



The Oxton Society

Annual Report for year 1st March 2023 to 29th February 2024

Oxton Conservation Area



We can all help to look after the Oxton Conservation Area



Produced by the Oxton Society for all residents of the Oxton Conservation Area, November 2022

We can all help to look after the Oxton Conservation Area



Introduction from Chris Jarrey, Chairman

Welcome to this annual report for the year 2023-2024; my second annual report as chairman and I have to say it feels like 2024 has raced by at least partly due to it being such a productive period of time for the Oxton Society. We have seen progress in many areas of our operations and some important progression in filling vacancies within our excellent team but with more to fill ongoing, details of which can be found in our newsletters and on the society website.

The village has flourished both environmentally and economically with few premises without tenants for any meaningful period and the new 'social' area outside of the shops on what was the bank site now attracting all generations as a new centre point of the village. The businesses on the site have diversified the retail offering in the village in a positive and possibly more 'continental' way.

The conservation work has been fruitful and special thanks must go to John Heathman for organizing the repainting of our heritage lamp posts, funded by the society and hopefully giving them many more years of life. Other positive results can be seen in the maintenance of our uniquely varied boundary walls and the work of the tree group, all of which goes towards retaining, nourishing and replenishing the feel of the village. It's often the little nudges and willing knowledgeable advice which the society is able to gently give that can make a big difference in sustaining our village as a delightful place to live and work and thanks must go to all in the society whose expertise and devotion to the cause allows that to happen. Thanks must also go to all of our members without whom the Oxton conservation area could not function.

As you know our main fundraising event of the year, the Oxton Secret Gardens, has continued to flourish and grow under the stewardship of a large number of local volunteers, most of whom go personally unheralded but to whom on behalf of the society and I hope the village in general I would like to express our sincere thanks and gratitude. Our event managers Kirsty and Lisa have continued to develop and enhance the success of the event and I am sure they know they are equally appreciated by all in the society.

So many individuals go into making our society and local environment such a success that it is not possible to name them all individually, but please know that however you contribute to the society, no matter how small the contribution, it is greatly appreciated and please accept my thanks on behalf of the committee.

The following pages detail our main activities over the year. I think you will agree that the society is in a very good place; our plan for the next 12 months is to focus on management of the tree scape and to ensure that the large planning issues currently still in consideration by Wirral Borough Council are dealt with in a manner in accordance with our founding principles.

Conservation and Planning Group

The former Planning Sub-Group of the Committee was renamed as the Conservation/Planning Group. This was to reflect its wider responsibilities and our renewed attempts to do more conservation work rather than community projects. The aims of the group are to help preserve and enhance the conservation area, including:

- Send comment on planning applications to Wirral Borough Council (WBC)
- Keep a watching brief on likely developments within the area
- Represent our interests to the Council and Conservation Areas Wirral (CAW) regarding the Local Plan and the role of heritage in council policy.
- To monitor the Oxton Character Appraisal and Oxton Management Plan
- To oversee the Oxton Design Award scheme
- To undertake conservation projects that reflect these aims

The main conservation project for the year was to produce a conservation leaflet on “Looking after the conservation area” which was distributed to every residence within the conservation area (over 800 properties).

The message was that whereas the iconic trees and sandstone walls in Oxton are well protected by planning rules, most houses, apart from our listed buildings, but including our “heritage houses” that contribute to Oxton’s special charm, have little or no protection from alterations that could damage their character. This means that the preservation of the area depends on householders ensuring that any changes they make are in keeping with the character of their property. Following this, we launched the idea of putting forward Oxton as an Article 4 pilot area via the Conservation Areas Wirral group. This was to introduce more protection for heritage housing. The Council has accepted the idea in principle but, to date, it has not progressed this initiative due to competing priorities.

There was one major planning application to consider, which was for the redevelopment of the former NHS site at Ashton House, bordered by Village Road, Columbia Road, Alton Road and Kent Street. We largely welcomed the proposals, including retention of trees and the design and layout of the houses, but were disappointed in the lack of green elements such as electric vehicle (EV) charging, solar panels, heat pumps etc. We also emphasised the need for a strong management plan to be put in place for the sandstone boundary walls. The decision on the planning application has been repeatedly delayed but now seems imminent. We have also commented on ten other applications – making minor comments on three of these and “no comment” or “support” for the rest.

The pair of Victorian semi-detached houses at the junction of Palm Hill/Shrewsbury Road came on the market as a potential development site. So far, no planning application has been received.

There were no nominations for the 2023/24 Design Award.

Tree Group

After 6 months of shadowing existing Tree group members, Duane Chong took over responsibility for the co-ordination of tree work applications within the Oxton conservation area in May 2024. Long standing tree group member George Harrison, together with David Coombes, who rejoined the group during the summer, make up the tree group.

The role of the Tree Group is to cast an eye over applications for tree work in the conservation area and to offer our observations to the Wirral Council's tree officers. Though the Oxton Society doesn't have decision making powers (only the Council does), we are able to offer our thoughts on whether we believe the application proposals are reasonable and justified. In this time of nature and climate crisis, the Council's (and our) first thought is to prevent the felling of a tree if it can simply be managed better through crown reduction, crown lifting, or limb removal. However, there are times when both we and the council agree that a dead, dying or diseased tree may best be felled and replaced.

The trees of Oxton are wonderful, and provide significant benefits to the local community by reducing flood risk (through ground water absorption), cooling the air, biodiversity enhancement and wildlife habitat, reduce air pollutants and mitigate climate change, through carbon capture. Spending time near trees also provides physical and mental health benefits enhancing energy levels while decreasing blood pressure and relieving stress. Landscaping with trees can also potentially increase property prices by as much as 20%! The trees of Oxton provide us with a legacy too, having social, aesthetic, sensory and leisure value in our community, providing stability and consistency to our lives, and are the subject of folklore, memories, and storytelling.

There have been recent discussions in the Oxton Society committee about the health, maturity and size of the tree population within the conservation area, and the committee is agreed that we should undertake a survey of the trees, involving local residents, through a citizen science approach. Following this, we will engage residents in learning activities to identify and age the trees in their road, notice whether trees are in good health, and improve the capacity of local children, young people and adults to assist with the survey data collection. By doing this, we hope to assist residents to better manage their tree assets.

More information about the survey and how residents can get involved will be provided through future Oxton Society newsletters.

Finance

The financial balance sheet for year end 2023/4 appears at the end of this report.

With thanks to our treasurer Griff Round and his excellent stewardship of the accounts has ensured a closing balance of £36,069, and an uplift of £6,316 from our previous end of year balance.

Membership

The year unfortunately saw the tragic loss of our Membership Secretary, Dave Barden, who was killed in the Moroccan earthquake whilst on the last leg of his world cycle trip. Jeff Willis agreed to take on the role on a temporary basis, and, with the help of Frances Barden, the membership database was recovered. We decided to overhaul the system and streamline it ready for a new secretary to take it over. This work was completed by 31st March 2024, pro bono, by Chris Malpas, a friend of the Society. Part of the modernisation plan was to press on with the use of Standing Orders for membership subscriptions in order to minimise administrative work.

The new streamlined membership database is now fully operational and the backlog of all changes since Sept 2023 is now cleared. At that time there were still 52 members who were due to renew for 23/24. They have been sent “final reminders” but we are assuming that about 50 memberships will be lapsed.

There are 35 members still to renew for the current year 2024/25. Since October 2023 we have had 27 new members, all paying by standing order or have become life members.

The membership, assuming 50 lapsed from 23/24 and 30 renewals for 24/25 still outstanding is, at the time of writing, a total of 451, made up of: 41 Life Members, 246 Household Members and 164 Individual Members. Of these, there are 376 who are paid up to date and 328 of these pay by standing order. The remainder have still to renew or have paid multiple years in advance.

We also have 73 corporate members with a free subscription – mainly the local Oxton businesses as well as partners that we liaise with, for example, other Charities and Conservation Areas, CAW, Wirral Borough Council, our local MP’s office.

We have, for the first time successfully applied for Gift Aid from our 2023/24 membership subscriptions and this generated a further £500 (approx.) for the Society.

Secret Gardens

Another highly successful event was held, brilliantly managed by our two key organisers and local residents, Kirsty Cotton and Lisa Stafford. We sold over 4,000 tickets for the event and after costs, were able to distribute more than £24,000 to our 3 participating partner charities (The Terral Morgan Memorial Fund, Sundowns and Birkenhead Youth Club). The Society itself received the remainder of the profits (approx. £11,000). It was agreed that moving forward for the event in 2024 onwards, that the profit split would increase in favour of the partner charities assisting us, each receiving 25%. The Secret Gardens event remains the main income project for the Society; without it the Society would be severely restricted in its operations and ability to carry out its conservation work.

Christmas Lights

This important community event continues to attract what seems like the entire residents of Oxton plus others from the wider area. Bringing the event back to a Saturday in 2023 meant that there was less crowding, although it was still very well attended with the dry weather bringing people out. The usual mix of local choirs, Salvation Army Band, kid's activities, Father Christmas grotto and mulled wine stalls made the event a huge success. A late response from an appeal for more volunteers to help run the event meant that the event could go ahead, as this was in doubt, but the issue of a lack of volunteers continually remains a problem. Thanks must go to the organising group led by Marie and Dave Pennington.

The finance to run this event still creates an issue for the society. This year the society backed the event with £1,781 to help pay for the road closure and the electrical contractor's installation costs. With this in mind we have decided, starting in 2024, to install the Christmas lights strings on a permanent basis with a one-off payment to the contractor that will see us able to effectively recoup that investment after 2-3 years.

We continue to try to engage with the local businesses in putting on this event. This had little success in 2023, but we are hopeful that the businesses will engage more and take up their responsibilities in helping us deal with rubbish disposal and the overall cost. It is noted that the money income from the Xmas raffle, (>£1000), is entirely due to the prizes that the businesses provide, but more actual investment, both physically and financially by the local businesses would make running this event more pleasurable and financially less onerous.

Hanging Baskets

2023 saw the last year that John Booth officially organised the hanging baskets project. A fabulous display was again brought to the village (repeated by John again in 2024!) Finding a volunteer to take over this task has been difficult – an offer from a local gardens landscape company has been received, but no firm agreement is yet in place for them to take over. In the meantime we continue on with the small posse of helpers who always turn out to assist with putting up and taking down the baskets. For 2025 we will have to find a new supplier of the flowers, so there is further change ahead. Hopefully this will not be an issue. The society funds the entire cost of the hanging baskets project annually which runs to approximately £2,500+.

History Group

Over the year the History Research Group has continued its various works. In addition to our four history walks, to the east, to the west, from the Arno and from the Williamson Art Gallery, we added a fifth walk, The Women of Oxton, informing people of the talented and courageous women residents of old.

In March 2024 the Group presented a display at the annual Wirral History and Heritage Fair at Hulme Hall. We also provided five walks as our contribution to the national Heritage Open Days programme in September.

The History Periodical, published quarterly, reached its 45th edition, and we look forward to maintaining its quality of original research into the year leading to our 50th edition, and the consequent publication of our second hardback compilation early in 2025.

We continued to research and answer individual questions sent to us by interested Oxtonians and others, including the Frick Museum in New York.

The paper history archive has been put in store after the regrettable closing of the Oxton Bookshop at the Williamson. We extend thanks to Moira Young for the valuable service she provided in running the archive for many years, selling our booklets and managing our walks.

Summary of the annual accounts for 2023-2024

Year ended 28 Feb 2023			Year ended 29 Feb 2024	
Income	Expenditure		Income	Expenditure
£3,374		Administration		
	£472	Memberships & donations	£4,024	
	£199	Accountancy		£542
	£129	AGM		£296
	£1,137	Website/Software		£169
£99	£431	Newsletters		£1,311
£3,473	£2,368	Other	£163	£1,178
			£4,187	£3,495
		Strategic aims		
£15,228	£0	OxSoc Secret Gardens	£12,063	
	£2,760	Blue plaque		£0
£220	£807	Hanging baskets		£3,291
	£0	History group & periodical	£156	£1,219
£3,114	£5,921	Tree planting		£0
	£459	Xmas lights	£4,823	£6,605
£18,562	£9,947	Other		£304
			£17,042	£11,418
£22,035	£12,315	Totals for the year	£21,229	£14,913
£29,753		Carried forward	£36,069	

		Secret Gardens		
Secret Gardens 2023			Secret Gardens 2024	
£21,688		£8 Programmes (pre- sales)	£22,480	
£13,760		£10 Programmes (on the day)	£12,687	
£13,922		Other income	£9,298	
	£11,659	Expenses		£8,835
	£25,648	Payments to charities		£24,941
	£12,063	Balance to OxSoc		£10,689
£49,370	£49,370		£44,465	£44,465
		Programme numbers		
2711		£8 Programmes (pre- sales)	2810	
1376		£10 Programmes (on the day)	1268	
4087		Total programmes sold	4078	