United Kingdom outside London. The education sector is vital to the county's economy, employing 11% of the workforce in 2001. Oxford University now supports over 18,000 jobs in the county directly or indirectly and Oxford Brookes University has nearly 3,000 staff; since 2002, the Defence Academy, the country's higher education institute for defence forces, has also been based in

Oxfordshire at the Shrivenham Campus. There are also many jobs in primary and secondary education and in local language schools. Health and social work accounted for 10% of the county's workforce in 2001 and is particularly important around Oxford, where the Churchill and John Radcliffe Hospitals are also major research centres. Oxfordshire had the highest rate of growth of any English county in high-tech employment during the 1990s and, in 2004, over 1,400 high-tech companies were employing more than 37,000 people in the county. Isis Innovation Ltd, Oxford University's technology transfer company, has created over sixty companies since it was established in 1988. Key locations in the county are Begbroke Business and Science Park, Culham Science Centre, Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, Milton Park, Oxford Business Park and the Oxford Science Park. Notable firms include Oxford Instruments, Research Machines and the Formula 1 teams Williams (based at Grove) and Renault (at Enstone). The Diamond Light Source, opened by the Queen at Harwell in 2007, is a supermicroscope, which allows cutting edge scientific research and the building that houses it is a remarkable addition to the county. Agriculture employed 20.2% of the county's workforce in 1901 but, with the mechanization of many farming processes, the proportion had declined to only 1.7% by 2001. Though now so small, the sector remains as vital as ever in terms of food production and the management of most of the county's precious landscape. Farmers' markets have been a welcome development in recent years, providing local outlets for the sale of fresh produce and helping to boost farmers' incomes.

Oxfordshire is now closer to London and Birmingham by the M40, closer to Europe by Eurostar and closer to the rest of the world through Heathrow airport. Local distinctiveness began to be eroded in the nineteenth century, when the canals and railways brought in cheaper or mass-produced building materials from other parts of the country. Motor vehicles accelerated that trend in the twentieth century and the development of new building methods, employed by comparatively few large building firms, brought greater uniformity to the built environment. Legislation relating to house-building, planning and highways set countrywide standards that may have been entirely necessary in one sense but inevitably diminished local colour. These developments have

affected Oxfordshire, like everywhere else, and it is perhaps worth noting that William Morris, the artist and socialist, felt that Oxford had been ruined even by the 1870s. John Piper illustrated examples of visual blight in his Shell Guide to Oxfordshire published in 1938 and Lionel Brett's Landscape in Distress criticized the poor quality of new housing in south Oxfordshire in 1965. Change of any kind may seem threatening but today's changes are often on a large scale – a motorway, a reservoir, an airport, a housing estate or a business park – and comprehensive, perhaps removing every last trace of a much-loved local landscape. The motor car, our housing needs and our shopping habits have a more insidious visual impact on our surroundings. Rising levels of traffic have led to the building of new or improved roads, to intrusive road markings and to an ever-growing forest of road signs. Around 78,000 houses have been built in Oxfordshire since 1981, most of them in Oxford and the country towns; comparatively few have been built in villages. Developers and builders have generally opted for neo-vernacular or neo-Victorian styles to appeal to a conservative housing market. They have also concentrated for financial reasons on building larger, more expensive houses rather than affordable homes, leaving many local people unable to buy a property in the place where they live. Retail changes saw the first national chains like Boots and W. H. Smith appearing in towns before the First World War and, a century later, the same nationally or internationally owned businesses occupy premises in almost every town and city centre; the first out-of-town superstore in Oxfordshire was the So-Lo store, now ASDA, at Wheatley in 1978, setting a trend towards convenience shopping which has since proved unstoppable. Set against this background, Oxfordshire does still retain to a surprising degree much of its local distinctiveness, thanks in no small part to the planning system and the campaigning efforts of local groups and individuals.

Oxfordshire today offers a rich cultural heritage, a highly successful blend of surviving traditions, long-established institutions and recent innovations. Old traditions include the famous May Morning ceremony, where crowds gather below Magdalen Tower at 6 a.m. to hear the college choir welcome the coming of spring. Many people go on from there to watch morris sides dance outside some of Oxford's most famous buildings. The morris dancing tradition survived in a few Oxfordshire communities in Victorian times

and it is still popular today, for example, in Headington Quarry, Abingdon and Bampton. Oxford University offers the annual Encaenia ceremony, when academics led by the Chancellor process to the Sheldonian Theatre to award honorary degrees to the great and the good. Eights Week provides another fine Oxford spectacle each year in late May, as college boats battle for the title Head of the River. Henley Royal Regatta, founded in 1839, is both a social occasion and a highly competitive sporting event. Abingdon and Woodstock still have mock mayor making ceremonies, where fun is made of normal civic dignity, and you can see mummers' plays around Christmas time at Bampton and elsewhere. There are even duck races at Grove but, to be fair to the birds, toy ducks are now used! A Pooh Sticks competition on the river Thames at Day's Lock, Little Wittenham, was first held in 1983 and has become a regular fixture. Annual autumn fairs, some dating back centuries, still bring noise, fun and some disruption to Abingdon, Oxford, Witney, Banbury and Woodstock. The Oxfordshire area even has one unique pub game, Aunt Sally, where you have to throw sticks or batons to knock a 'dolly' off its spike. On a more cerebral note, Oxford has the world's oldest public museum, the Ashmolean Museum, dating from 1683, which provides free public access to world-class art collections. Other Oxford museums include the University Museum of Natural History, with the last fragments of a dodo, and the Pitt Rivers Museum, with shrunken heads, masks, feather cloaks and musical instruments. The Museum of Oxford covers the city's history and Oxford Castle Unlocked introduces visitors to over 900 years of the castle and prison. Many Oxfordshire towns and villages have local history museums; specialist museums include the River and Rowing Museum at Henley, the Oxford Bus Museum at Long Hanborough, Manor Farm Museum at Cogges and Pendon Museum in Long Wittenham, with model railways set in 1930s English landscapes.

The local musical scene is extraordinarily vibrant. The Oxfordshire County Music Service is among the best in England and Oxford has many classical orchestras, chamber groups and choirs, including those attached to Christ Church, Magdalen and New College. The Holywell Music Room in Oxford is said to be the oldest purpose-built music room in Europe, built in 1748, and the city has many other fine music-making venues, including the Sheldonian Theatre, the Jacqueline du Pré concert hall at St Hilda's

College, college chapels and parish churches. St Peter's Church at Wallingford and Adderbury Church are two of the most atmospheric classical music venues in the county. Oxford is also well-known for other types of music and a survey in 2008 revealed that it is second only to Manchester in turning out rock stars. The city spawned bands such as Radiohead, Supergrass and the Candyskins and acts like Foals, Little Fish and Young Knives are currently winning acclaim. Venues such as the Carling Academy and the Regal in Cowley Road, the Wheatsheaf in High Street and the Jericho Tavern in Walton Street welcome established and up-and-coming bands. The Truck Festival at Steventon has showcased local indie music since 1996. The Towersey Festival since 1964 and the Cropredy Festival since 1974 have provided annual treats for folk music fans. The Blackbird Leys Choir, a group of local people with no previous musical training, evolved out of Channel Five's Singing Estate series in 2006 and has attracted much national attention.

The other arts are in similarly fine fettle. The Oxford Playhouse celebrated seventy years at its Beaumont Street home in 2008 and Oxford's New Theatre provides a wide-ranging programme, which includes opera, ballet, musicals and appearances by star performers. Local dramatic and operatic societies and undergraduates offer a huge choice of entertainment at the many Oxford venues, which include the Old Fire Station, the Burton Taylor Theatre and a growing number of theatres in colleges and schools. Youth drama has a lively base at the Pegasus Theatre in East Oxford. Regular theatre flourishes also at Sonning, at Henley, where the Kenton Theatre dates back to 1805, and at Chipping Norton, where a converted Salvation Army citadel has become a fantastic community resource. The Mill Arts Centre in Banbury stages drama as well as many other arts events. Cinema visits declined in Oxfordshire as elsewhere in the 1960s and many local cinemas closed. Recent years have seen an increase in film-going and new multi-screen cinemas have opened in Oxford, Didcot and Witney. Modern Art Oxford has engaged with new audiences through an open exhibition in 2008 for local residents, by taking arts events into the Oxford suburb, Rose Hill, and through events and activities on the theme of Oxford 2015. One visitor, commenting on the latter, remarked that it 'showed me a vibrant, modern town which offers more than world-

famous libraries and geniuses at University'. The same spirit has been evident at dramatic outdoor events such as OOMF! (Oxfordshire's Own Millennium Festival) at South Park in Oxford in 2000 and Luminox, a stunning light display in Broad Street in 2007. Multicultural Oxfordshire is at its most exuberant in the annual Cowley Road Carnival, which attracted an estimated 35,000 visitors in 2008.

Positive features must outweigh the negative ones in any survey of Oxfordshire today. The BBC Oxford website described Oxfordshire as 'the cleverest county in the world' in 2008. This assertion may be difficult to prove, not least because counties are far from universal, but Oxfordshire is certainly full of people who are determined to make a difference, to enrich the lives of others and to make the county a better place. There are at least 3,000 voluntary and community organizations in Oxfordshire and it has been estimated that 80,000 people give the equivalent of £40 million pounds worth of voluntary work each year in the county. At a challenging time for the whole world, individual and community effort on this scale provides real hope for the future.

Malcolm Graham

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Notes

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