

“Not a bad house; not a bad locality....”

**A study of the historic built environment of the
West End of Oxford**



OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD
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OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD

WEST END AREA ACTION PLAN

Our title is taken from Henry Acland's *Memoir on the cholera at Oxford in the year 1854*. Oxford's west end suffered badly in the cholera epidemics and had been almost totally demolished by the 1970s. Yet as Acland saw, it is all too easy to blame buildings for our problems. They cannot defend themselves. Rebuilding for a brave new world can be persuasive but is often the triumph of hope over experience.

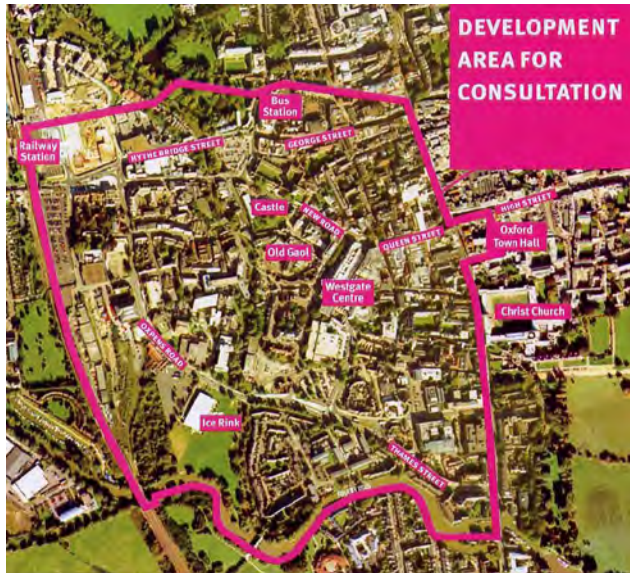
The Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society have commented on the proposed objectives of the City Council's West End Action Plan that it lacks an objective aimed at respecting, conserving and sustaining the historic built environment of the area, and that before decisions are taken, there should be a thorough appraisal of the area with a view to establishing the main issues which the plan will need to take account of.

The Society accepted an offer from the Oxfordshire Buildings Record to carry out an initial appraisal of the area. This work was done by a small team of volunteer members, and we have pleasure in offering the results to the Council for consideration.

The main findings are as follows:

- The recent residential developments should be allowed to bed in before disturbing the remaining structures in the northern part of the area. The influx of new residents needs to settle in; people need time to create a community and articulate their wishes for leisure and commercial activities nearby.
- A case should be made for listing the Ice Rink, Christ Church Old Buildings, the Chequers public house, Cantay Depository, Quaking Bridge and the Wharf House.
- The City Council should consider extending the Central Conservation Area to include the triangle containing the Royal Oxford Hotel, the southern side of Frideswide Square, St Thomas' churchyard and the block bordered by Osney Lane and Woodbine Place.
- A case should be made for commemorating the charitable work of Mary Jephson by a Blue Plaque on the former crèche at Woodbine Place.
- Every effort should be made to conserve St Thomas's school in Osney Lane.
- If demolitions are planned, the Duke of York public house, Hartwell's Garage and King's Motors in Park End Street should be fully recorded.
- The nameplate at Quaking Bridge should be re-instated.
- Some List Descriptions need amending to ensure protection of later additions (Coombe House, Blackfriars, 10 Littlegate St.)
- Any new buildings should be lower in height than the present Westgate car park.
- Remaining elements of the Victorian street pattern should be retained.
- Granite setts should be exposed in St Thomas' Street.
- Mature trees and other natural habitats should be respected and retained.

Methodology



The area shown in the AAP scoping report as being the subject of the action plan and shown in the map below was taken as the basis for the work.¹

Although the area includes a significant part of Oxford's historic centre, eg. Cornmarket Street, St Aldate's and Pembroke Street, the redevelopment proposals are concentrated to the west.

Accordingly the initial survey work was confined to this area in order to trial the method used and to ensure a timely report.

Listed buildings were identified and noted. No further work was done on these as their status gives them a degree of protection under the planning legislation. The City Centre conservation area was noted, but as only one significant building within it (St Thomas's school) is likely to be part of the redevelopment proposals and this building is the subject of a recent planning application, we felt the (limited) protection offered for the rest of the area was adequate for the time being.

The team then systematically examined the area for other structures of all types and ages which made an important contribution to the historic environment. For some, the historical significance had to be obtained by later research. We are particularly indebted to Malcolm Graham's leaflets, 'On Foot in Oxford', in particular no.7 (St Thomas' and Osney) and no.10 (South-West of Carfax).

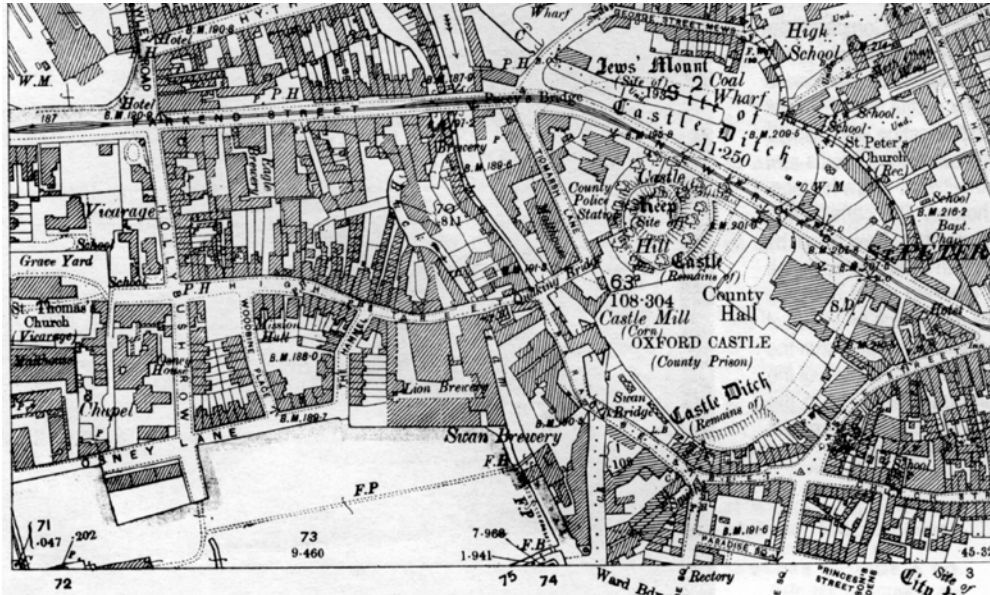
Finally, conclusions and recommendations were prepared.

The results are set out below. For convenience, the area is divided into two parts, divided by Osney Lane.

¹ It was not immediately clear why the boundary was drawn as shown. The Town Hall seemed to have been included on the basis that the City Council have what we took to be a separate consultation exercise in hand on possible changes to this important Grade II* building. The northern boundary is, on the other hand, inexplicable, as it runs through the Said Business School, the grounds of Worcester College, across boundary lines and through the Debenham's store. If the intention was to signal the possible redevelopment of the Gloucester Green bus station, this should have been done explicitly. It is not mentioned in the draft proposals, however.

Part One: Northern Section

The northern part of the area is shown in the 1898 OS map below.



In this area, redevelopment is focussed on the area between Hythe Bridge Street and park End Street, but as the Frideswide Square area is a secondary element, this has also been included.

Listed Buildings

1. 1, 2 and 3 Fisher Row
2. Cooper's Marmalade factory
3. St Thomas' vicarage
4. St Thomas' church
5. St Thomas' Girls' School - The Lodge (1841) and railings.
6. Oxford Prison
7. Old County Hall and walls
8. Coombe House (which we assume covers the adjacent Boy's school of 1839)

Other buildings and structures of importance

Name: Royal Oxford Hotel

Address: Frideswide square

Description: A striking neo-classical closure of the square to the east, in orange Temple Guiting stone, with recent doorways which although incongruous are not unpleasant.



Royal Oxford Hotel (2001)

Summary of importance: Built in 1935 to the designs of J C Leed, this is a valuable contribution to the townscape, facing the visitor entering Oxford from the station or by road. There are some original external features such as the name plates and night bells.

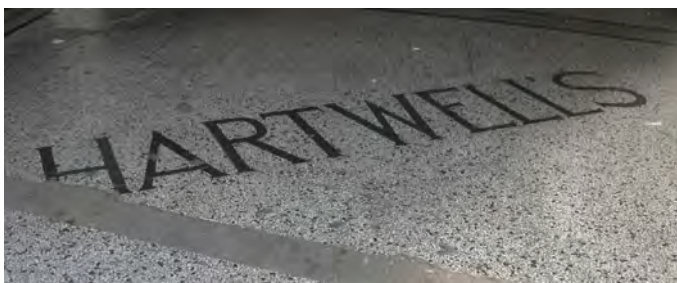
Name: Former Hartwell's Garage (now Staples)

Address: Park End Street



Hartwell's Garage (2006)

Description: The Park End Street elevation retains the Art Deco detailing of the pilasters, frieze and central 'H' initial of the 1930s building, picked out in green. Hartwell's name survives in the mosaic floor of the garage entrance.



Summary of importance: One of the former 'street of wheels' garages which sprung up here in the 1930s, this retains a number of original features.

Name: Former King's Motors (now Kwik Fit)

Address: Park End Street



King's Motors (2006)

Description: A four-bay neo-classical façade in Guiting stone with the second bay accentuated and topped by a cornice. The ground floor façade is modern, but the original name survives in the mosaic floor. Original glass panels showing motoring scenes from the 1930s are not now visible.



Summary of importance: One of the former 'street of wheels' garages which sprung up here in the 1930s, this retains a number of original features.

Name: Cantay Depository

Address: Park End Street

Description: An impressive block, brick with stone dressings; two tall pavilions at each end with shaped gables. The western pavilion is more ornate with an open pediment and unusual round-headed windows with king mullions and transoms. The central three bays also have shaped gables. At ground floor level, some shops retain original ceramic tiles,

mosaic floor designs and iron Lucy columns. The former offices have an engraved glass window with the company name.

Summary of importance: The offices and depository of Archer, Cowley and Co, designed by H J Tollit/Tollit and Lee and built 1894-1909. Henry James Tollit (1835-1904) was a pupil of William Wilkinson, and after his death, his partner Lee seems to have taken over the business. The office building at the west end is particularly important due to the glass, tiles and floor mosaic, as well as the dramatic architectural details.



Cantay Depository (2006)



Office window detail (2006)

Name: Christ Church Old Buildings

Address: The Hamel/Osney Lane

Description: a Peabody-type mass housing development of three blocks around a central drying ground/children's playground.

Summary of importance: Built in 1866-8 by E G Bruton, and originally called 'Model Buildings', this is a remarkable survival. It is highly worthy of listing. The block opposite (1-7 The Hamel) is probably also by Bruton of around the same date.

Christ Church Old Buildings (2001)



Name: Former Crèche and Invalid Kitchen

Address: Woodbine Place



Description: On the corner of the plot bounded by Woodbine Place and Osney Lane, this employs the same materials and general architecture as the surrounding houses. The doorway to Woodbine Place is particularly distinctive, in ashlar with small windows to either side.

Former crèche (2006)

Summary of importance: the crèche was established in 1893 by Miss Mary Jephson of Gunfield, Norham Gardens, probably through a legacy after her death. She was noted for her philanthropic work in the area, and the building stands as a memorial to this, which could be enhanced by the addition of a Blue Plaque to the benefactress.

Name: Chequers public house

Address: Hollybush Row



Description: A long building comprising two pavilions either side of a central block with a recessed first floor, on which the name of the pub is displayed.

The Chequers

Summary of importance: Although no doubt 'modernised' internally, this seems to

be substantially the 1913 pub by Wilkins and Jeeves. It is worthy of listing.



Name: Brewery Gate public house (formerly Marlborough House)

Address: St Thomas' Street

Description: Brick, Welsh slate roof, with outbuildings – possibly stabling with lead roof louvres.

Summary of importance: although altered, originally by H G W Drinkwater, architect to Morrell's brewery, 1896. Suitably refurbished, this pub could be an asset to the area.

Brewery Gate public house (2006)

Name: Quaking Bridge

Address: St Thomas' Street

Description: Iron structure, modern roadway. The name sign seems to have been lost in recent years.



Summary of importance: the name was recorded in 1297, but the present iron bridge was built in 1835 by Cort & Co. of Leicester. The manufacturer's plate seems to be obscured by a buddleia at the north-west corner, which should be removed. The structure is as important as the nearby Swan Bridge and should be listed.

Quaking bridge (2006)

Name: St Thomas' School

Address: Osney Lane

Description: A very attractive polychrome brick entrance and railings with Art Nouveau detailing. The block to the rear is rendered, possibly over brickwork.

Summary of importance: By P A Robson, 1904. Despite an antagonistic report prepared for a recent planning application, this is a good building by an important school architect, and deserves better. This building is threatened by redevelopment, but is within the conservation area. Every effort should be made to conserve it.

St Thomas' School



Name: Frideswide Square south side

Address: Frideswide Square

Description: A row of brick and stone town houses with commercial premises. To the east, the listed Cooper's Marmalade factory by H Quinton, 1902, and in the centre, the former Castle Hotel (1888, E G Cobb). Each building in the group is similar in style and materials. There are some good features such as a floral mosaic floor at no.26 (illustrated below)

Summary of importance: a strong group of buildings which provided a grand statement to the visitor to Oxford on arriving by rail at the LMS/LNWR station opposite (now removed). Although built over a number of years they form a group united by their stylistic similarities. A number of original shopfronts survive and the mansard roof of the former Castle Hotel is a distinctive central feature. The character of the shops reflects the location and traffic conditions, but they are a valuable commercial asset to the large number of dwellings nearby.



Frideswide Square south side (2006)



26 Park End Street (2004)

Name: Row of houses

Address: 1-5 Becket Street

Description: A group of five town houses, four with paired doorways (one now converted into a single doorway) in brick with a slate roof. Three storeys with basements. One with the fading painted sign of the Florey Commercial Hotel above the doorway.

Summary of importance: a good quality row of houses providing hotel and multi-occupancy accommodation in a central location. Probably early 20th century.



1-5 Becket Street

General comments on the historic environment

There are three historic routes into Oxford running through this section. The Botley Road to Hythe Bridge Street, still heavily used, St Thomas' High Street, truncated and now largely residential and Osney Lane, truncated first by the railway and later by the creation of Oxpens Road. Park End Street is a western extension of New Road, built in the 1770s. Transportation has been a key theme. The Oxford Canal terminated in 1790 at what is now Nuffield College, with wharves where Worcester Street car park now is, and the first railway station in the area was built in 1851. There has been a lot of development in this area, even since the 1898 map was produced. The railway encouraged the building of the Royal Oxford Hotel and the motor car drew a number of garages to the triangle.

There is currently a mix of 19th and 20th century buildings in the area which are all well used. But there has been considerable recent building activity in St Thomas' High Street, on the BT site and in Park End Street. The 21st century commercial premises remained empty in January 2006. There is an argument for allowing the residential developments to bed in before disturbing the remaining structures. The influx of new residents needs to settle in; people need time to create a community and articulate their wishes for leisure and commercial activities nearby.

Although many of the Victorian and earlier plots and buildings have gone, the area still retains early 20th century buildings which have survived due to their adaptability. We believe that they can serve 21st century requirements equally well by suitable alterations.

Some granite setts are visible under the broken tarmac in St Thomas' Street. We think that this surface should be reinstated in largely residential roads such as this to differentiate them from the modern roads and to help slow down the traffic.

Part Two: Southern Section

There has already been much redevelopment in this section. There are no listed buildings. The major structure of significance is the Ice Rink, which we consider worthy of listed status. There are, however, some lesser buildings worthy of note.



Outline of southern area on 1898 OS map.

Listed Buildings

1. St Ebbes church
2. 8-10 Turn Again Lane (listed under Charles Street)
3. Holy Trinity Vicarage
4. Jolly Farmers
5. Health centre, and 21 Paradise St (Greyfriars)
6. former Blackfriars, 10 Littlegate St.
7. Former St Ebbes Rectory, Paradise Square (nb not in Images of England)
8. 29a Castle Street
9. Swan Bridge

These are not described in detail as information is contained in the list descriptions. Where additional material was obtained, this is included below.

Other buildings and structures of importance:

Name: Ice Rink

Address: Oxpens Road



Oxford Ice Rink (2001)

Description: 'High tech' steel and glass with the main hall suspended from tall masts.

Summary of importance: an innovative structure by Sir Nicholas Grimshaw (1984). It was one of the first of a new 'school' of leisure buildings with a functionalist aesthetic. Also important is its setting, a ship-like building sitting on a green swathe bordering the Thames (and which is often flooded).

Name: Duke of York

Address: Oxpens car park

Description: 'North Circular' architecture, L-shaped plan; brick, with art deco touches. Stone door surrounds and name plaque.

Summary of importance: one of the few remaining structures left standing from the demolition of St Ebbes in the 1960s/70s. An unpretentious 'local' pub with possibly some



remaining evidence of 'off licence' sales area and original internal features. This building should at least be recorded if it cannot be saved.

Duke of York (2005)

Name: Wharf House

Address: Thames Street

Description: Ashlar faced house of ca1830 with rubblestone side walls and rendered rear. Probably the offices of the wharf officials before becoming a public house. Surrounded by 1980s redevelopment.

Summary of importance: the last vestige of the former river trade in this part of Oxford. Likely to contain original features such as fireplaces. It is not listed, but an internal inspection is needed before action is taken.



Wharf House (2005)

Name: Castle Tavern

Address: Castle Street

Description: Mock Tudor by H G W Drinkwater (1892).

Summary of importance: Attractive example of the style, by an important local architect, who worked for Morrell's brewery among others. Corner site in vulnerable part of the town, but the building serves to protect the listed Greyfriars behind. Danger of being swamped by redevelopment all around.



Castle Tavern (2005)

Name Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre

Address 10 Littlegate Street

Description: Attached to the listed building are two former chapels. One is a large rubblestone building with ashlar dressings and a canted frontage on to Littlegate Street. This seems to be the building referred to in 'On Foot in Oxford – 10' as the former Adullam Chapel, designed by William Fisher in what was then called Commercial Road².

² The early stages of the nonconformist revival owed much to the successful pastorate at New Road of James Hinton (1787–1823), who not only increased the size of the Baptist congregations in Oxford and neighbouring villages, but gained the respect of leading members of the university and townsmen. Nonconformity received a further boost in 1831 and 1832 from the activities of H. B. Bulteel, curate in charge of St. Ebbe's church from 1826 to 1831. Bulteel adopted increasingly extreme views during his time at St. Ebbe's, and in 1828 his parishioners protested to the bishop about such practices as allowing a chimney-sweep to pray extempore to the Sunday school. In 1831, after a provocative university sermon and an unorthodox preaching tour of Devon and Somerset, his curate's licence was revoked. Bulteel replied by holding services in his garden, and later by preaching in the Baptist chapel in St. Clement's, where he was baptised by Hinton's son, John, early in 1832. Later that year he opened the Adullam chapel in Commercial Road, to which

It later became a Baptist Chapel, for a congregation of 800 ‘with a Sunday School attached to the front’, and continued as such until ca.1938. The internal panelling, stairway with handrail and gallery on slim columns all survive. The gallery seating and railings have been removed and a ceiling has been inserted, but the general layout is clear.



Former Adullam Chapel (2005)



Chapel interior (2005)

To the rear is a further chapel-type building with a foundation stone laid by J T Olney, esq, London in June 1884. This building, now divided into a chapel, office and billiard room, also has an inserted ceiling, but the bases of arched roof trusses can be seen supported on stone corbels with shields.

some of his former congregation followed him, and which was for some years the largest nonconformist chapel in Oxford.

From: 'Modern Oxford', A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 4: The City of Oxford (1979), pp. 181-259. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22805&strquery=adullam>. Date accessed: 29 November 2005.

There are some puzzles about these buildings. The street range has concrete sills and window dressings and seems much later than 1832. It is, however, the only candidate for a building holding 800 people and must be the Baptist Chapel. The building to the rear may be the Sunday School, despite its position.



Suspended ceiling in Adullam chapel (2005)

Summary of importance: This complex must now all be regarded as part of the listed building, and the list description needs to be revised to take this into account. The former Adullam/Baptist Chapel is in need of renovation, but could fairly easily be restored to form a meeting room or community hall. The postern and gateway to the former Blackfriars monastery is preserved within as the rear wall of the 1647 house. There is much good quality craftsmanship in both the chapel buildings.

Name: St Ebbe's Rectory

Address: Paradise Square

Description: This building is listed, but a description could not be found on Images of England. It is in limestone and was built by G E Street in 1854. Now used by Cherwell College it is entered from a small garden, part of Paradise Square. Inside, a newel stair and some good panelled doors. The extension of 1868 has a doorway to the street with date, coat of arms and a motto.



Interior of St Ebbe's Rectory (2005)



Summary of importance: Clearly any building by G E Street merits recognition. It does not appear to be under threat, but the preservation of its setting amongst the trees should be safeguarded.

St Ebbe's Rectory – exterior (2005)



Stairways – St Ebbe’s Rectory (2005)

St Ebbes school (Street, 1858) shown on the OS map to the south of the rectory, has been demolished – there is a modern block of flats on the site.

Other buildings

Much of the post-1970s construction lacks merit. The Westgate Centre dominates the northern part, and is too bulky for the adjacent buildings. Some of the small-scale housing on Paradise Square is better suited to the area, and even Critchley’s brick building on the square is well-detailed and may stand the test of time. The Abbey Place housing scheme to the south of the square is, on the other hand, in need of care and attention.

Architecturally, it seems to have borrowed a number of motifs from Japanese architecture (eg. kimono-windows and double-king-posts) – perhaps filtered through Charles Rennie Mackintosh - but the main merit of the block is as a barrier between the Oxpens Road and car park and the domestic scale of the square. The former College of Further Education building on the east side of the Castle Mill stream is also looking tired. The modern housing south of Turn Again Lane is well-scaled, varied, but appears to be a jumble of houses with no clear numbering or logic.



Details of windows and doorway at Abbey Place (2005)

General comments on the historic environment

Although the demolition of St Ebbes and the subsequent rebuilding of the Westgate Centre and new housing destroyed the Victorian street pattern, some elements survive around Paradise Square and Littlegate Street. These remnants are important, but the Oxpens Road does not follow the earlier pattern.

There are a number of trees in this block which soften the bleak open areas and modern buildings. Some clearly pre-date the demolitions, later ones are now well-established. They all make an important contribution to the area and provide valuable wild-life habitats.

Conclusions

The West End of Oxford has been badly served over many years. As a location for closely-packed workers' houses in the 19th century it was badly hit by the cholera epidemics of the 1840s and many houses became slums. However, the destruction of the buildings in the 1970s destroyed a community and brought with it large-scale impersonal structures such as the Westgate centre and car park, out of scale and with no realisation of the consequences in terms of increased car travel into the city. Since then, attempts have been made to bring people back, at Abbey Place, and St Thomas's High Street. The former is even now showing signs of lack of maintenance; the latter is mainly a series of 'gated ghettos' in which the inhabitants live, in self-imposed isolation from some perceived but probably imaginary threat. Yet these people, and those in the friendlier new developments at the Lion Brewery and the former Telephone House need time to form

communities and articulate what they want from their neighbourhood. It would not be right to embark on wholesale redevelopment of the west end until this has happened. Many of the buildings designated as in redevelopment areas in the proposals have shown over the years that they are adaptable to new uses, and many have important original features. The historic built environment is generally at a smaller and more people-friendly scale than modern developments and has been shown in many places to be a positive force for revitalising communities. The West End action plan should be drawn up with an understanding of this and a recognition that it is all too easy to blame buildings for our problems. They cannot defend themselves. Rebuilding for a brave new world can be persuasive but is often the triumph of hope over experience. Demolition should be the last resort.

Recommendations

Our recommendations are as follows.

- The recent residential developments should be allowed to bed in before disturbing the remaining structures in the northern part of the area. The influx of new residents needs to settle in; people need time to create a community and articulate their wishes for leisure and commercial activities nearby.
- A case should be made for listing the Ice Rink, Christ Church Old Buildings, the Chequers public house, Cantay Depository, Quaking Bridge and the Wharf House.
- The City Council should consider extending the Central Conservation Area to include the triangle containing the Royal Oxford Hotel, the southern side of Frideswide Square, St Thomas' churchyard and the block bordered by Osney Lane and Woodbine Place.
- A case should be made for commemorating the charitable work of Mary Jephson by a Blue Plaque on the former crèche at Woodbine Place.
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- If demolitions are planned, buildings such as the Duke of York public house, Hartwell's Garage and King's Motors in Park End Street should be fully recorded.
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- Some List Descriptions need amending to ensure protection of later additions (Coombe House, Blackfriars, 10 Littlegate St.)
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- Remaining elements of the Victorian street pattern should be retained.
- Granite setts should be exposed in St Thomas' Street.
- Mature trees and other natural habitats should be respected and retained.

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