

Walking through the history of West Oxford with Malcolm Graham

+ PART 3 +

Winding your way from St. George's Tower...

Continue to Quaking Bridge, a name first recorded in 1297, and probably a description of its precarious state. The present iron bridge dates from 1835, and the name of the ironfounders, Cort & Co., Leicester is to be seen beneath the North parapet.

eye sore into modest beauty spot

Fisher Row began to develop in the early 17th century upon the Wareham (i.e. Weir-meadow) Bank which was perhaps created during the construction of the Weir Stream centuries before. From the first, it was a home for bargemen from nearby wharves, and for fishermen who supplied the local market with freshwater fish and crayfish. Some of the 17th century houses, together with 19th century insertions, survived until 1954, when the Row was largely cleared, thus turning "a minor eye-sore ... into a modest beauty spot". In 1885, Fisher Row was more happily described as a row "of low houses - some new, some old, and one or two remarkable - (straggling) along a narrow quay arched over by the bridges. In the doubled stream, where it fronts the houses, fleets of old punts lie moored to their poles among the choking weeds; not the varnished toys of the Cherwell, but the craft native to these shallow waters as the gondola to the lagoons of Venice".

On the corner of St. Thomas' Street, No. 1 Fisher Row is a 3-storey brick house of the late 18th century probably built for Ald. Edward Tawney (Mayor of Oxford 1797). Tawney also built the adjacent almshouse in 1797 and, in 1799, left sufficient money to keep three poor men and three poor women, who "should be of good fame and character, who had lived well, and been reduced in circumstances, single and unmarried, and of 50 years of age at the least, ... should be of the established church, and regularly attend divine worship at the parish church of St. Thomas".

Walk into St. Thomas' Street, passing on your left the rebuilt Marlborough House public house (1896, H. G. W. Drinkwater), and cross Bookbinders' Bridge, which probably owes its name to bookbinders serving Osney Abbey. The late 19th century buildings of Morrell's Lion Brewery (5) dominate and crowd in upon this section of the street, and an impressive iron gate is adorned by suitably rampant lions. The brewery offices beyond the gate are again by Drinkwater (1892). Beyond here, St. Thomas' Street is a sorry sight, the victim of well-intentioned slum clearance which failed to distinguish between good and bad. The worst features were congested courts and yards behind the street frontage where overcrowding and poor sanitation was most serious and where most of the 55 cholera cases in the parish in 1854 occurred. Little could be done to improve such areas, but the main crime of the other houses was to be situated in an unfashionable part of Oxford.

55 Cholera cases in St. Thomas' Parish

old Christ Church buildings

As you turn left into The Hamel - a name which means merely "hamlet" or "village", look back towards the Castle, where trees growing out of the motte give an illusion of floating in space. Beyond excavations which traced housing in St. Thomas' back to the 12th century, notice the derelict Mission Hall and Sunday School classroom (1893, F. Martin), which was built for the New Road Baptist Church. To the right of The Hamel, Old Christ Church Buildings (1866-8, E. G. Bruton) (6) provided 12 2-bedroom and 12 3-bedroom flats for families, and 6 1-bedroom flats "for those artisans and labourers whose families consist entirely of one sex, or whose children have grown up and left their homes". The Buildings are in the form of a 3-sided quadrangle, enclosing a drying ground which was also to serve as a children's playground.

Future events in the summer season

15th JULY BAR-B-QUE
Once again we shall be dancing on the Botley Road Recreation Ground to the Royal Garden City Jazz Band. Last years Bar-B-Que was thoroughly enjoyed by all who went so how about you coming this year? Tickets and posters will tell more information nearer the day but mark the date in your diary now and book your babysitter or better still bring the children along and make it a family occasion.

SUMMER PLAYSCHHEME

This years summer playscheme will be held from July 31st to August 25th. The playlead. playleader will be the same as last year Robin Boshier. More helpers are desperately needed to help organise the scheme. You need not be a parent of children who would be attending the scheme - just someone who enjoys being with children - perhaps a sixthformer, student, grandmother or auntie. Anyone who is interested please get in touch with Jill Moss, 4, Otlands Road. Phone Oxford 42051.



WITH THE FLOOR of the main hall beginning to deteriorate noticeably, the Committee has decided to have it sanded and sealed at the earliest opportunity. It will be closed for this purpose from June 30 to July 6 inclusive, and the Association will have to foot the bill of £270. But the new floor should be a vast improvement for everyone who uses it, and will be easier and cheaper to maintain.

The Hall, which started its facelift last year with redecoration, has another improvement now on the way. The redecoration is to be finished, and new full-length curtains are being made with the aid of a grant from the City Council. With the Hall being increasingly used for social events, the Association is anxious that it should provide as pleasant an environment as possible.

THE NEW CLEANING arrangements introduced at the Centre a year ago have saved the Association over £200 in their first year of operation. Basic cleaning has been done during four hours a week, and users of the Centre are expected to clear their own particular mess up after them.

This has proved controversial with some people, while others appear more willing to enter the spirit of 'self-help' and co-operation. In terms of the general atmosphere at the Centre, it is nice to think that people are trusted and responsible: in cash terms, it has also meant that money can be spent on real improvements instead of on cleaning up other people's mess! It has also been possible to 'freeze' the hire charges for rooms, and to introduce a scheme for reduced charges for regular users.

COUNCIL MEETINGS OPEN TO YOU IN JUNE

1st Highways 9.30 am
Estates 2.30 pm
5th Recreation/Amenities 2.15
6th Housing 2.00
7th Planning 9.45 am
13th Environmental Health 2.15
14th Finance 10.15
21st Planning 9.45 am
26th Council 3 pm
28th Parliamentary & Selection 10.15

THE CHINESE HAVE interesting names for their years - do they have a 'year of the fences' by any chance? For it has been just such a year at the Community Centre. We estimate that the City Council has spent over £600 on erecting or replacing fences we did not want, and refused to spend perhaps £200 on a small piece of fencing needed for safety purposes.

When the fencing on the Helen Road frontage broke about a year ago, we asked the Council to remove it so that shrubs and perhaps a seat could be put there to improve the appearance of that side of the building. They refused to dig the tarmac up for us (presumably on grounds of cost) and then the next we knew they had been and replaced the fence.

NEIGHBOUR DE-'FENCE'-LESS!

When Mrs White, whose house adjoins the Centre car park in Binsey Lane, complained of damage to her conservatory from balls used by children playing at the Centre, we asked the City if they would replace some wire netting beside the conservatory which had long since decayed. Eventually - after almost a year - they erected wire netting all along the wall overlooking the Binsey Lane and Helen Road gardens: but they stopped short of the vulnerable conservatory, the only bit that actually mattered!

When a small child 'escaped' from the toddlers' enclosure last July, the Council told the Oxford Mail the fence would be repaired. But after further thought they decided to do nothing after all.

Now don't get it wrong! We don't want the City Council to spend less money here. But we would like to see it spent where it's needed.

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DO YOU HAVE a photograph of historic local interest? If so, WON would like to know. We would like to publish old pictures of the people and places of West Oxford: can you help?