



the
Oxton Society
Annual Report 2020-2021



New words entered our collective vocabulary in 2020-21: pandemic, Covid-19, face mask, lockdown, zoom. We became obsessed with numbers at national, Wirral and at Oxton Ward level. Yet, despite the anxiety, the sadness, the disruptions to everyone's lives and three lockdowns, the Oxton Society, like so many organisations, has carried on. Looking back, we were able to achieve more than we might have expected as we held all our committee and group meetings by zoom. Our main event of the year, Secret Gardens, was cancelled and presented virtually and there was a Christmas lights switch-on but no gathering. We tried to keep in touch with members through newsletters, history periodicals, members' emails and Twitter. The website was updated regularly and a new members' Facebook page launched. Other key functions, including planning, trees, history all carried on virtually.

But what shines out from this is the importance of the multiple layers of community that exist in Oxton. *Greens*, *Edwards* and *Stirling Wines* did their best to keep open throughout and to deliver food to vulnerable households and we remain enormously grateful to all the teams involved. We now give a hearty welcome back to the businesses that were forced to close as well as a resounding welcome to the new businesses that have located in the Village. The full list can be found on the Oxton Society website.

Home Watch groups turned themselves into online WhatsApp support networks that looked after their immediate neighbours: shopping, picking up prescriptions, dog-walking, sharing websites, information, humour and all the while trying to keep positive.

"It is heartening to see the growing sense of community and concern for each other in Oxton". These were the words of Councillor Allan Brame who set up a framework for volunteers in Oxton just before everyone was told to stay at home on March 23rd 2020. We are indebted to Allan and his teams of volunteers for their energy and commitment throughout this year.

So despite the restriction and three lockdowns the Oxton Society is able to report progress in a number of significant ways. But it has also enabled the Society to take stock and review our priorities as we go forward.

Conservation

The Village Centre

The Willows development was finally completed and the four shops (highlighted in the April



newsletter) and apartments were largely let by early 2021. Extensive discussions covering the treatment of the frontage, works to the imposing sycamore tree and the location of a defibrillator took place and agreement on all these matters was reached. We were delighted that the developer, Mike Hercules, agreed to the siting of a defibrillator on the side of one of the shop units and undertook to pay for the electricity and insurance costs. Generally, the Society is pleased with how the development has been designed

and constructed and the partnership which has emerged with the developer. As part of completing the Willows development the Society refurbished its notice board and Oxton Joinery did an excellent job at no cost for which we are very grateful. In addition, we undertook work on the sycamore tree located at the entrance to the site.

On the more negative side, January 2020 saw the appearance of the large-scale mural on the side wall of Home Coffee. Its appearance divided the Village not least as there had been no consultation with the Society, the Council or local residents. The Council ruled that the

Tranmere Rovers football logo constituted an advertisement and required permission. It asked for the crest to be removed and it was replaced with the Birkenhead coat of arms.

Christmas Lights



Not being able to hold a Christmas lights switch-on event meant that the Village lights project was in danger of not being funded. However, a tremendous community response resulted in the project being funded through a JustGiving initiative. In addition Greens of Oxton donated a new Christmas tree and collaborated with Oxton Artists, who created beautiful and unique Xmas decorations. Many of our local businesses also made significant donations and we are very grateful for all their continued support. We were able therefore to purchase new lights for the tree, plus a few repairs and extensions which provided a much-needed boost to the lockdown look of the Village. Wirral Borough Council gave us permission to keep the lights up past 6th January to lift the post-Christmas gloom; so overall, and given the circumstances, this proved to be a very successful community event. The plan for 2021 will be to hold the switch-on event again as normal.

Hanging Baskets

The cancellation of the hanging baskets display was, of course, a great disappointment as its contribution to the summer Village scene is so widely appreciated. However, our alternative display of colourful bunting with a floral motif from July to October went some way to brightening up the Village centre. The good news is that in January we received a very generous donation for the baskets for 2021 from a member of the Society in memory of relatives.



Planning

There was a significant drop in the number of consultations received on planning applications — just twelve in this period. Objections were submitted to three of these on the grounds that they were harmful to the character of the Conservation Area, and one representation was submitted to support an application which made a positive contribution. One planning enforcement complaint was submitted in respect of unauthorised demolition of a section of sandstone wall. A significant issue was the need to encourage the improvement of the quality of design in new buildings, how this could be embedded in the Council's emerging Local Plan and factored into the anticipated submission of a planning application for the Ashton House site.

4 Trees

It was inevitable that Covid would have a big impact on the work of the Tree Group. Notwithstanding, thirty six applications were disposed of during the year, all within the prescribed time limits. Of these, twenty three concerned trees within the Conservation Area and thirteen protected by Tree Preservation Orders. This result is due to the hard work of Prof. Ron Jones, who stood in for David Coombs as coordinator of the Group just as the first lockdown started in 2020. We'd like to extend out thanks to David Coombes for his sterling work as convenor and grateful thanks to Ron Jones for taking on the role *pro tem*.



The tree planting scheme for members has had to be suspended due to Covid. Some five applications have been notified and are held in abeyance.

Community

Secret Gardens



The Secret Gardens of Oxton was cancelled in May 2020 due to lockdown. Not daunted by this setback a small group of members and residents organised a virtual event on Facebook, publishing videos of more than twenty village gardens as well as performances from local entertainers.

More than 2,500 people visited the page during the day-long event and more than £3,000 was raised via JustGiving and donated to Wirral Foodbank. Residents also donated half a ton of food via collection boxes in the Village. Planning by the Oxton Society Secret Gardens Task Group for a second virtual event took place for 2021.

History

During lockdowns the Guided History Walks had to be suspended. The History Group posted on the Oxton Society website, for download, two quiz walks for family groups. They aimed to promote permitted exercise at the same time as encouraging interest in local history in children and young people. The History Group was kept busy answering a stream of individual questions about Oxton's people and places from the past.



In September 2020 a Blue Plaque was unveiled to commemorate the work of Laura and Jane Willmer, sisters who lived in Wellington Road. They were amongst the first women newspaper editors in Britain, in the early 20th century. Restrictions were in place, but the unveiling was conducted by the editor of the Liverpool Echo, Maria Breslin, the first woman editor of the newspaper, with the family of Shabbar Jaffar, the owners of the house

A new page on the website was set up featuring Lockdown Walks from Oxton Village and a number of members contributed their own walks.

A major new history of the Society was launched in 2020 written by the Secretary Alan Chape and given to members for free: *Oxton Conservation Area and the Oxton Society 1979-2019*.

Communications

During the last year we have produced four newsletters, of which the first two were online only, because of delivery issues during the Covid lockdowns. Following a survey in February 2020, when 180 members replied, we have been publishing new articles in response to their comments, including pieces on local businesses, architecture, wildlife, planning issues and on people who lived in the Village houses in the past. Over the next year we hope to cover more topics suggested by members: environmental issues such as climate change, gardening topics and articles on local artists, authors and community groups.

The period following the appearance of the mural caused the Society to rethink its social media strategy. The Society's Facebook site was being overwhelmed by the debate and by other issues. As a result, we decided to create a separate Facebook site and restrict it to members of the Society. This has worked very well as the site is focussed on conservation and community matters relevant to the workings of the Society. Alongside this, a site entitled Only in Oxton emerged which has 2,200 members and is a vehicle for discussing other matters of interest to the Village.

Membership

At the end of the year we had 471 memberships comprising 166 individuals, 305 households and 52 business members. More than 71% of our membership live within the Conservation Area.

Of the 206 memberships which joined or renewed, 35% paid by cheque, 51% by PayPal and 14% by bank transfer. Although the pandemic has affected recruitment we have achieved successes: several new members have signed-up online, having been impressed by the quality of our website and Facebook postings.

It was agreed during the year that a new preferred method of payment using standing orders would be introduced from March 2021, although payments by cheque could continue. We benefit greatly from the 85% of members who agree to make their payments eligible for Gift Aid and nineteen members also added donations.

Partnerships

The Society has been in consultation with Conservation Areas Wirral (CAW) to agree comments on the draft Wirral Local Plan. Comments on the release of green belt land have taken centre stage but the Society has been active in highlighting the threats to the character of 400-500

properties that make a positive contribution to the Conservation Area. In addition, we have stressed the inadequacy and outdatedness of the Oxton Conservation Area Management Plan (approved in 2010). We have submitted a revised overall planning strategy statement as part of our comments on the draft Local Plan. This has been publicised in the Society's newsletter.

We value all our partnership including Conservation Areas Wirral (CAW), The Williamson, Friends of the Arno and all the churches, charities and schools that we work with and look forward to continuing with them when life returns to 'normal'.

Financial

The Oxton Society incurred a deficit of £6,092 for the year. The primary cause was the cancellation of the Secret Gardens event although there were several one-off items of expenditure, including our contribution to the landscaping of the Bank Site. Fortunately we have fairly substantial reserves with £20,537 remaining at the end of the year. See page 7 for the financial summary.

Looking Ahead

The starting point for mapping the future priorities of the Society has to commence with the impact of the pandemic on the way the Society conducts its business and the consequent changes to life in the Village. We will review the way in which we inform and respond to our members' concerns and suggestions. Some of the substance related to this includes lessons for Oxton from the pandemic and the concept of *EcOxton* and the *Cool Wirral* initiative. We will be arranging discussions with members during 2022.

We are also conscious of the wider context in which the Conservation Area sits. By October 2021 the Wirral Council should have submitted their new Local Plan to the government for its public examination. There may also be the first steps towards a new National Policy Planning Framework as part of the Government's plan to redesign the local planning process. Both of these will have important implications for conservation areas like Oxton, especially in relation to the proposed new policies for introducing the concept of 'beauty' in the design of places and buildings.

Finally, thanks to businesses, members, officers and the executive committee who have continued their support and have come through this challenging year together. A particular thanks to Councillor Allan Brame and his volunteers. A number of new faces joined us on the committee zoom screens and we are very sorry that Patrick Toosey, Steve Ferguson and Carolyn Weber will make 2021 their last year serving on the committee. All have made substantial contributions to the Society over many years and we will lose not only their significant expertise but long memories of the Society and how it has changed and developed. They will be hugely missed.

Rhiannon Evans

Chair, The Oxton Society

August 2021



Summary of the annual accounts for 2019-2020 and 2020 - 2021					
Year ended 29 Feb 2020			Year ended 28 Feb 2021		
Income	Expenditure		Income	Expenditure	
		Administration			
£4,371		Memberships & donations	£4,628		
	£380	Accountancy		£400	
	£660	AGM		£229	
	£610	Subscriptions (CV,CAW etc)		£510	
	£416	Website/Software		£643	
	£1,563	Newsletters		£887	
£25	£68	Other	£15	£163	
£4,396	£3,697		£4,643	£2,832	
		Strategic aims			
£10,242		OxSoc Secret Gardens	-£1,051		
	£597	Blue plaque		£410	
	£2,880	Hanging baskets/Bunting		£866	
£776	£1,043	History group & periodical	£832	£3,742	
	£797	Tree planting		£447	
£4,066	£5,941	Xmas lights	£3,334	£3,553	
£500	£60	Oxton in Bloom	£0	£0	
	£0	Other		£2,000	
£15,584	£11,318		£3,115	£11,018	
£19,980	£15,015	Totals for the year	£7,758	£13,850	
£26,629		Carried forward	£20,537		
		Secret Gardens			
Secret Gardens 2020			Virtual Secret Gardens 2021		
£0		£6 Programmes (pre- sales)	£0		
£0		£8 Programmes (on the day)	£0		
£0		Other income	£3,303		
	£1,051	Expenses		£60	
	£0	Payments to charities		£973	
	-£1,051	Balance to Oxsoc		£2,270	
£0	£0		£3,303	£3,303	
		Programme numbers			
0		£6 Programmes (pre- sales)	0		
0		£8 Programmes (on the day)	0		
0		Total programmes sold	0		

Agenda Oxton Society Annual General Meeting

Wednesday 29th September at St Saviours Church Hall, 30 Bidston Road, CH43 2JZ

19.00- 21.00

1. Chair's welcome

2. Minutes of last AGM September 25th 2019:

<https://theoxtonsociety.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/AGM-Minutes-2019.pdf>

3. Matters arising

4. Chair's report and approval of annual report

Summary of highlights and achievements 2019-2021

Discussion and questions

5. Accounts and approval of Treasurer's report (see p7 of the annual report)

Discussion and questions

6. Nomination and election of Executive Committee members and officers

Officers

Chair: *Rhiannon Evans*

Vice-Chair: Jeff Willis

Treasurer: Griff Round

Secretary: John Heathman

Committee members

Alan Chape, Dave Barden, Chris Jarrey, Bob Knowles, John Booth, Carla Walker, Heather McGrath-Alcock, George Harrison, Dominic Wilkinson, Steve Weber, John Field

Two vacancies remaining

8. Tribute to outgoing members Patrick Toosey, Steve Ferguson and Carolyn Weber

9. Motions (to be notified prior to the meeting to the Secretary)

10. The future

Close of meeting

There will be a stall displaying and selling the Society's publications

