Crescent Road View Assessment Summary

Introduction

This stands out as the only view among the ten designated view cones that has an urban foreground. The view is seen from a street developed on the edge of the historic settlement of Temple Cowley from the late 19th century with sporadic infilling and redevelopment throughout the 20th century. This has provided an architecturally diverse suburban foreground. As with the view from Rose Hill, this is not one of the historically recorded and celebrated views of the city. Nevertheless, it has been experienced by many residents of Temple Cowley in the past and continues to be a feature that transforms an apparently ordinary suburban street into a part of a world famous historic city. Comparison with the record photographs taken for this view in the 1960s reveals that the growth of trees in the middle ground has resulted in a significant change by hiding the open space of the sports fields and the rooftops of East Oxford.

The view is briefly channelled over the rooftops of houses lower down the hill to a cluster of historic high buildings in the City Centre. The Radcliffe Camera’s dome and the tall spire of St Mary’s Church form the core of this group, which also includes the tower of Ss Mary and John’s Church in East Oxford and the ‘flèche’ of Exeter College Chapel. Moving down the street, the curve of the road pulls the focus of the view across to the left including the towers and spires of Christ Church, Nuffield College, Merton College Chapel and St Aldate’s parish church. Proceeding further along the road, this view is rapidly hidden as buildings block the line of sight to the City Centre with the attention switching to the wooded hillsides across the Thames Valley to the west. Looking further to the left the greenery of the middle ground is less dense and the rooftops of East Oxford become a distinct element of a more ordinary urban view.
The Viewers

This view is not noted as having any notable historical associations but nevertheless is likely to have formed a feature of the lives of local residents in the past and is appreciated by those who live on and pass along the road today.

Present Viewers

Local residents present

Today the view is experienced by the local community and motorists heading into the centre of Oxford via Cowley. This is a well used road and therefore the view is seen by a large number of people as a part of their daily life.

Viewers in the past

Local residents past

Historically (and at least since the 12th century), this view will have been seen by residents in and around Temple Cowley, as well as workers in the fields surrounding the village.

The Viewing Place

Where you see the view from affects your understanding of its significance. This can depend on how much you know about the viewing place and its history, whilst temporary features of the viewing place can have a big impact on the viewing experience.

Aesthetic value of the foreground

This is a tranquil residential street, with green hedgerows and street trees and a mixture of architectural styles that are unified by the use of red brick and pitched roof slopes.

Historical interest of Temple Cowley

Temple Cowley, a rural settlement located on a prominent hillside to the south-east of Oxford, and named after the medieval house of the Knights Templar, was in existence by the 12th century and preserved its ancient agricultural character until the mid-19th century.

The historic village has now been largely infilled and surrounded by 19th and 20th century suburban development that reflects the city’s industrial expansion in the 20th century.

A residential area

Crescent Road is a residential street that was first laid out in the 1850s. The street has continued to develop over the past century and a half and might be regarded as similar to many other contemporary streets elsewhere, were it not for the direct view to the City Centre and its world famous historic buildings.
This photograph of the view for Crescent Road was taken shortly after the view cone was designated in 1962. It illustrates the major change that tree growth and infilling on the road has had on the character of the view. The East Oxford suburb is seen in the valley floor and the City Centre beyond it, raised up on its gravel terrace. The black and white photograph also helps to highlight how direct sunlight illuminates the limestone of the historic high buildings in the City Centre.

This is a kinetic view that is influenced by the course of the street, change in elevation and the framing provided by the buildings to either side. What is seen in the view can change relatively rapidly through the growth or removal of trees. It is now seen with a green middle ground echoing the rural landscape that once separated Cowley from the city. However in the recent past the suburb of East Oxford was more visible, illustrating the expansion of Oxford in the 19th and 20th centuries for the growing workforce of its educational and industrial institutions. Nevertheless little in the middle ground rose up (other than the towers of Victorian churches) that would detract from the prominence of the historic high buildings of the City Centre as the focus of the view. These are seen as a series of clusters that, in turn, form the focus of the changing view. The group set around the spire of St Mary the Virgin Church and the dome of the Radcliffe camera (which also draws in the tower of the Church of Ss Mary and John in East Oxford) form the main focal group, although others are also important. The historic high buildings of Christ Church, for example form a notable group. Wytham Hill provides both a green backdrop to the high buildings and draws the eye down to the main focal group where it dips to the right. The ‘ordinary’ suburban setting of the foreground adds another layer of historic interest, illustrating the development of Oxford in the 19th and early 20th century outside the
focus of the academic institutions into suburbs that served new industries but continued to maintain links with the historic heart of the city.

Context:

A rare view Views from the hills south east of city are rare, due to the mixture of dense urban development and tall vegetation. As a result the opportunity to see the city from this angle is significant even though the view from the original assessment point recorded in the local plan is currently screened by foreground trees. The view makes an unexceptional suburban street part of a world renowned historic city.

Topography and layout of the view:

Elevated medium/long distance view The elevation and steep slope to the north provides a short section of street from which the viewer is able to see over the rooftops of buildings further down the street and trees in Cowley Marsh Sports Field to the City Centre.

The high buildings are just over 2.8 kilometres to the north west (Magdalen Tower being the nearest). Whilst Wytham Hill is some 7 kilometres distant (at Marley Wood).

Channelled to the City Centre and busy foreground The view is unusual among the designated view cones in having a suburban streetscene as a foreground with buildings on either side of a street creating a channelled view to the City Centre. These views are surprisingly rare within the city as suburban development tended to block views rather than frame them.

The detail of the streetscene, including parked and moving cars, lampposts, telephone poles and wires, front garden boundaries and planting and buildings provides rich detail with a high potential for change.

Other viewing points As you approach the City Centre the view is also seen from Cowley Road, where again, the strong building lines and linear street channel the eye towards the high buildings of the City Centre. This is a lower lying view point from which St Mary the Virgin Church rises against the sky above the buildings lining the road.

The middle ground The rooftops of the East Oxford suburb form a low-lying middle ground masked from Crescent Road by the trees in Cowley Marsh Sports Field. The towers of the Church of Ss Mary and John, Cowley Road and St John the Baptist, Iffley Road rise above the treetops, adding to the historic skyline.
Wytham Hill as a background

Wytham Hill provides a background and horizon to the view. The indistinct texture of woodland provides a sense of depth to the view. There are no distracting structures or modern features seen between the historic high building and the hill. St Mary the Virgin Church Spire and the Radcliffe Camera’s dome are the only buildings that break above the horizon of the hill and so have extra prominence in the view.

Green Characteristics:

| Foreground foliage in the street scene | Street trees, hedgerows and garden planting contribute greenery and softening to the urban foreground that helps to blend with the greenery of the middle ground at the Cowley Marsh Sports Fields. |
| Green middle ground of Cowley Marsh Sports Field and the Cherwell and Thames Valleys | The greenery of trees in the Sports Field, with other greenery in the low-lying middle ground, provides an attractive middle ground, screening from view buildings in East Oxford. Further greenery beyond the suburb screens the City Centre’s buildings. As a result the historic high buildings rise from the valley’s greenery in isolation from other structures. Trees in the valley floor provide a rich tapestry of colours, changing through the seasons and representing the mixture of native trees in the rural landscape of the River valley and more ornamental planting in gardens and churchyards within the suburbs. |
| Trees in the City Centre | Occasional taller trees in parks and college gardens stand alongside the historic buildings. These provide a contrast to the buildings’ strong geometric forms and reveal the green character of gardens in the City Centre. The edge of the City Centre is marked by the trees of Christ Church meadow. These represent a formal landscape, the recorded development of which dates back to the late 16th century as well as contributing to the image of Oxford rising from its ‘ancient groves’. |
| Green backcloth of Wytham Hill | The city is seen within a rural setting, a feature of its aesthetic value that has been appreciated for centuries. Wytham Woods themselves are of historic interest having inspired writers and latterly forming a gift to the University by Raymond ffennell to form a living laboratory and to preserve their green character. The dark green foliage provides a strong contrast to the limestone of the historic high buildings, helping the latter to stand out. |
Architectural characteristics:

Buildings in the foreground

Late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century suburban houses dominate the foreground. These are generally of two-storeys, in redbrick or painted render with slate or clay tile roofs, and with prominent gables either to the road or as exposed flank walls seen due to the curving line of the road. They enclose the viewing place and frame the view.

A prominent group of later 20\textsuperscript{th} century houses with mansard roofs catch the eye due to the rhythm of their exposed flank walls. The horizontal line of their flat roofs frames the focal group of buildings in the City Centre.

Buildings in the middle ground

From the viewpoint buildings in east Oxford and the general mass of buildings in the City Centre are currently screened from view by the tree cover. This is a relatively recent characteristic as historic photographs reveal the townscape of East Oxford was more visible in the 1960s. It does contribute to the effect of seeing the City Centre buildings in a green setting, although this is at the expense of the historic interest of seeing the city in the context of its Victorian and 20\textsuperscript{th} century suburbs.

The historic high buildings are seen as a strong contrast with the buildings in the foreground, having a strong vertical emphasis with a contrasting palette of materials. As a result of their distinctive forms they are easily recognised as buildings associated with the history of the University and medieval city. The common palette of materials (mainly limestone and lead) draws them together as a group and makes them stand out in the landscape when they are seen in strong sunlight.

Focus of the view:

Focal Group

The dip of Wytham Hill draws the eye to the pairing of the spire of St Mary’s Church and the dome of the Radcliffe Camera, which both rise above the tree line and form the focus of the view. Together they represent the medieval and ecclesiastical origins of the University and its flourishing as a European centre of learning in the Age of Enlightenment.

The Tower of Ss Mary and John’s Church in front of these two and the roof and flèche of Exeter College Chapel behind them add to the gravity of this focal group.

Other high buildings

Other historic high buildings representing college chapels and churches in the City Centre and East Oxford add a spiky skyline of iconic historic buildings representing the history and tradition of individual colleges and institutions, as well as the city and University as a whole.
The Influence of light and the Seasons:

Seasonal changes of vegetation colours
This view’s aesthetic value (and part of its historical value) is strongly influenced by the foliage in the landscape. This will change in character between the seasons, introducing a rich range of colour in the autumn in particular.

Daylight
The view is seen to best effect in mid-morning in spring or autumn with low angled sunlight directly behind the viewer and illuminating the limestone of the historic high buildings.

Cars and gardens
The presence of cars will change during the day. Car movements are likely to be least frequent outside either end of the school and work day, at which times the street should provide a more tranquil viewing location.

Detractors:

Trees screening the view
Street trees in the foreground and the trees in the valley beyond are growing to a point where the view to the historic high buildings is being lost. The pinnacles of Merton College Chapel, for example, are only just visible above the canopy, whilst Magdalen College Tower is lost on the right-hand side of this view behind a group of tall trees.

Street clutter
Telephone poles, wires and street lamps have a minor negative impact due to their poor aesthetic value compared with the historic buildings and green landscape.

Sensitivity to Change:

Change in the street scene
The clutter of the street scene provides an opportunity for enhancement of the views by tidying up the disparate lighting columns, street signage and telephone wires to enable the view to the City Centre to be better appreciated.

Development within the street that blocks the view is the greatest threat to its continued value.

Changes in the middle ground (East Oxford and the Thames Valley)
Development that rises above the general roofscape level of buildings in the middle ground to an extent where it would be conspicuous in the middle ground and draw attention away from the City Centre and historic high buildings as the focus of the view would result in harm to the view. A small number of high buildings in this area already stand out, including the towers of the Church of Ss Mary and John, Cowley
Road and the Church of St John the Evangelist, Iffley Road. However these are also historic buildings which have special significance for their historic interest and communal value and, as such make a positive contribution to the view. Nevertheless they do not set precedence for development of this scale.

Foliage in the middle ground has increased considerably since the view cone was first designated in 1962 and now threatens to obscure the view. Careful management of the trees in the Cowley Marsh Recreation Ground in particular has the potential to increase the prominence of the historic high buildings in the view.

**Changes in the City Centre**

The City Centre is seen as just a few of the historic high buildings rising above the trees in the valley, which therefore act as the focus to the view. New development that rises amongst the historic high building either blocking views to them or that fails to share their characteristic slender forms, distinctive materials or architectural richness of detailing would cause harm to the view.

**Changes in the background to the view**

The background of the view is formed by the wooded hills in the distance, which provide a strong contrast with the architecture of the City Centre. The close visual relationship of the City Centre and the rural hinterland is part of both the view’s historic interest and attractive quality. Development that rose up between these two elements reducing the immediacy of the connection would result in harm to the view, unless it is seen as a continuation of the City Centre skyline and shares its characteristics.
Example view from Crescent Road at the apex of the view cone

Illustration 1: Simplified render of the Crescent Road View
Other historic high buildings rise above the tree canopy, and will take a focal role as the building line pulls the view from right to left.

The flat-roofed buildings and the gable end to the right create a box that frames the view to the focal group.

A cluster of four historic high buildings forms a focus to the view (St Mary’s Church, the Radcliffe Camera, Church of Sts Mary and John and Exeter College Chapel).

The view is framed by the buildings and trees of the street running down the hill.

Street furniture, cars and gardens contribute to a busy streetscape that draws the eye. The view to the city centre is a special addition to this everyday suburban view.

The gentle slope of Wytham hill draws the eye down to the focus.

Greenery in the streetscape draws together foreground and middle ground and softens the outline of buildings.

Greenery in Cowley Marsh screens lower buildings from view and provides an attractive green middle ground.