

Wholesome Dwellings

Housing Need in Oxford and the Municipal
Response, 1800-1939

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List of Abbreviations

JOJ	Jackson's Oxford Journal
OC	Oxford Chronicle
OCA	Oxford City Archive
OHC	Oxfordshire History Centre
OT	The Oxford Times
TNA	The National Archives

Author's Preface

'Wholesome dwellings of a type much needed.' That was how Arthur Ormerod, Oxford's Medical Officer of Health greeted the twenty-eight new Wingfield Street houses which the Oxford Cottage Improvement Company had fashioned out of dilapidated Dover's Row in 1909. By the early 20th century, the provision of social housing had become a major issue, but Oxford City Council, like most English local authorities, was reluctant to interfere in a private housing market that had proved unable to supply houses for the least well off. This logjam was broken in the aftermath of the Great War when the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919 established a partnership between central and local government to provide 'Homes for Heroes'. The heady idealism of those early days soon faded, but the supply of council housing along similar lines continued until the 1980s. In seeking to provide affordable houses between the Wars, some of the challenges Oxford City Council faced - frequent changes in government housing policy, for example - were common to all English local authorities, and the book thus serves as a comparative study. Oxford was unusual, however, in being run by a virtually non-political council, including a minority of university councillors. The city also faced special challenges such as the tightly-drawn municipal boundaries and high wages in the motor industry which impacted on building costs. Above all, Oxford's national and international reputation gives the study a more than local significance, as witnessed by the notoriety of the Cutteslowe Walls saga, the most glaring example of residential segregation in the city between the Wars. Today's shortage of truly affordable houses and social housing for rent is very similar to the situation a century or more ago so this examination of the achievements and shortcomings of the City's response to the inter-war housing crisis can provide timely lessons for a brighter future.

Chapter 1

The nineteenth century background

In Oxford as elsewhere the housing question in the nineteenth century was largely seen in the light of broader public health issues.¹ The population of the city more than doubled from 11,921 to 28,843 between 1801 and 1851² and a rash of suburbs began to occupy the low-lying fields and meadows around Oxford's famous towers and spires. In 1811, there were 2,092 inhabited houses in the city and the adjoining parish of St Clement and no fewer than 1,190 houses were built during the boom decade of the 1820s. St. Clement's was incorporated into the city in 1836 and, by 1851, Oxford had 5,100 inhabited houses.³ In broad terms, developers and builders managed to keep pace with the demand for housing since the number of people per house in Oxford and St Clement's declined from 6.0 in 1821 to 5.3 in 1841.⁴ Typically, too, the new housing for the working classes was 'tailored to suit their low earnings'⁵ and the report from the Poor Law Commissioners in 1834 alleged that speculators in St Clement's and elsewhere were deliberately building 'houses of the worst and most unhealthy kind' in order to exploit a situation by which occupiers of cottage property could secure exemption from paying rates on the grounds of poverty and then claim partial rent relief from the parish; the unscrupulous landlord was thus able to charge the tenant a higher rent than he could otherwise have done.⁶ Some builders certainly acquired several adjoining plots in order to cram more houses on to a site or to create courtyards filled with poorly-ventilated properties, but most simply erected the basic house type of the period, the two or three storey through-terrace house of local brick or stone with a Welsh slate roof.⁷ Incomers from the surrounding countryside such as Henry and Martha Taunt, whose son, Henry, became the well-known local photographer, could afford to rent one of the new houses in St Ebbe's and, according to the Revd John Henry Newman, curate of St Clement's in the 1820s, that area was substantially populated by those who had been made homeless by improvements in the city centre.⁸

Oxford's early nineteenth century properties, like those elsewhere in England, were usually of moderately high quality and certainly an improvement on older urban and rural workers' housing but, in the absence of an adequate municipal water supply or city-wide drainage, they relied on wells for their water and on cesspools, ditches or streams for drainage.⁹ This provided the grim context for the three major cholera epidemics which struck Oxford, causing 95 deaths in 1832, 64 deaths in 1849 and 115 deaths in 1854. More than a third of all the deaths in the city in 1832 occurred in St Clement's, and new housing areas in St Ebbe's and Jericho were also severely affected. After 1832, St Clement's benefited from a new water supply piped to public pumps from springs on Headington Hill, but St Ebbe's was again badly affected in the later epidemics, accounting for thirty (26%) of the city's deaths in 1854.¹⁰ Henry Acland, in his account of the 1854 outbreak, drew attention to an overcrowded house in Gas Street, St Ebbe's

¹ A.S. Wohl, *The Housing of the Working Classes in London, 1815-1914*, S.D. Chapman, ed., *The History of Working Class Housing: a Symposium* (1971), p. 21

² A. Crossley, ed., *A History of the County of Oxford, volume IV: the City of Oxford* (1979) – hereafter VCH Oxon 4, p. 182

³ Census 1811, *Abstract of the Answers and Returns* (1812), pp. 259, 264-5; Census 1821, *Abstract of the Answers and Returns...Parish Register Abstracts* (1822), pp. 256, 260; Census 1831, *Abstract of the Answers and Returns...Enumeration Abstract*, vol. I (1833), pp. 492-3, 502-5; VCH Oxon 4, pp. 181, 195, 261-3

⁴ Census 1821, *Abstract of the Answers and Returns...Parish Register Abstracts* (1822), pp. 256, 260; Census 1841, *Abstract of the Answers and Returns...Enumeration Abstracts*, 1841 (1843), pp. 232, 237

⁵ A. Sutcliffe, *Working-class Housing in Great Britain: a Review of Recent Research*, *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin* 24 (1972), 42

⁶ *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the...Poor Laws* (1834), pp. 14-16

⁷ M. Graham, 'The Suburbs of Victorian Oxford', Leicester University Ph D thesis (1985) – hereafter Graham, *Suburbs of Victorian Oxford*, pp. 247-8

⁸ M. Graham, *Henry Taunt of Oxford: A Victorian Photographer* (1973), p. [1]; A. Mozley, ed., *Letters of J H Newman during his life in the English Church, volume 1* (1891), p. 84

⁹ Graham, *Suburbs of Victorian Oxford*, pp. 251-2; J. Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970* (1970), p. 73; D.J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (1979), pp. 266-7; R.J. Morris, 'The Friars and Paradise: the Building of St Ebbe's', *Oxoniana* 35 (1970), p. 94

¹⁰ VCH Oxon 4, pp. 237-9; R. Fasnacht, *A History of the City of Oxford* (1954), p. 197; H.W. Acland, *Memoir of the cholera at Oxford* (1856), p. 30

where six families, comprising twenty-seven people, lived under one roof. He emphasised that 'this is not a bad house; not a bad locality, as houses and localities are counted bad, but it is a kind of house, and a kind of locality, and this is a kind of life, for those who live it, which begets eleven cases of cholera upon two floors, built on a piece of ground about 28 by 18 [feet].'¹¹

The most important local government body in Oxford at this time was the Paving Commission, a joint university and city authority which had been established in 1771, but it lacked the powers to control development and declined to adopt the Health of Towns Act in 1848 because this might lead to increased expenditure and the loss of local autonomy. The commissioners held a sanitary inquiry in 1851 which identified the grave danger to public health from inadequate drainage arrangements, abundant cesspools and disgusting privies, and the risk of seepage from cesspools into wells. The report recommended a covered main sewer to a treatment plant south of the city, the installation of main drainage to houses and the replacement of cesspools and privies by water-closets. The scale of this work was beyond the Paving Commission, but the authority continued to make some improvements such as the covering of Trill Mill Stream, a branch of the river Thames which had virtually become an open sewer through St Ebbe's. A local attempt to secure greater powers for the commissioners failed in 1854, and efforts to secure a strong Local Board of Health under the Local Government Act 1858 were thwarted in 1859-60 before finally being accepted in 1864. The Oxford Local Board established in 1865 was a joint university and city body like the Paving Commission and almost equally committed to economy, but building byelaws introduced in 1866 enabled it to intervene much more closely in the development process. From the first, the board accepted that a main drainage system should be established and, although it took until 1872 to commit itself to a scheme, the system was in operation by 1877 and was completed in 1880.¹²

Reports into the cholera epidemics and Ormerod's 1848 survey of the sanitary condition of Oxford drew attention to dreadful housing conditions in poor areas of the city. In 1856, Acland acknowledged that he had seen far worse dwellings in London, Edinburgh and other large cities, and he was reluctant to condemn every alley as unfit for habitation, but he deplored the continued existence of certain rooms and staircases in St Thomas' and St Ebbe's. Before 1851, he and other sympathisers had acquired one of the worst alleys in Oxford with a view to building model dwellings, but the purchase price and the low rents they could obtain made the scheme a commercial failure; they had simply uprooted a bad population without providing the model dwellings.¹³ Acland may also have been influential in persuading his college, Christ Church, a major landowner in St Thomas's parish, to stop renewing the leases of dilapidated old properties there in the 1840s. In 1850, Christ Church set up a house improvement committee which set out to repair old houses in Hollybush Row and let them to respectable tenants. More ambitiously, in the mid-1860s, the college commissioned the Oxford architect, E. G. Bruton, to prepare plans for improving their property in the parish and he proposed building a number of model dwelling houses by 1876. (Fig. 1) The first two blocks, now known as Christ Church Old Buildings, were built in 1866-8 on the site of Woodbine Place, and a further seven 'cottages' were built in The Hamel in 1868. (Fig. 2) The return from these dwellings was disappointing and the college waited until 1893 before commissioning another block, Christ Church New Buildings, in Osney Lane.¹⁴ Poor housing conditions across the city led in 1866 to the formation of the Oxford Cottage Improvement Company which was inspired by the work of early housing societies in London. The company had 'mainly philanthropic' motives, promising shareholders an annual dividend of up to five percent through purchasing old houses, reconditioning them and renting them out to the labouring classes; once firmly established, the company also envisaged building new blocks. By 1880, the company was renting out 55 tenements in Oxford and was generally paying a dividend of four or five percent. In 1884, it responded to the demand for low rental properties in North Oxford by acquiring a site in Plantation Road from St John's College and building a terrace of seven cottages designed by the college

¹¹ Acland, *Memoir of the cholera at Oxford*, p. 80

¹² VCH Oxon 4, pp. 232-9; Bodl. G. A. Oxon 8^o 850(7) Byelaws made by the Local Board of Oxford... (1865), *passim*; Graham, Suburbs of Victorian Oxford, pp. 172-8

¹³ Acland, *Memoir*, pp. 46-7

¹⁴ Graham, Suburbs of Victorian Oxford, pp. 123; Christ Church Archives, Maps Oxford (St Thomas) 26; Christ Church Archives Estates 78/135, ff. 336, 364



Figure 1. Plan of St Thomas's prepared in 1867 by the Oxford architect, E. G. Bruton, illustrating an ambitious programme for building new housing on the Christ Church estate. Newly-built model dwellings are shown on the corner of The Hamel and Kite Lane, today's Osney Lane. Houses on the east side of The Hamel were built as planned in 1868, but the other dated improvements were never implemented.

architect, Harry Wilkinson Moore. The site was costly to develop because of former gravel workings and the new houses had to be let at higher than intended rents ranging from 5/- to 5/9 a week; a small discount was offered for prompt payment and, it was alleged, for regular church attendance. The Plantation Road scheme seriously depleted the company's capital and it acquired no more old properties until the 1900s.¹⁵

The population of Oxford continued to increase in the second half of the nineteenth century, from 28,843 in 1851 to 49,336 in 1901. This growth was fuelled in part by the expansion of the university, but the railways also strengthened the city's role as a regional market centre and helped it to become something of a residential resort.¹⁶ By the 1850s, there was scarcely any available housing land in the city centre and development was therefore concentrated in the suburbs, creating the 'base and brickish skirt' around Oxford which Gerard Manley Hopkins so deplored.¹⁷ The number of inhabited houses in Oxford rose from 5,100 in 1851 to 10,484 by 1901 and J. Eagleston, a member of Oxford Local Board, claimed in 1870 that the new suburbs catered for every section of the community: 'on the one hand there were magnificent dwellings for the wealthy, and quiet corners for the learned; on the other hand there were pretty little cottages where people might remove from the courts and alleys of the city streets, and dwell in comfort and

¹⁵ Bodl. Oxon 4° 180, ff. 1, 5-7; OC 3.1.1885

¹⁶ M. Graham, *The Growth and Impact of Oxford after 1800*, K. Tiller and G. Darkes, eds., *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire* (2010), pp. 146-7

¹⁷ W.H. Gardner and N. H. McKenzie, eds., *The Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edn (1967), p. 79



Figure 2. Christ Church Old Buildings in Osney Lane in 1971. The three storeyed tenement block of red and cream brick, designed by E. G. Bruton and built between 1866 and 1868, provided a mix of one, two and three bedroomed flats around a central drying ground. Beyond it, there is a glimpse of one of the Christ Church houses built in The Hamel in 1868 alongside Morrell's Brewery chimney.

peace.¹⁸ In Oxford as elsewhere, however, it was becoming evident that this new housing was for people who could choose whether or not to move. Affordable housing for working people was now a diminishing asset as builders no longer erected the sort of houses they had provided earlier in the century and old properties in central courts and yards were being displaced for new college and university buildings and commercial premises.¹⁹ The pressure to build better houses came from landowners and developers who insisted on high quality properties that would retain their value; both on the St John's College leasehold estate in North Oxford and on Robert Buckell's freehold estate in Grandpont, for example, builders were required to expend a minimum sum on each house.²⁰ Local authority intervention added to the cost of house-building, and Joseph Curtis, an Oxford architect and builder, estimated that the Local Board's building byelaws introduced in 1866 and the requirement to deposit plans of new buildings with the City Engineer would add 15% to the rent of a working man's house.²¹ Market-orientated builders also chose to build higher value houses because they would be more likely to appeal to potential purchasers or tenants and thus attract a higher return.²² Between 1845 and 1910, the improvement in the size and quality of the average

¹⁸ OC 4.6.1870; *Census of England and Wales, 1901. County of Oxford, Area, Houses and Population* (1903), p. 9

¹⁹ A. Sutcliffe, Working-class Housing in Great Britain: a Review of Recent Research, *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin* 24 (1972), p. 44; C.V. Butler, *Social Conditions in Oxford* (1912), pp. 98-100

²⁰ Graham, *Suburbs of Victorian Oxford*, pp. 70, 153

²¹ OC 12.1.1867

²² Graham, *Suburbs of Victorian Oxford*, p. 192

house contributed to a rise of approximately 85% in house rents; during that period, the rents of the lowest class of property remained static.²³

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century and until 1914, Oxford's local authorities strived to improve conditions in the city's older housing areas while resisting growing pressure to embark on a municipal house-building programme. Key figures in the struggle to improve public health in Oxford were the Medical Officer of Health, Alfred Winkfield, and the Inspector of Nuisances, Thomas Hull, appointed by Oxford Local Board in 1871.²⁴ In his annual report for 1872, Winkfield noted that 'the water supply was very bad in some localities with wells exposed to pollution from cesspools, etc.'²⁵ Following detailed inspections, hundreds of notices were issued in the 1870s under the Board's building byelaws, requiring properties to be connected to the city water supply. In 1874, Winkfield reported many complaints about both the quality and quantity of the water, noting that it was unfiltered and that pumping ceased at night, leaving houses served only by the mains without water for many hours. These issues were eventually resolved in 1885 when filter beds were built at the city waterworks and water from the river Thames above King's Weir was piped to the Railway Lake reservoir.²⁶ The main drainage of the city, overseen by the City Engineer, William Henry White, led to the replacement of hundreds of foul privies with water closets, a task that was virtually complete by 1880.²⁷ Winkfield then turned his attention to very dilapidated courts and houses, issuing property owners with notices to repair them or see them closed down. In 1884, he reported that houses in Green Dragon Yard in St Aldate's, Norman Court in St Thomas's and Lamb and Flag Yard, St Thomas's had been closed, and some houses in Sadler's Court, Buckland's Yard, St Ebbe's had been demolished as unsafe and unfit for human habitation.²⁸ Official interventions of this kind contributed to a reduction in the death rate and, in Oxford's case, the death rate fell from 22.4, close to the United Kingdom average of 22.8, in 1875 to 13.0 in 1900 when the average for the England and Wales was 18.3.²⁹

The Medical Officer of Health and his staff were not the only people to bring poor housing conditions in Oxford to public notice. Energetic clergymen such as the Revd Thomas Chamberlain in St Thomas's and the Revd Montague Noel in St Barnabas' knew every corner of their parishes and deployed district visitors who not only supported parishioners' faith but could also report back on the individuals that they met.³⁰ From 1883, visitors from the newly-formed Oxford Sanitary Aid Association began to visit poor people in their homes, providing some health education and also advising the Medical Officer about cases of infectious disease.³¹ Publicity encouraged calls to Oxford's local authorities that they should utilise the various Acts of Parliament which enabled them to intervene more forcefully in the housing question. In 1877, a correspondent F.S.M. from St Aldate's suggested that the City Council could usefully clear its old courts and yards in George Street under the terms of the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act 1875 and build 'comfortable dwellings' on the site of the City Gaol in Gloucester Green.³² The *Oxford Chronicle* published an apparent debate between two working men in 1885, criticising the destruction of old cottage properties which was forcing people like them into lodgings or out 'Robin Hood way', a remote corner of East Oxford; they wanted the City Council or the Local Board to buy up convenient land and build rows of cottages renting for three to four shillings a week.³³ Like most contemporary local authorities, both bodies adopted a *laissez faire* attitude to housing³⁴ and nothing changed after 1889 when Oxford became a County Borough and a newly-elected City Council took over from the non-political Local Board.

²³ K. Maiwald, An Index of Building Costs in the United Kingdom, 1845–1938, *Economic History Review Second Series* 7 (1954/5), p. 192

²⁴ OC 7.1.1871

²⁵ *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the City of Oxford* (1872) – hereafter M.O.H., 7

²⁶ M.O.H. (1874), pp. 10–11; M.O.H. (1884), p. 11

²⁷ M.O.H. (1877), p. 8; M.O.H. (1880), p. 10

²⁸ M.O.H. (1884), pp. 12–13

²⁹ M.O.H. (1875) – (1900), *passim*; T. McKeown and R.G. Record, Reasons for the Decline in Mortality in England and Wales during the Nineteenth Century, M.W. Flinn and T.C. Smout, *Essays in Social History* (1974), p. 246

³⁰ A. Summers, A Home from Home: Women's Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century, S. Burman ed., *Fit Work for Women* (1979), pp. 34–5

³¹ M.O.H. (1883), p. 8; M.O.H. (1884), p. 10

³² OC 14.4.1877

³³ OC 3.1.1885

³⁴ E. Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations* (1974), pp. 116–22

The new council initially had a Liberal majority, but University members accounted for a fifth of its membership and party politics played very little part in its affairs.³⁵ George Hawkins, a compositor at the University Press and the first President of Oxford Trades Council, stood as an Independent candidate for North Ward in the municipal elections in November 1889 and included a call for better housing in his election address. He came second bottom out of fifteen candidates, but his campaign drew attention to the needs of working people and may have encouraged Alderman J. C. Wilson to argue in February 1890 that Oxford needed a Housing and Allotments Committee on both charitable and public health grounds because the city had many houses in a most unsatisfactory condition. His request was referred to the Sanitary Committee, but no action was taken.³⁶ The Oxford Board of Guardians, prompted by the Revd L. R. Phelps, unanimously passed a motion in November 1891, urging the City Council to consider improving the dwellings of the poor because bad housing inevitably led to destitution, ill health and drunkenness. Their memorial was belatedly referred to the Sanitary Committee the following February and a sub-committee visited some of the courts in St Thomas's which the Guardians had specifically mentioned. Their report in June stated that conditions were not as black as they had been painted: 'where landlords do their duty and tenants pay their rents, a tolerable level of comfort and convenience was generally attained.' As a result, they advised the council that there was no justification for adopting part III of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890 as a prelude to building municipal houses.³⁷ Ironically, the City Council did use the 1890 Act to obtain loan sanction for an improvement in St Ebbe's that had first been proposed in 1854. Decrepit buildings in Blackfriars Road, including Trinity Square, were demolished and Trinity Street was extended over the site to form a link with Friars Street and open up the neighbourhood. The scheme completed in 1893 included a new house and shop in Friars Street designed by the City Engineer.³⁸ (Fig. 3)

By the end of the nineteenth century, the housing question was no longer simply a public health issue affecting the poorest in society who, in contemporary eyes, were often seen as improvident.³⁹ Reports from the Royal Commission on Housing in 1884-5 showed how dangerously overcrowded many cities were becoming. The extensive demolition of houses and commercial demand for central sites was forcing rents up while the flight of the middle and artisan classes to the suburbs was providing builders with a speculators' paradise.⁴⁰ In Oxford, C.V. Butler reported in 1912 that tenants in the city's remaining courts and yards were generally paying one shilling a week per room and sixpence for a washhouse. Local builders were preferring to build larger houses renting at over five shillings a week when the less well paid were clamouring for small, cheap houses renting for less than four shillings a week. At the same time, there was a shortage of three bedoomed houses in areas close to major workplaces such as Oxford University Press.⁴¹ In Oxford, too, the quality of new building work and the effectiveness of local authority supervision provided an additional cause of concern. In 1881, E.F.G. Griffith published a report on the sanitary condition of the University's Lodging-Houses, finding recently-built properties 'nearly as imperfect in their sanitary arrangements as those built a century ago'.⁴² The Delegacy's Sanitary Inspector continued to find fault with the drainage in new houses and the local historian, Herbert Hurst, criticised the 'unwisdom or trickery of modern builders' for including too little hair in plaster ceilings; about once a month, he saw the debris of a fallen ceiling being removed.⁴³ Against this backdrop, in February 1899, the Young Men's Christian Association held a conference on 'Sanitary Regulations as to Building Sites and Housing of the Working Classes in Oxford.' The conference asked the City Council to provide equivalent accommodation for families displaced by demolition and appointed a committee to study the local housing situation. The committee decided that three bedoomed houses were necessary to ensure the separation of the sexes and failed to find

³⁵ VCH Oxon 4, p. 240

³⁶ D. Bowie, *Reform and Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires: Radical, Socialist and Communist Politics in the City of Oxford, 1830-1980* (2018), pp. 82-3; OC 8.2.1890, 14.6.1890

³⁷ OC 14.11.1891, 21.11.1891, 11.6.1892

³⁸ Bodl. G. A. Oxon b.168, f.4; OHC OCA City Engineer's Strongroom Plan 6040

³⁹ D. J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (1979), p. 268

⁴⁰ Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, pp. 277-8

⁴¹ Butler, *Social Conditions in Oxford*, pp. 98-9, 112-16

⁴² E.F.G. Griffith, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Lodging-Houses* (1881), p. 5

⁴³ Graham, *Suburbs of Victorian Oxford*, pp. 187-8

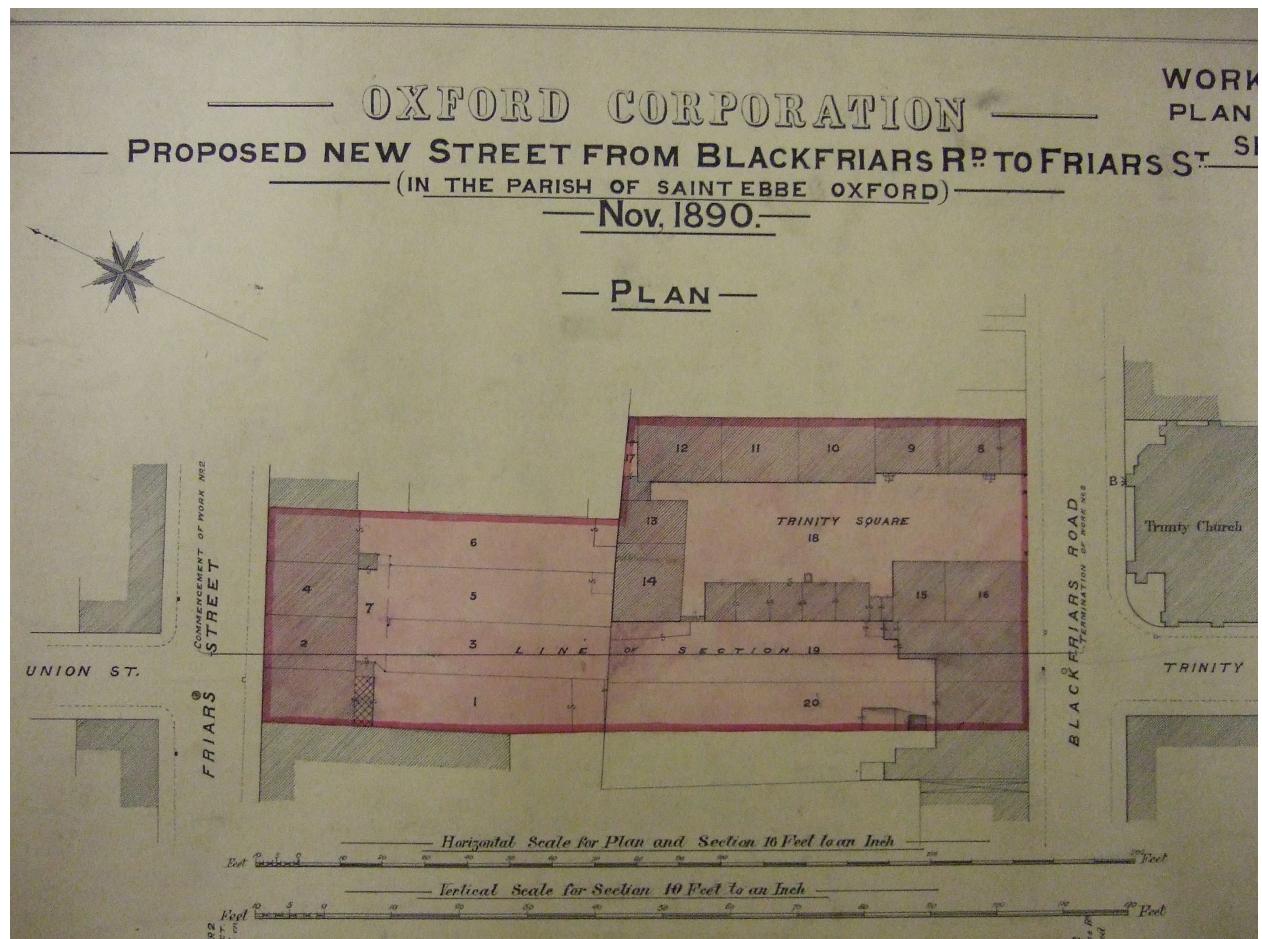


Figure 3. Plan of a proposed extension to Trinity Street in St Ebbe's, 1890. Blackfriars Road and Friars Street had been laid out as two parallel roads in the early 1820s, and the formation of an interconnecting street to bring light and air to a densely populated area was first recommended in 1854. Oxford City Council finally carried out the improvement in 1893, demolishing Trinity Square and building a new house and shop in Friars Street.

any that were let for less than six shillings a week. Its report in October estimated that the council could build suitable houses to rent at between 4/3 and 4/6 a week using the powers of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890.⁴⁴ In February 1900, the Oxford Christian Social Union agreed to the formation of the Oxford Municipal Housing Association which would seek to influence public opinion and persuade the City Council to adopt part III of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890. The association, led by the Revd A.J. Carlyle and the Revd W.B. Duggan, held public meetings and carried out a survey of city centre housing which confirmed a shortage of bedroom accommodation.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ OC 25.2.1899, 14.10.1899

⁴⁵ OC 17.2.1900, 24.3.1900, 21.9.1900, 26.10.1900, 21.12.1900