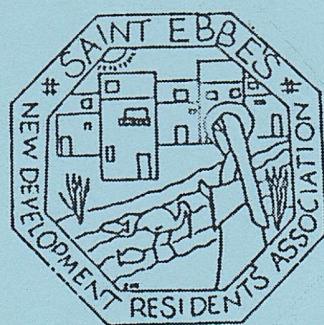


St Ebbes New Development Residents Association

**SENDRA**

**A Brief History of an Oxford Parish**



by

Mary Hodges

## SENDRA, a Brief History of an Oxford Parish

St Ebbe's parish is one of the ancient parish divisions of the City of Oxford, dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> century. St Ebbe was a Northumbrian princess who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and a church dedication to her is very unusual; she was the daughter of King Ethelfrith of Northumbria and sister of King Oswald of Northumbria. She became abbess of the double monastery of Coldingham in northern Northumbria. St Etheldreda, Ebbe's niece, became a nun in her monastery before founding a monastery at Ely. Ebbe was renowned for her holiness. She died in 683; her relics were found in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and her feast day is on August 25<sup>th</sup>. Today the headland near Coldingham is called St Abbes Head.

St Ebbe's church stands just inside the old City walls and very close to the Little Gate, the southern entrance to the City. It was a private church in early Saxon times and in 1005 Ealdorman Aethelmaer granted the church and its possessions to the Abbey of Eynsham. The parish from the beginning housed the poorer inhabitants of the city. The Friars - Black and Grey – so named from the colour of their habits - came to live in the area from 1221 onwards. The Blackfriars or Dominicans, also known as the Order of Preachers, had their Priory built in the area south of the Little Gate; eventually their land, gardens and orchards reached down to the river.

The Priory of the Greyfriars or Franciscans was also built just south of the City wall adjacent to St Ebbe's church, and with their land also extending across to the river. By the end of the thirteenth century the whole area had become known as the Friars and people still call it that today. When the two Friaries were closed in 1538 by order of Henry VIII as part of changes which were to become the English Reformation, the lands they had owned passed to others who for a long time used the land for market gardens. The Paradise Gardens had formerly been the orchard of Greyfriars and were said to be the finest kitchen garden in England; another place-name, Penson's Gardens, commemorates another extensive market garden in the area. Because the area was the home of poorer people natural disasters often took a heavy toll; in 1643 an epidemic struck the parish severely and in 1644 a fire further reduced the number of people in the parish.

In 1819 the Oxford Gas Works was built on land which had formerly been part of the Friars' market gardens beside the River Thames. From that time the parish was developed rapidly as an area of cheap housing. The need for such housing was in part caused by the clearance of cottages in the city centre where the Colleges were undertaking expansion of their buildings and in part by a general growth in population in Oxford during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The St Ebbe's area was seen as suitable for small houses for working people. It was regarded as being particularly unattractive for superior housing development since it is low lying and subject to flooding. The Gas Works also made the

atmosphere unpleasant. Only Paradise Square was developed for more superior housing and here a Church of England elementary school and a rectory were built for St Ebbe's parish. From about 1819 to 1830 economic factors in the country at large encouraged investment in the building and renting of cheap property. In fact most of the houses built in St Ebbe's in this period were financed by tradesmen, college servants and even labourers. The land was bought in large lots and the road plan laid out, but the building was done by men who bought small parcels of land and there built houses to let which were of the cheapest kind, with, typically, two up and two down room arrangements. As a result of this piece-meal development little or no attention was paid to drainage, lighting or road surfacing. Drainage was simply provided by a series of cesspools, privies and open ditches, with the result that well water was contaminated. Builders made some effort to deal with the problem by providing ditches along the backs of the houses; these ditches led effluent down to the Thames with the outflow just above the Oxford Water Works at Folly Bridge. In fact the houses were built at a time when there was general ignorance about drainage and water supplies. For water, occupiers of St Ebbe's houses used wells which were shared between houses. The cholera outbreaks of 1832 and 1849 seriously affected St Ebbe's and in 1849 no fewer than thirty people died here. Eventually the general efforts to improve drainage throughout the City brought better conditions, but the St Ebbe's houses still remained in a poor and overcrowded part of the City, overshadowed by the Gas Works. In 1845 Holy Trinity Church was built and opened on the corner of Trinity Street and Blackfriars Road. It was a daughter church to St Ebbe's parish church and in 1851 had a congregation of 750 people; it was built in the Early English style to designs by H J Underwood. In 1882 the Gas Light and Coke Company, when extending their works by building on the south bank of the Thames, connected the two sites by two bridges which still stand. The Gas Works at that time provided employment for some 300 people. As early as 1930 efforts were made to clear slum properties in St Thomas' parish and this led to the emergence of commercial and shopping areas in Hythe Bridge Street, Park End Street, Tidmarsh Lane and Paradise Street.

In the 1950s a wholesale redevelopment of St Ebbe's began. The City Council saw that the overcrowded houses and streets should be cleared. The clearance of slum housing was proceeding apace all over the country and the City Council, in tune with this, wanted to develop new suburbs of Council owned property to the south and east of the City. The Morris car factories were principal employers in Oxford and the new housing developments were planned to be close to these factories. However, many St Ebbe's people worked within the city and above all in the employ of the

University. The first building to go was Holy Trinity Church, demolished in 1957, then the gas works and the gasometers were cleared by 1968. The 19<sup>th</sup> century houses were almost completely cleared by 1972. 17<sup>th</sup> century houses in Turn Again Lane were rescued from demolition by the Oxford Preservation Trust, whose offices are now in one of the houses they saved. The City Council owned much of the area and by compulsory purchase took over the rest.

This was a time of challenge for the City Council. The area now cleared was large and potentially very important, since it lay immediately adjacent to the very centre of the medieval city. In 1945 to 1947 the City Council appointed Thomas Sharp, an eminent town-planning consultant, to produce a comprehensive plan for Oxford. In the introduction to the plan Sharp said 'I know very well that some of the suggestions I make will rouse bitter opposition in some quarters.' A major concern at this time was traffic flow in the City. Plans to build a relief road connecting the railway station and St Aldates with a view to a continuation relief road across Christ Church Meadow had begun in 1923 when Christ Church sold Oxpens Meadow and its surrounding area to the City. The first step was the building of a bridge over Castle Mill Stream and the construction of a new road from Hollybush Row to New Street. The new road was planned 'to relieve the congestion of traffic at Carfax.' by extending it to St Aldates and from there across Christ Church Meadow to Magdalen Bridge. The campaign to prevent a road being built across Christ Church Meadow, which had become part of Sharp's plan, unfortunately meant that his vision of a renewed Oxford was lost. The area cleared by 1972 was now to contain the new Westgate Centre, car parking in a multi storey block, new buildings for the College of Further Education, and housing developments. Into the area came new buildings of varying quality, in 1966 the Magistrates Courts, in 1968 the College of Further Education, and in 1965-69 the maisonettes on the site of the old Gas Works - now Preachers Lane and Friars Wharf. These blocks of maisonettes more or less followed the plan Sharp put forward - he had suggested however that provision of housing to replace the old St Ebbes should consist of three storey blocks.

The further development of the now vacant area of St Ebbe's remained stalled for a number of years by indecision over planning and the inability of the City Council to make use of Sharp's plans. The main problem was the road system. From 1930 onwards surveys, reports and inquiries on transport and the road system flowed from many quarters. Inner relief-roads were suggested but no agreement over details was reached. Central Government insisted on the need for relief-roads, 'twenty years of proposals, counter proposals, decisions and reversals followed that at times made the city a national laughing stock.' (Victoria County History of Oxfordshire Vol IV Oxford City) In

1972 the City Council refused to implement what central government had ordered and in 1974 the County Council took over road developments. By this time the Westgate Centre and the new County Council Offices had been built and as a result Castle Street was realigned. Protests about the complete demolition of St Ebbe's and the Friars led the planners to consider using the land still derelict for housing and to use this opportunity to build the long proposed road through to St Aldates. The building of Oxpens Road and the new Thames Street defined the area now to be used for housing. The long planned hotel site became a housing area and by a piece-meal process the area cleared twenty years before was filled as we see it today. Street names were retained in some cases, Dale Street became Dale Close and Sadler Street became Sadler Walk commemorating James Sadler (1753-1828). In 1784, whilst employed in the University Chemistry laboratory, he made the first aerial ascent; in a hot-air balloon, from a site just south of the city wall, overlooking Merton field. Other street names disappeared but Pike Street reappeared in 1986 as Pike Terrace. The new Salvation Army Citadel replaced the old building and the Deaf Centre was placed in a restored building which retained a very few medieval and 17<sup>th</sup> century features including traces of the medieval Blackfriars Priory. An important gain was the mixture of social and private housing. The architectural merits of the first phase new development (Dale Close, part of Trinity Street, and Sadler Walk) inspired very successful social housing design in Blackfriars Road, Trinity Street, Pike Terrace, Old Greyfriars Street and Turn Again Lane. A first real effort to improve the river bank along both the Thames and Castle Mill Stream was a welcome asset stemming from the private development both in our area and in Shirelake. But the public buildings of the 1970s in the St Ebbe's area consisted of 'large, insensitively detailed buildings rising from car-strewn open spaces....even the most doctrinaire modernist would find it difficult to find a good word to say for the new telephone exchange, the magistrates court and the appallingly insensitive Westgate Centre.'

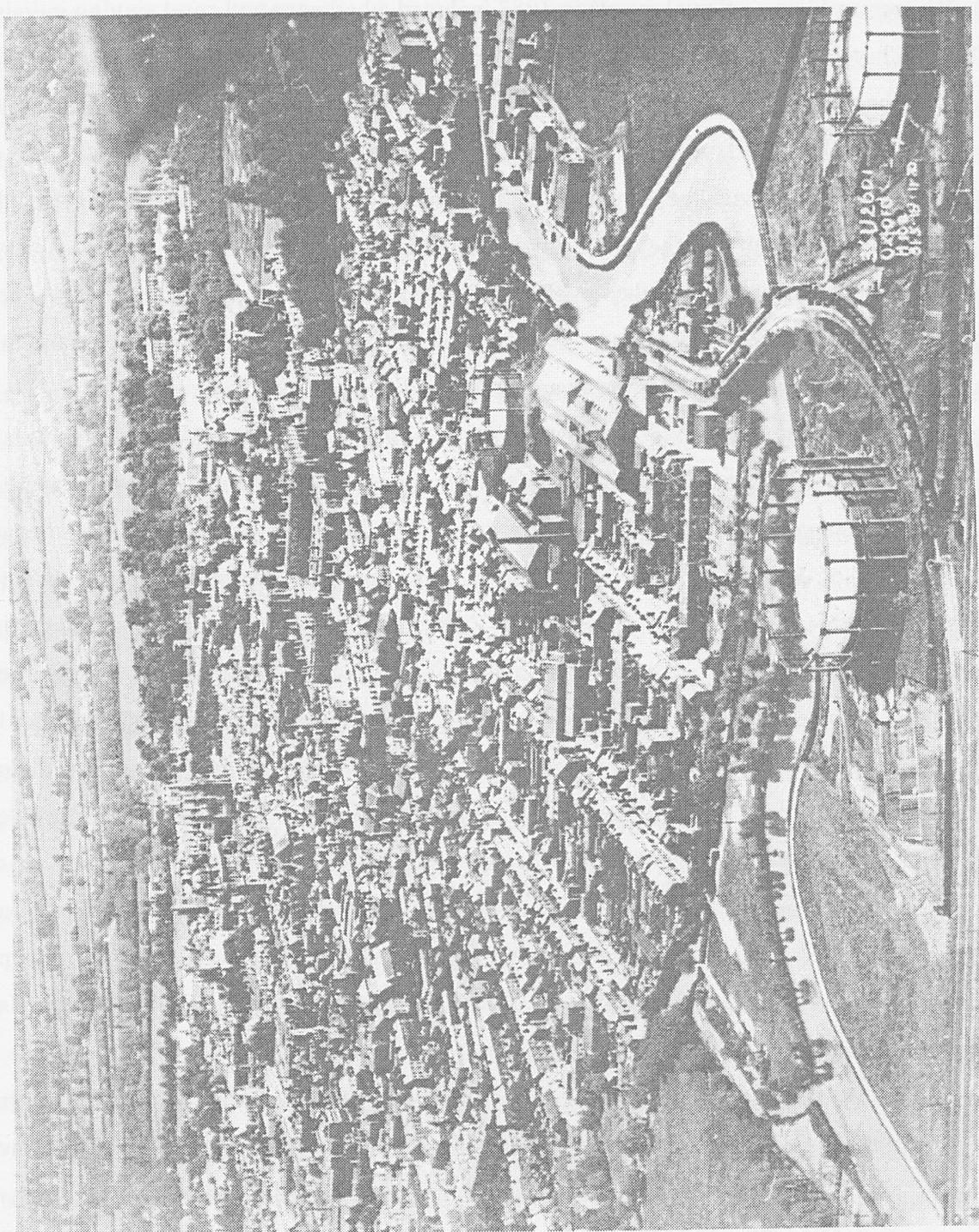
(Geoffrey Tyack, *Oxford an Architectural Guide* 1998)

In October 1981 the first meeting of the group later to become the St Ebbe's New Development Residents Association (SENDRA) met at 10 Dale Close, the meeting having been organised by Paula Peters. Alec Mann was elected the first Chairman of the Association for the year 1982. The unauthorised parking of cars was discussed - we may not be surprised to hear - but we should be grateful that the early efforts of the Association led to the designation of the whole development as a 'double yellow line' area. In 1983 the Association published the first Directory, a list of members and their addresses but as yet without telephone numbers or car registration numbers. An annual subscription of £1 per household was agreed; this rose to £2 in 1988 and in that same year Edward

Harper of 10 Dale Close designed the SENDRA logo which is used on all our publications. Phases two and three of the development were now being planned by a new group of developers - Wilcon, that is the houses which completed Thames Street, Trinity Street and Sadler Walk, phase three being the Rivercourt Flats. Social events in 1983 included a barbecue and carol singing in liaison with St Ebbe's Church, two events which have continued to prove very popular since. The name of the Association was not yet settled - Rivercourt Association was one suggestion. The shape of things to come was clear as Oxpens came under threat as a site for a new football stadium to replace the Manor; discussions with the City Council focussed on traffic congestion. Liaison with our local Councillors was set up and they were invited to attend social events. An important environmental success was the agreement by the developers of phases two and three to use bricks which matched fairly well those used in phase one. The new Pembroke Building across the river and the new flats built by the City also across the river were announced and plans agreed.

In 1984 the Constitution of the Association, drafted by Grace Briggs and Reg Cave, was agreed and its title as SENDRA settled while the Directory that year now contained telephone and car numbers as well as some general information. The always popular annual visit to a College began with Reg Cave's tour of Exeter College; an interest in things archaeological, already begun in 1983, continued with visits to Chedworth Roman Villa and Cirencester Roman amphitheatre. A wine tasting party and a barbecue completed the social events, with carol singing now well established. 1984 also saw the opening of the Oxford Ice Rink, built on part of Oxpens Meadow and designed by Sir Nicholas Grimshaw. Of buildings sponsored by the City Council in our area it is almost the only one which can be considered to have real architectural merit. In 1985 membership was extended to residents of phases two and three - with one vote at the Annual General meeting against the proposal! As it was also agreed that committee members could not be re-elected until one year had elapsed after their term of office, it was decided that one committee member should continue for a further year in order to provide continuity. New College was the venue for the College visit that year and we also visited the Austin-Rover factory.

By 1986 the amalgamation of the three phases into one Association was successfully completed and the greatly increased numbers made it necessary to hold the AGM at St Ebbe's Church Parish Centre. Newsletters were begun in 1986 and have formed an important part of the Association's organisation since. By 1987 75% of the households in the area were members of SENDRA - this was the year of the first musical evening, tapping the talent of members to the great enjoyment of all; moving a piano from one house to another was sometimes necessary! Noisy events on



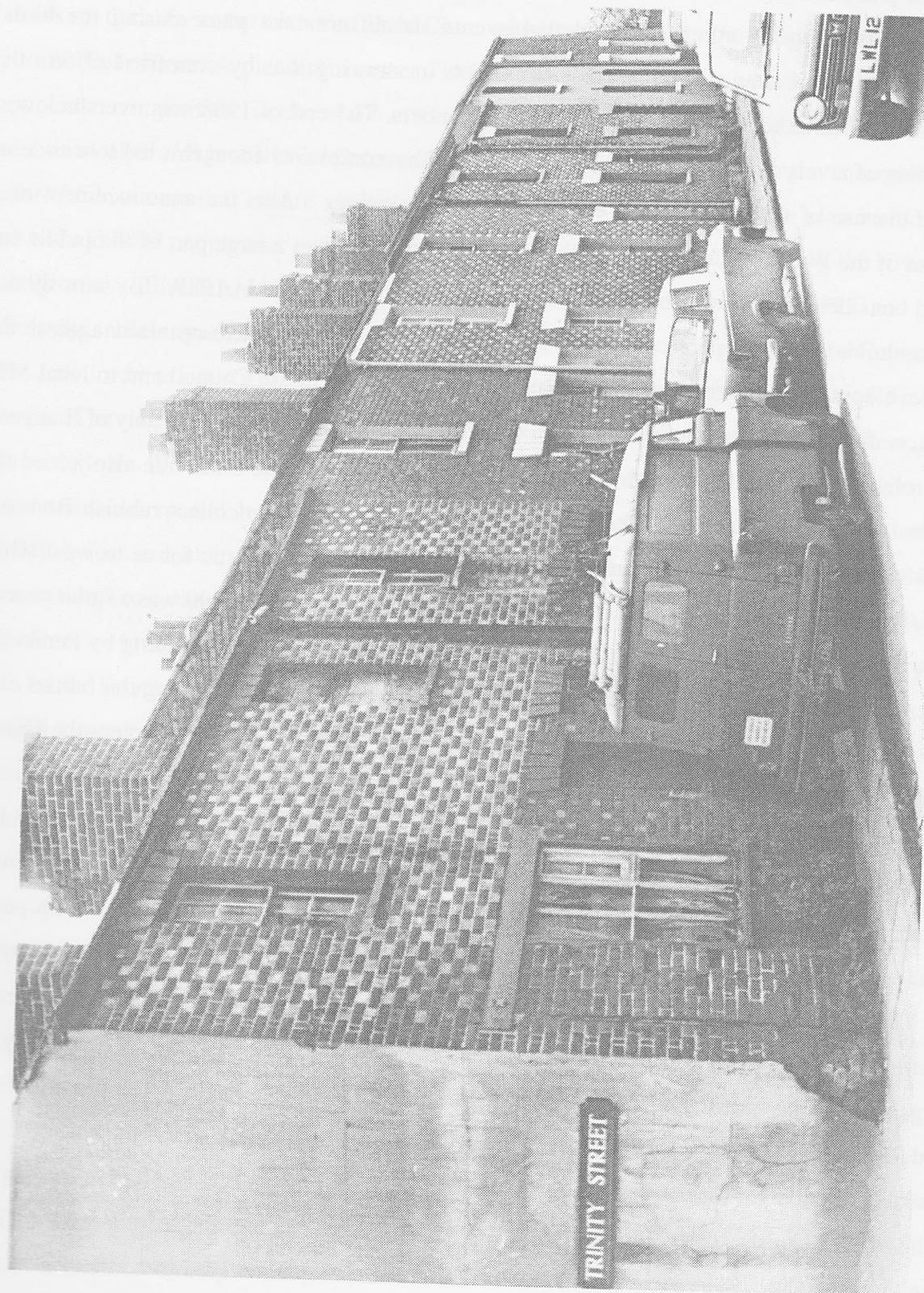
Aerial View of St Ebbes in 1930



The Old Gas Works by the River Thames, St Ebbes 1945



Trinity Church St Ebbes 1950



Trinity Street St Ebbes 1960

Oxpens Field led finally to a successful meeting with the Recreation Committee of the City Council. It was agreed that there should be no more than three special events each year, that noise and car parking should be properly controlled, and that events should not take place during the birds' breeding season. This was a landmark for SENDRA in showing that by concerted efforts the Association was able to achieve real benefits for its members. The end of 1988 was overshadowed by the holding of a very noisy 'pop' concert in the Ice Rink - complaints about this led to a code of practice for the use of the Ice Rink for events other than skating. Also the announcement of a development of the Westgate Centre which would lead to building over a large part of the public car park caused considerable anxiety and much hard work by the Association in 1989. By now 89 out of 125 households were members of the Association and a petition was organised against the proposed development. Members were assiduous in writing letters to the Council and to local MPs and to universal relief the plan was rejected by a full meeting of the City Council in July of that year. Again the role of the Association in protecting the environment was made clear. We also joined the nation wide Litter Blitz in April. Working through a Saturday morning to collect rubbish from our 'patch', 38 sacks were filled, the organisers providing tabards made of plastic for us to wear while working. The Litter Blitz has become an annual event. By comparison 1990 was a quiet year of social events, visits - a wonderful day at Ardington House, another to the new building by Pembroke College across the river - drinks parties but no barbecue. But SENDRA still had regular battles over noise and incursions onto Oxpens Meadow by 'travellers' and others. Work to protect the beauty and peace of the area was seen by now to be the principal task of the Committee and members.

In 1991 the Neighbourhood Watch scheme was set up for the area and a coordinator appointed to organise it; the scheme was welcomed and has been helpful in many ways - apart from the secretary of that year falling off the ladder he was using to put up one of the special signs on a lamp-post - luckily he was not hurt! Parliament was visited in 1991 and tea taken on the Commons Terrace with our M P. The Council had to be encouraged again to conform to the rules already agreed for the use of the Ice Rink and the Oxpens Field. 1992 saw the publication of six newsletters during the year. Rumblings were being heard about the Local Plan and what it might mean for us. We noted that the Local Plan proposed a sports hall beside the Ice Rink on the far side from the meadow and members liked the idea of that, many hoping for a swimming pool as well. SENDRA was invited to join the annual Conservation Advisory Forum which gives us another way of expressing views about the environment. 1993 saw a questionnaire for members which helped to confirm us in our existing policy as an Association which tries to form a pleasant community where friendship can

flourish through social events and information can be given, but where environmental matters are seen as very important. The barbecue was revived that year and much enjoyed - it depended for its success on the area in the corner of Dale Close which was willingly 'lent' by the inhabitants of nos 12 to 20 Dale Close. A pleasant summer , which included one of our households winning the best kept garden competition for the whole of Oxford, saw a College visit to Exeter again, drinks parties and a musical evening. But on October 8<sup>th</sup> came an unpleasant shock with the announcement of a plan to build a so-called leisure village on the land beyond the Ice Rink. The plan included a night club to hold 2000 people and a multiplex cinema as well as car parking all along the river bank and underground. SENDRA braced itself for the biggest challenge yet. 1994, 1995 and 1996 saw seemingly endless meetings, petitions, public meetings, letters to the press and to Councillors and MPs , all in an effort to force a full and proper discussion of the implications of the proposed scheme. The efforts of committee members were vital and time consuming but were much appreciated by members who tried to meet all calls for further letters, petitions and so on. Newsletters and special bulletins kept members in touch with developments. In the newspapers SENDRA featured alongside other Oxford groups opposed to the scheme including the Oxford Preservation Trust, the residents of Gibbs Crescent, St Thomas's, Osney and the College of Further Education. At last, in August 1996, the planning application was 'called in' by the Secretary of State for the Environment.

SENDRA members decided that the Association must oppose the City Council and the Developers at the Public Enquiry. A sub committee was formed to do the necessary work – which was considerable. SENDRA provided its own witnesses from amongst our members and they were led by an expert in planning. The Enquiry dragged on from September to December 1997, taking place in the Town Hall. At last in April 1998 we heard that the Secretary of State had rejected the proposed plans completely The papers produced by SENDRA for the enquiry have been deposited in the County Records Office.

Somehow, in spite of the enormous volume of work in opposing the leisure village plans, the committees of 1994, 1995 and 1996 managed to maintain 'the customary programme of social events that do so much to make us a cohesive community', as Reg Cave wrote in his annual report in 1995. We read much in the papers about the breakdown of community life, how people do not even know or speak to their neighbours, how people are lonely and friendless. Here in St Ebbe's we have a community where people do talk to one another, enjoy meeting at the Green Man – our controlled crossing of Thames Street into the City – and on the way up to town and back again; we

soon get to know if help is needed and we sympathise in one another's sorrows and losses. We love our gardens and our open spaces of grass and shrubs and we have the chance of country walks along the river and over Grandpont Nature Park and Christ Church Meadow. At the same time we can walk to the theatre and to concerts and we can make full use of the Libraries and other facilities of the City and enjoy its beauty.

In 2005 a new Local Plan was agreed and once more SENDRA faced the possibility of the encroachment of commercial and 'leisure' areas around our area. The plans for a renewed 'west end' included changes to the railway station, a realignment of roads, and space for commercial development. Once more many felt that not enough housing, so sorely needed in Oxford, was being planned. Then came plans for a new Westgate Centre. The developers persevered through three refusals at Central Government level but finally a plan was agreed. The demolition of the multi-storey car park was long overdue – it had been declared dangerous ten years before. The plan is for it to be rebuilt adjacent to Castle Mill Stream and in order to achieve this the Duke of York public house is to be demolished. There were 22 pubs in the Friars area in 1950, the only other survivor is the Wharf House, closed in 2007. Also to be demolished is the block of flats for disabled people in Paradise Square. In the place of all this there may be a massive extension to the shopping centre at Westgate, to be occupied by John Lewis Ltd and by 90 other shops. The problems of traffic access to the area are as difficult as ever. We must hope that the buildings themselves will not be as 'appallingly insensitive' as the buildings they will replace.

A significant change in the SENDRA area over the last ten years has been the extension of properties bought to let. Some of our houses have been divided to provide multiple occupancy. This affects SENDRA in that those renting houses often do not stay for long and so take little part in our activities.

SENDRA members see that the coming five years will present serious challenges to our area. Traffic problems and congestion will become more serious. Our pleasant area of houses may feel more beleaguered as attacks on our open spaces and in particular Oxpens Meadow multiply. The natural beauty of Castle Mill Stream and of the Thames will be under even greater threat.

SENDRA members have always seen their Association as of crucial importance in making certain that the City Council remembers and pays proper heed to the fact that it is the City Council itself which has attempted here a rare experiment of keeping residential areas within the City centre. The

## SENDRA, a Brief History of an Oxford Parish

attempt is something to be proud of. For those of us lucky enough to live here we have the constant task of protecting our very complicated environment so that the needs of residents are met. Otherwise the experiment might as well collapse and the whole area be taken over by commercial and 'leisure' development. This would be a serious loss. We must, in a small City like Oxford, preserve the idea that people count, and that to have people living as permanent residents in City centres is the best way of ensuring a safe and pleasant environment for all.

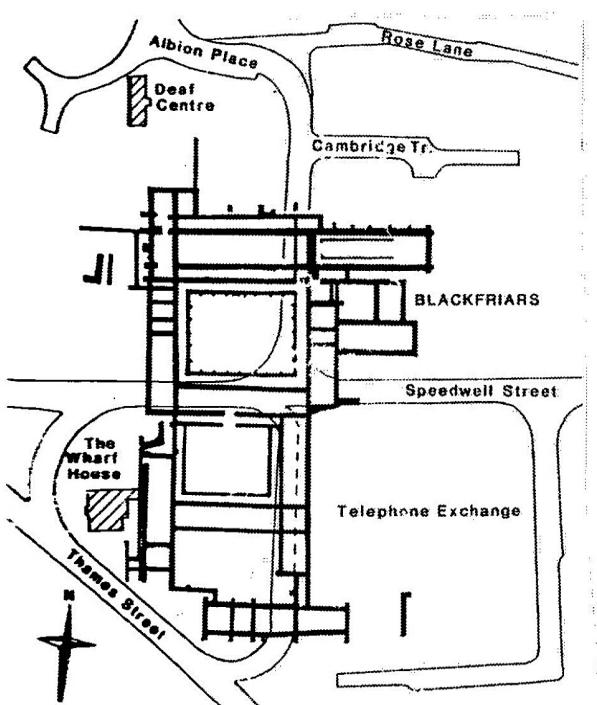
## References

Victoria County History of Oxfordshire, vol 4 The City of Oxford  
Sharp, Thomas *Oxford Replanned* 1947  
Newbigging, Carole *The Changing Faces of St Ebbe's and St Thomas's*, 2 vols, 1997  
Panton, Andy *Farewell St Ebbes* 1980  
Dodd, Anne, ed. *Oxford before the University* 2005  
Hassall, Tom *Oxford, the Buried City* 1987  
SENDRA Committee Papers and Minutes 1982-2008  
Use [www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/heritage](http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/heritage) to look at photographs, maps and text about St Ebbes

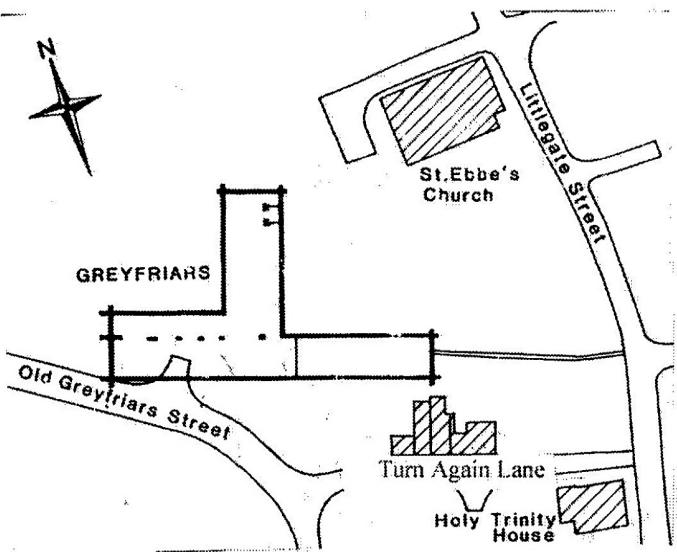
## Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology Unit

Centre for Oxfordshire Studies



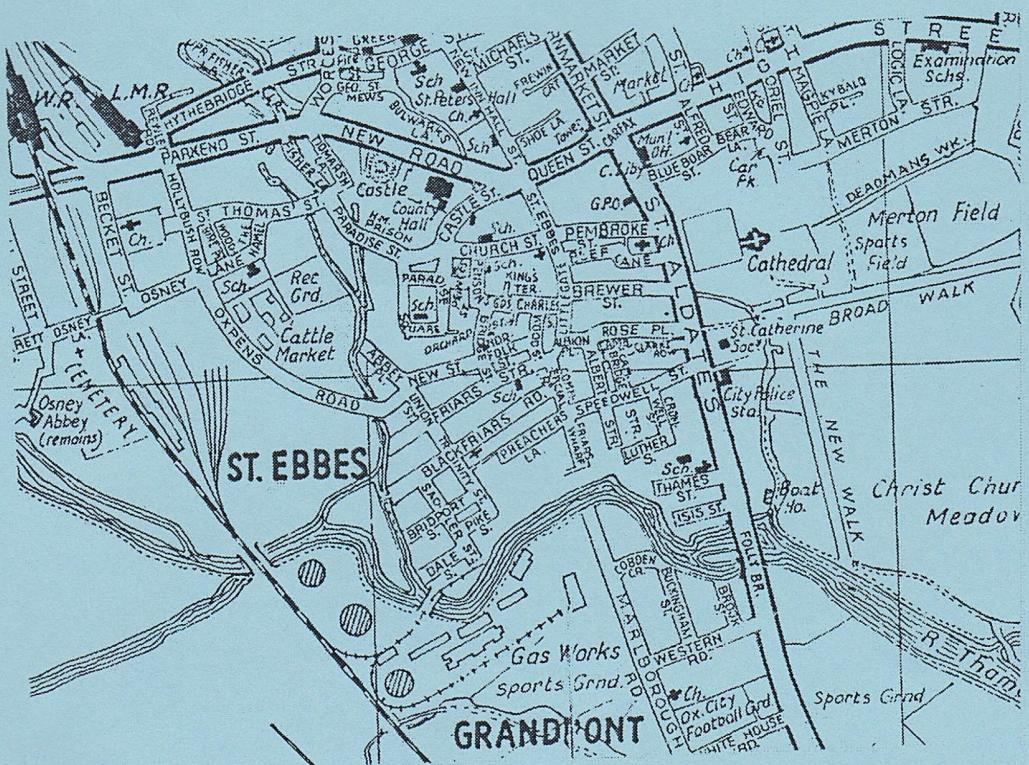
The Dominican Priory in 1500



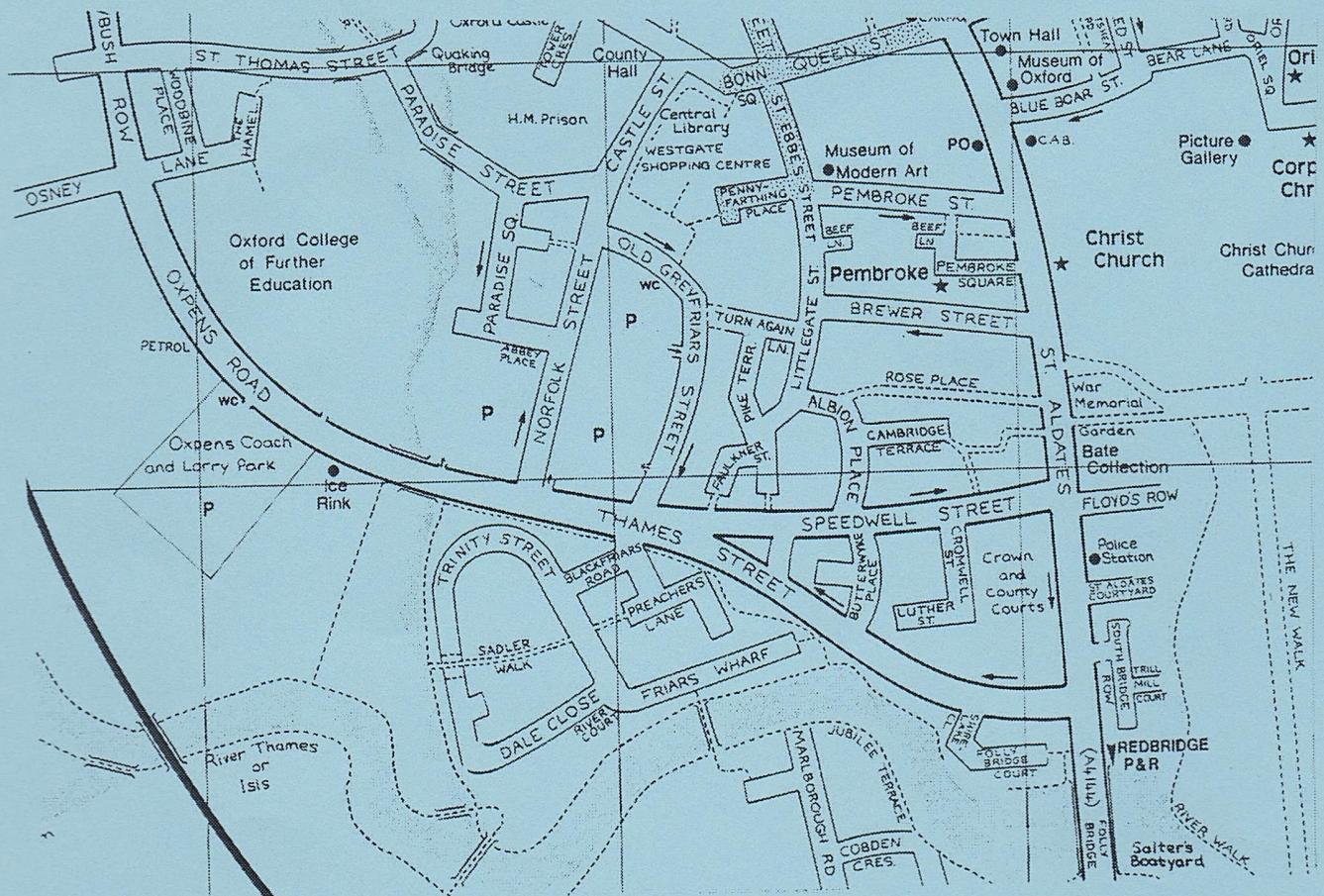
The Franciscan Priory in 1500

### SENDRA Chairmen, Secretaries and Treasurers

1981/2	Alec Mann, Kate Nunn
1983	Ruth Wynne-Davies, Jean Cook
1984	Reg Cave, Valerie Vowles
1985	Jack Blencowe, Madeline Barber, Peter Woolstenholme
1986	Jean Cook, Carl Savage, Malcolm Ryder
1987	Mike Ball, Margaret Kemeny, David Edwardes
1988	Bob Albright, Valerie Harvey, Carolyn Nelson
1989	Reg Cave, Mary Hodges, Sally Ball
1990	Betty Mansi, Alison Deer, Don Fraser
1991	Copper Le May, Jack Blencowe, Janet Fearon
1992	Madeline Barber, Norma Williams, Desmond Kay
1993	Paul Vowles, Nancy Brown, Jean Cook
1994	Adrian Williams, Mary Hodges, Bernard Roe
1995	Reg Cave, Valerie Davies, John Shelvey
1996	Bernard Roe, Mary Waley, Carl Savage
1997	Mary Hodges, Jean Cook, Geraldine Stormont
1998	Valerie Davies, Christina Ashby, Ted Harris
1999	Ruth Wynne-Davies, Mags Golby, Don Fraser
2000	Peter Highton, Nancy Brown, Geraldine Stormont
2001	Peter Highton, Mary Waley, Valerie Harvey
2002	Carl Savage, Lynn Erler, Penelope Le May
2003	Mary Hodges, Mags Golby, Valerie Harvey
2004	Rosemary Fennell, Mary Waley, John Shelvey
2005	Val Harvey, Ruth Green, Cynthia Barber
2006	Madeline Barber, Bryan Barnard, Michael Jeffreys
2007	Colin Bridger, Emily Hargus and Manuel Padron, Anu Dudhia
2008	Mark Luntley, Elizabeth Jeffreys, Anu Dudhia



St Ebbes in 1960



St Ebbes in 2008

Published by SENDRA 2008