Hinksey Hill A34 Interchange View Analysis Summary

Introduction

Recognising the prospect of the city from a modern highways interchange as a significant view may be surprising to many. However, the A34 Hinksey Interchange is in fact the site of a much older meeting of highways. It marks the point where the high road from Oxford to Abingdon over the Cumnor Hills, met the route along the west side of the Thames valley through South and North Hinksey. This has been the first view of Oxford seen by many travellers approaching from the south since the Middle Ages.

J. M.W. Turner’s paintings of this view highlight the broad expanse of the floodplain with the city’s historic high buildings seen at eyelevel as distant pinnacles against the sky. In his more mature work, dating from 1818 the pairing of Tom Tower and All Saints’ Church (Lincoln College Library) provides a central focus to the view, whilst the grouping of St Mary the Virgin Church Spire and the Radcliffe Camera’s dome is supported by the shorter spire of Christ Church Cathedral and provides a mass to the left that adds to this focus. Other artists have focused on this central area.

The building of the interchange cemented the role of this point as the first point of arrival for many travellers approaching Oxford from southern England. The interchange provided a raised platform from which motorists would see the famous skyline across the green landscape of the valley. However, the development of dense foliage surrounding the interchange now makes it hard to see this view, whilst the two lines of pylons running up the valley from the south dominate the landscape setting of the city.

The Viewers

This view provides a shared experience that provides a connection between past and present viewers. As a result the view can gain significance from those who have seen it before, including artists and writers who have portrayed it in the past. This view is one of those portrayed by J. M. W. Turner both in his childhood and later in his career and was a regularly reproduced image in the 19th century. It has been an important view for travellers arriving on the edges of Oxford,
looking down from the Abingdon Road across the green Valley of the River Thames to the City Centre with its famous skyline. It continues to be the first view of the city that travellers arriving from the south have the opportunity to see and forms a link in the chain of views that are seen by walkers and others enjoying the routes along the line of hills west of Oxford.

Present Viewers

People traveling on the A34 an A423 into Oxford

This view is seen by hundreds of people everyday as they arrive in Oxford either from the A34 or descending from Hinksey Hill. Although the view from the interchange is currently screened from view by the thick vegetation on the embankment, the view is still seen looking from the A423 southern bypass between the interchange and the junction with Abingdon Road. For vehicle passengers this is likely to be a fleeting view but nevertheless is significant as a first view of the city from an arrival point in the south.

Local Residents

Whilst the roadside environment is not an attractive prospect for a leisurely walk the footpath running alongside the A423 is still used by pedestrians and cyclists from nearby areas as part of a route between Oxford and Kennington and Hinksey Hill, to which the view to the historic city and rural setting of the meadows adds considerably to the otherwise unexceptional highways landscape.

Walkers, joggers and cyclists

The interchange and roadside footpath form a link in the routes from the city to the hillside walks from Hinksey Hill to Harcourt Hill that are enjoyed by many as recreational routes through Oxford’s countryside setting, to which the views down to the city provide a unique historic and aesthetic value.

Vale of White Horse District Council and Oxfordshire County Council

Designated view cone shown on both district and city council’s local plan map and forming part of the Green Belt designated by the Secretary of State, County, District and City Councils to protect the historic character of Oxford.

Viewers in the Past

Travellers approaching Oxford

This is likely to have been part of a route to Oxford and to the Midlands from southern England since at least the late Middle Ages and will have been seen by many travellers descending the hill as their first view of Oxford and its famous skyline.

J. M. W. Turner, copied and reproduced as an

Turner painted this view twice. Once in 1787 as a child in a relatively naïve style (and with a number of discrepancies in the topographic detail) and again as a more accurate topographic view.
Other 19th century artists

Other artists used this view as a subject in the early and mid 19th century, using the hill slopes to frame the views of the valley, including the meandering course of the River Thames, which leads the eye up to the two groups of historic high buildings. Generally, these use foreground figures (including animals) to emphasise the bucolic character of the setting in contrast with the urbane subject of the city’s architecture. Locating academics in the rural foreground setting is also a common motif used, emphasising the contrast of city and country. Examples include Mackenzie and Keux View of Oxford, from the Abingdon Road used in James Ingram’s Memorials of Oxford 1837, J. Jackson engraving, c. 1845 and Joseph Skelton’s engraving “after Malchair” (c. 1820).

The Viewing Place

Where you see the view from can add to its significance through its historic associations as well as the visual aspects of the view and the viewing experience. Today the interchange of roads on Hinksey Hill is an unpleasant place, dominated by traffic and its associated noise and odour. However in the past this was an important point on the road network, providing the first view of Oxford from the south as the traveller descended the hill along the Abingdon Road. It provides a point in the Oxford Green Belt from which the historic city can be appreciated in its landscape setting. The construction of the road interchange in the 1960s enhanced this viewpoint by providing a raised viewing platform. The viewpoint is now a point that thousands of motorists pass through everyday, making it one of the city’s most visited viewing places. However, the growth of trees on the road embankment has now obscured the view from the interchange itself and requires management to open this out again.

Part of the historic Abingdon Road

The antiquity of this route may not be apparent to many of today’s travellers arriving via the A34 (Oxford’s southern bypass), although it may be more obvious to those travelling down the narrow green route of the older high road Hinksey Hill (the A4183) from Abingdon or Boars Hill. Abingdon was the County town of Berkshire in the Middle Ages and the location of one of the country’s largest monasteries. As such the route between the two towns is likely to have been a significant thoroughfare.

The first view of Oxford from the south

Today the interchange is important as the point where motorists leave the A34 trunk road to enter Oxford from the south. Up to this point the road is too low in the valley to
afford a prospect of the city but from the interchange the first view to the city is seen.

**Part of the Green Belt**
Designated in 1958 and reviewed through local plans since then recognises that seeing Oxford in its landscape setting is part of the city’s special character.

**A new viewing point**
Although this is an ancient viewing point, the construction of the ring road in the 1960s created an accentuated platform at the interchange providing a new raised viewing place from which the city could be seen. The importance of the resultant view as a part of Oxford’s green setting was recognised in the 1980s.

The historic high buildings of the City Centre are seen as a distant group across farmland. The photograph illustrates the impact of tree growth and the pylons on the view.

**The Landscape in the View**

*This is a medium distance view of the city looking across the green rural landscape of the Thames Valley floodplain. Within the framing of the hills to the east and west the City Centre is seen at the end of an extensive green middle ground with the historic high buildings rising above the general level of the rooftops of the city and without structures in the background to compete with them. The mass of building of Christ Church are seen from the south, forming a large block of limestone buildings with Tom Tower and All Saints’ Church provided a focus to the view at the centre of the skyline. To the right, the Radcliffe Camera and the spire of St Mary the Virgin Church provide a second focus to the view combining two of the most memorable features of the city skyline. Comparison with historical portrayals of this view demonstrate that the historic experience recorded at the beginning of the 19th century is still recognisable, partly due to the screening of the later 19th and 20th century suburbs of South Oxford on the right hand side of the view by lies of mature trees. Unfortunately the overgrown hedgerows and developing tree*
canopy in the foreground and on the edge of the City Centre currently obscures the view from the viewing place restricting the opportunity to appreciate it.

Context:

From the Western Hills
This is the most southerly of the views from the hills to the west of Oxford looking north east over farmland from the edge of the wooded slopes of the hill.

Next to a busy road
This makes viewing the city a noisy experience with the unsettling feeling of passing vehicles. For motorists the view is likely to be fleeting, if seen at all, although many commuters could see it on a daily basis.

Topography and layout of the view:

A medium distance view looking across the undeveloped floodplain
The City Centre’s historic high buildings are seen in the middle distance, some indistinctly but with sufficient clarity to make out the architectural features of the largest structures. No intervening development in the floodplain blocks the view to the City Centre.

From the edge of the embankment
The steep embankment next to the interchange provides a platform from which the view over the floodplain in the middle ground to the City Centre should be unhindered by hedges and trees lines. However, at present the embankment is covered by foliage which is blocking the view.

Rural middle ground setting to the city centre
The fields of the floodplain in the middle ground reflect the historic pastoral setting of the city that was admired by artists and writers in the past and continues to be both an aesthetically pleasing setting for views to the city and provides historical value to the city by illustrating the relationship of the city with its agricultural surroundings.

City Centre as the horizon
The historic high buildings of the City Centre form prominent features on the horizon seen in the distance as a line of spires against the sky. Lower buildings are screened by the foliage of trees on the city edge.

No other buildings are seen in the background to the view giving the historic high buildings an important role as the end point of the vista.
**Green Characteristics:**

**Green fields and hedgerows**

The fields in the foreground and mid ground provide the green setting to the view of the City Centre that is part of both its attractiveness and sustain the historical experience of seeing the city in its green valley setting.

**Trees marking the railway and on the city edge**

The trees draw the eye up to the City Centre and contribute to the green character of the city’s setting. They mark the course of the railway line, which is an historic feature, but also help to hide the engineered landscape of the modern trackside. They also screen the late 19th and 20th century suburbs of New Hinksey and Cold Harbour running down the Abingdon Road from the view, helping to preserve the green character of the city’s setting.

**Architectural Characteristics:**

**The historic high buildings**

The historic high buildings rise in a line across the central part of the view with a broad area to either side without high features visible. Nuffield College’s spire marks the edge of the skyline on the left (west) side, whilst the dome of the Radcliffe Camera marks an edge on the right, with Magdalen College’s tower providing an outlying high building (originally located outside the City Centre).

As a group the buildings share a common palette of materials and a vertical emphasis contributing to the famous spiky skyline interrupted by the curvaceous forms of domes.

**Two focal groups**

The pairing of Tom Tower and All Saints Church spire lies close to the centre of the view and provides the initial focus, which then moves to the right where a second pairing is seen of St Mary’s Church Spire and the Radcliffe Camera’s dome, providing building on the skyline and the most instantly recognisable.

**Infrastructure:**

**The railway**

The railway line is a feature of historic interest, the construction of which influenced Oxford’s continuing development in the 19th century although the modern engineered landscape is unlikely to make a positive aesthetic contribution.
The pylons

The Pylons and power lines that cross the view are a major feature of infrastructure but are considered to mainly be a detractor in this view (see below)

The Influence of light and the Seasons

Seasonal Changes

The green character of the view is likely to be strongly affected by changes in the seasons as foliage changes in colour. There is likely to be some flooding in the low-lying meadows in the middle ground during the winter. Adding a waterscape to the view.

Sunlight and optimum viewing conditions

The view is north facing and is likely to be well lit on most sunny days. For the optimum viewing conditions the view is best seen with dark clouds in the background and the City Centre’s historic high buildings illuminated by direct sunlight.

Detractors:

The pylons

The pylons are massive structures with an industrial quality to their design, which dominate this view. They are seen as considerably larger than the historic high buildings whilst the connecting power lines join them up to give them even greater visual presence in the view. Despite their ‘see-through’ quality they out-compete the historic high buildings from the viewer’s attention.

The overgrown embankment and the disappearing view

The foliage around the interchange has grown to a point where the view is largely hidden from the viewing place. A view can still be seen from the A423 above Redbridge Hollow.

Temporary buildings at Redbridge Hollow

The small settlement of temporary dwellings for travelling families at Redbridge Hollow has reduced the undeveloped, rural quality of the foregrounds. The single-storey structures do have the benefit of being less visible than larger conventional houses might be.

Poor quality viewing environment

The noise, business of passing traffic and noxious exhaust fumes of motor vehicles combine to make this a poor quality viewing environment in spite of the efforts to provide carefully managed and planted verges to the traffic intersection.
Sensitivity to Change:

Potential for enhancement of the viewing place

Potential for the enhancement of the roadside environment is limited and is likely to be constrained by the needs of highways safety. However, lowering of the roadside hedgerow would provide views out towards the City Centre.

Increased and continuing loss of view through lack of management of roadside scrub

Without adequate management it is likely the area from which the view cannot be seen will continue to grow. Whilst this might be regarded as a temporary harm to the view there is potential that the inability to appreciate and understand its value will result in inadequate consideration of the impacts of other change on the view.

The current screening of the view is resulting in ongoing loss of value to the city of the experience of viewing its world famous skyline at a major arrival point in the city and a corresponding loss of the city’s status.

Change in the rural foreground and middle ground

Loss of the green, open and rural character of the foreground and middle ground would result in harm to the view by disrupting the role it plays as the rustic contrast with the sublime architecture of the City Centre that has been admired over the centuries.
**Change on the city edge**  
At present the lower scale ‘brickish skirt’ of the 19th and 20th century suburbs that surrounds the City Centre is hidden from view by tree lines that allow the City’s historic high buildings and City Centre roofscape to be appreciated in direct contrast with the historic rural landscape. Development that raises the scale of the suburbs, such that they appear as an intervention between the City Centre and countryside setting would be regarded as resulting in harm to the view.

**Change in the City Centre**  
The positive features of the City Centre skyline depend on the visibility and prominence of the historic high buildings as the focus of the view and the character and grain of the lower level city roofscape as a complex mass of short lengths of steeply pitched roofs representing a historic City Centre. Development that does not reinforce these characteristics would result in harm to the value of the view.
Verified view of Oxford from the A420

Illustration 1: Simplified render of the view from the A420
The city centre skyline can be seen as a line of distant spires set against the sky. Tom Tower and the spire of All Saints’ Church provide the initial focus, which then moves to the spire of St Mary’s Church and the Radcliffe Camera’s dome to the right.

The pylons and power lines are massive features in the middle ground, out-competing the historic high buildings for dominance in the view with features that have an industrial character adding a poor aesthetic quality to the skyscape.

The trees marking the railway line provide a green edge to the city centre, screening lower buildings from view and leading the eye to the historic high buildings. Nevertheless, they have grown to a point where they screen many of the high buildings from view.

The roadside hedgerow has now grown to a point where it blocks the view from most of the viewing place.

The roadside is a noisy and noxious viewing environment whilst the tarmaced path and crash barrier provide a poor aesthetic quality to the foreground.

Fields and hedgerows can be glimpsed providing a rural middle ground setting to the city centre.