

THE REGENERATION OF OXFORD CASTLE

The Oxford Castle Heritage Site is a striking social and cultural development in the centre of the city connecting into Oxford's West End. A five acre site surrounded by walls, it incorporates the remains of Oxford Castle the ancient county gaol, and the more modern prison. Today it has been transformed into a sustainable mixed-use development comprising an art gallery, hotel, education centre, heritage visitor attraction, residential apartments, and restaurants and bars, found across the site, set around public squares and gardens, each with its own distinct character.



The regeneration of the Oxford Castle Heritage Site has been achieved through a successful partnership between the public, private and third sector, careful restoration, imaginative planning and proactive community engagement. All the buildings and structures are listed, so that it was some challenge to create a sustainable commercial development, which conserved this unique place, as the most significant piece of Oxford's town history, outside the University, and opening it to visitors for the first time in its 1000 year history.

Oxford Preservation Trust is proud to be one of three key partners in delivering the development and continues to take responsibility for the historic heart of the site with the remains of the Norman castle and other historic buildings. Conservation, heritage and education objectives were key to the success of the development and were agreed at the outset by the County Council and the Oxford Preservation Trust, and accepted by other partners as a critical part of the development.

As the freehold of the site is owned by Oxfordshire County Council, it was important that the development could contribute to the Council's strategic priorities, creating new jobs, leisure services and new homes. The new hotel, restaurants, apartments and pedestrian through routes have ensured that the site is integrated into the city, creating a commercially viable place which is lived in and well used by residents and visitors. The history of the castle and the gaol has been used to the full in the Oxford Preservation Trust's heritage visitor attraction and education centre *Oxford Castle Unlocked* giving everyone the chance to learn more about the city, outside the university. Together we have created a new cultural and commercial quarter for Oxford, opening the site for the first time in its history, and adding to the offer in a County with a strong reputation as an exceptional place to live, work, learn and visit.

A Brief History

For 1,000 years Oxford Castle has occupied a five-acre site in the heart of Oxford. The castle was originally built by Robert D'Oilly, for William the Conqueror and has been home to kings, sheriffs and, latterly, convicts. For 900 years Oxford Castle was used for a Prison, cut off from the rest of the city. As a Castle, the walls kept people out and later, as a prison, they kept people in, so that the site has never been open to the public before, until now.



The Oxford Castle Heritage Project began in 1997 when Oxfordshire County Council purchased the freehold of the castle site from the Home Office, when the HM Prison closed. The site included several Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Grade I, Grade II* and Grade II listed buildings and structures, and included the two oldest remaining structures in Oxford – St George's Tower and the Castle Mound. The right for the Council to acquire the site had been retained in criminal justice legislation in the 1970's, largely due to the efforts of Hugh Mercy Walton who was at that time solicitor to the Council and subsequently a trustee of Oxford Preservation Trust.

Oxford Castle first appears in the OPT's Annual Report of 1942: "*Great expectations have been aroused recently by the prospect of Oxford Castle and Prison being vacated....and the possibilities for the site...as a space..for a public park, perhaps a County and City museum*". There were several further rumours of the prison closing, so that when it did happen in 1996 various organisations and individuals had hopes of using the site for uses including a concert hall, museum of military history, and student housing.

The County Council's ambition was to see the site re-used and regenerated. It set out clear project objectives, in spite of property consultants advice that "*there could be no alternative uses for Oxford Castle with any positive value.... the site is a liability....*"

The objectives were:

- to restore and conserve the historic buildings
- to maximise public access to and through the site and to as many of the buildings as possible
- for the whole site to be developed, managed and recognised as a single entity
- to encompass sustainable commercial use as well as a full interpretation of the site's history and heritage and good provision for education
- to be delivered at minimum risk and cost to council tax payers

Joining Forces

The County Council realised that this venture could only be achieved by working in partnership with the private sector and by securing grant funding.

Following a selection process, the Trevor Osborne Group was chosen as its development partner the first of a number of successful partnerships across the site.

With its long history and connection to the Castle, Oxford Preservation Trust understood the importance of the site and the positive contribution that they could make by becoming more closely involved taking responsibility for the ancient buildings which there less likely to have commercially viable alternative uses. These included the Mound, St George's Tower, and D Wing, now the heritage attraction and education centre, and so the Trust became the third partner in the development.

This provided the opportunity to bring together many of the Trust's primary objectives, protecting the site for its character, history and setting within the city, an enabling the Trust to provide better education and understanding of the city's heritage, whilst ensuring that the overall redevelopment of the site respected and responded to its historic, architectural and archaeological significance. On completion of the development, the Trust has taken a fifty year lease of a significant part of the site including the buildings and structures around the Castleyard, which it redeveloped and subsequently sub-let to experienced commercial operators, Continuum, who run *Oxford Castle Unlocked* and the *Key Learning Centre*.

Grant funding was secured from SEEDA (South East England Development Agency), English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Trust For Oxfordshire's Environment.

With shared vision, open lines of communications and a team approach, the partnership worked together to drive the project forward. Over the months of construction, there was a range of obstacles that needed to be overcome including delays from public utilities, arson and a main contractor going into liquidation. All of these difficulties and others were managed and absorbed proving the true strength of the partnership.

Oxford Castle Ltd. was required to carry out the restoration work to the historic buildings and provide enabling works for the Oxford Preservation Trust development before the lease from the County Council was granted or any of the commercial businesses could open. The value of these enabling works were treated as match funding and helped the Trust to secure just over £4m from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Involving Communities

Consultation and community involvement were central to the regeneration of the Oxford Castle Heritage Site. Residents and stakeholders were consulted through a range of public meetings, user groups and consultation exercises. A newsletter kept local residents and commercial businesses in the vicinity informed and engaged, and a community notice board on the site entrance, a programme of media releases, and public open days, kept the wider public up-to-date.

Initially, there were concerns from local interest groups about losing the site to commercial interest with Oxford Preservation Trust being at the forefront of this concern that any redevelopment should give the public access and that the history, architecture and archaeology of the site be understood before changes were made which might damage these and impact on the setting and views of the castle mound. A high profile lobby group, 'The Castle Action Group', was formed to oppose development. To address these concerns, the County Council formed the Castle Consultative Forum including key representatives from the Castle Action Group, and through this involvement they later became key advocates for The Oxford Castle Heritage Site.

In addition to involving residents and stakeholders in the general design of the site, the County Council and the Oxford Preservation Trust also extensively involved Oxford and its people in shaping the heritage visitor attraction and its accompanying education centre. A family panel was established to advise and evaluate activities for families in the education centre and a lifelong learning programme (open to everybody) explores the history of the castle and prison and its links to the town.

Oxford Preservation Trust began to compile an oral history of the prison involving former prisoners, prison staff and local residents.

Sustainability and conservation at the heart of development

In 1999 Oxford Preservation Trust and the County Council commissioned jointly a Conservation Plan for the site. This set out requirements and guidance for restoration and conservation, including use of materials, protection of views, retention of architectural features etc. The plan was adopted by the County Council and all parties involved in the development were required to comply with it.

The Conservation Plan led to the drawing up of a set of Conservation Objectives which were incorporated into all of the legal documents including the future Management Agreement and various leases which ensure that they can act as a guide and control for the site into the future.

Oxford Preservation Trust and the County Council also agreed a number of Heritage Objectives which helped to secure grant funding and to guide the development and the arrangements for education and interpretation. They are now incorporated into relevant leases and management agreements:

- Tell the story of the development of the Castle and Prison site as a whole, from its earliest beginnings through to the present day.
- Interpret all the heritage assets on the site, including those within the wider commercial scheme.
- Allow the buildings and the archaeology to tell the story; "let the stones speak".
- Use the stories of people from the past and present who have had contact with the site to tell its story.
- Interpret the site's recent development as the latest chapter in its history.
- Recognise that the present and future of the site represent chapters in its history and that its story will continue to unfold.

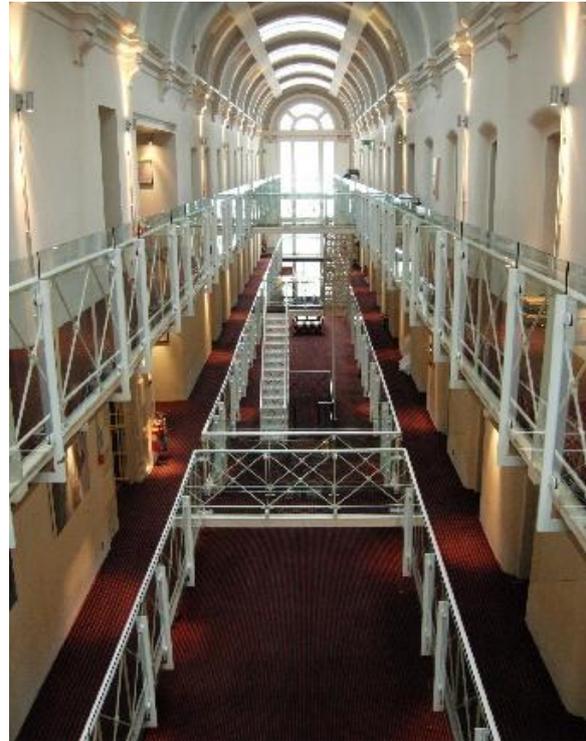
- Relate the story of the Oxford Castle/Prison site to the development of the wider City of Oxford and the County of Oxfordshire and its links to the history of the nation.
- Adopt a variety of approaches in interpreting the site, appropriate to the diversity of potential users, their needs and interests.
- Create a degree of flexibility in the interpretation, allowing for future change in response to users' needs.

Plans for the redevelopment of Oxford Castle were drawn-up under a partnership agreement between Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford Castle Ltd. For five years, a team of selected architects worked together with archaeologists, historians, landscape architects and conservation specialists to create the sustainable development plans for the site.

These plans demonstrate how sensitive and creative planning can enable historic structures and buildings to retain their integrity, keeping as much of the original fabric as possible, whilst allowing new and innovative new uses to be introduced.

Sustainability and good conservation techniques were employed throughout the construction:

- Use of lime mortar and mortar based plaster.
- Use of Bath stone (the fabric of the existing structures) to carry out repairs to buildings and to build new structures
- Re-use of existing materials in the works, for example, where stone was taken out of one building it was re-used in another location
- Re-use of granite blocks in the Castle site main entrance which were salvaged from elsewhere in the city centre



Oxford is known for its innovative approach to transport and cars and a sustainable approach to transport was adopted. There is limited car parking on site (a single 20-space underground car park exists for use by the hotel), over 150 cycle parking spaces were provided, together with excellent public transport links, so that both Park & Ride and bus services are available at the entrance to the site.

Oxford Preservation Trust engaged a young but reputable architectural practice, Panter Hudspith, to design the new shop and entrance to the visitor centre – a glass structure adjacent to St George's Tower, suspended from the 19th century prison wall, with a café and education centre pushing through the Prison wall and adjacent to the Castle Mound. This was achieved with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, enable the highest standard of new building and workmanship so that the 'heritage site' sits alongside the commercial development as its equal partner. A viewing platform on the top of St. Georges Tower and a tunnel beneath the ground give the public access from the Tower to the Crypt



The Development Timeline

- 1996 - Oxford Prison closes for the last time
- 1997 - Oxfordshire County Council buys back the site from the Home Office
- 1997 to 2001 - Oxfordshire County Council funds the upkeep of the empty prison by renting it out to film and television companies. Many feature films and television series have been filmed on the site including 101 Dalmatians and Bad Girls
- 1997 to present day - Archaeological investigation, reveals much about the city's history
- 1998 to 2000 - Partnerships between the County Council, Oxford Castle Ltd and Oxford Preservation Trust put in place. Plans put out for public consultation
- 1999 – The County Council and Oxford Preservation Trust jointly commission a Conservation Plan.
- 2001 - Planning permission and grant-funding from SEEDA, Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage and Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment are secured; demolition and restoration starts
- 2004 - the site receives a blessing from the Right Reverend Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, to commemorate the site's history and celebrate the progress and future of this prestigious scheme
- September 2005 - Last intensive phase of construction commences
- November 2005 - First businesses open, including restaurants and the Malmaison Hotel

- Oxford Preservation Trust appoints Continuum as operators of the heritage attraction, and a partnership with the County Council to provide an education officer is agreed.
- May 2006, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II performs the official opening ceremony for the Oxford Castle Heritage Site
- May 2006 – “Unlocked” the heritage visitor attraction opens its doors to customers
- September 2006 – the Oxford Castle Education Centre opens

Role of the planning authorities

The site includes two scheduled ancient monuments and several grade 1 and grade II* listed buildings, and is within a conservation area. The processes for securing the necessary consents were complex with the City and County Councils and English Heritage all having separate statutory responsibilities. The attitude of the planning and conservation officers was initially cautious, for very good reasons, but as they were consulted throughout the design and development a “consents group” began to form. The Consents Group met regularly with the project managers, architects and engineers to discuss the plans thereby ensuring effective cooperation and avoiding disputes and delay. This was helped by the Conservation Plan which defined the principles of conservation across the site.

Discovery of Archaeology

The development works gave the opportunity for the discovery of some of the most extensive and important archaeological investigations in Oxford for several decades. Time and funding were provided to allow full archaeological excavations which have added considerably to the knowledge of the history of the city. Part of the Saxon town wall was discovered and has been retained as one of the features of the development. The investigations added to the body of knowledge of the history of the site and the city. A full report of the findings is to be published later in 2013.

Outlining Oxford’s Oldest New Quarter

The strength of the £45 million re-generation of the Oxford Castle Heritage site is in the sum of its parts, ensuring there really is something for everyone.

The component parts are outlined below.

The Heritage and Education Centre

The *Oxford Castle Unlocked* visitor attraction allows the Oxford Castle buildings to tell their own stories. Visitors can learn about the real people and events from the castle site’s turbulent past and uncover its dark secrets.

O3 Gallery

The O3 Art Gallery presents a programme of exhibitions by regional artists. It aims to provide a milestone in the development of an artistic career by providing a

commercial launch pad for the artist, providing an opportunity for publicity and exposure and a chance to sell their work.

Malmaison Hotel

The Malmaison Hotel Oxford, has taken up residency in the former prison. The hotel has been designed to retain many of the prison's original features. Three cells have been knocked into one to form bedrooms, carefully done to provide luxury and amenity, whilst still retaining many of the original features including the wooden cell doors and spy holes.



Commercial Premises

A range of prestigious commercial operations have taken up long-term leases providing an attractive range of restaurants in public spaces.



Apartments

Forty individually designed residential apartments were sold off plan and continue to be some of the best addresses in the City centre.

Public Spaces

There are four public places, each with a distinct character:

- The Entrance Square and Piazza
- The lively Market Square surrounded by restaurants with al fresco dining
- The cool green of the Castle Gardens.
- The Castleyard at the foot of the Castle Mound and St. George's Tower surrounded by the Castle's oldest buildings.



The external areas are used throughout the year for theatre, music festivals and art events.



Delivering Success

When Oxfordshire County Council set out its objectives for the Oxford Castle Heritage Site it was determined to realise its goals. These have all been achieved:.

- The historic buildings have been restored and conserved and the public have complete access throughout the site.
- The site was developed and is managed and recognised as a single entity.
- The site encompasses sustainable commercial use through long-term (minimum 20 year) leases and the Oxford Unlocked visitor attraction provides a full interpretation of the site's history and heritage.
- The project has been delivered at minimum risk and cost to council tax payers and even before opening, the Oxford Castle development was praised in the Heritage Counts 2003 report as being a good example of how historic places can provide focus for regeneration.
- The development has created over 300 jobs and 11 businesses. Visitor numbers are reaching the target levels of 70,000 per year and arranged school visits have exceeded target numbers, helped by the County continuing to provide funding for a part time education officer despite a period of cuts to funding for local authority services.

Oxford Preservation Trust is delighted to have secured the most important historic site in the city outside the University, providing public access, interpretation and education to all, raising the profile of Oxford's town history, a place of belonging and of which local people can be proud, and encouraging an interest in, and understanding of, the site and the wider city.

The ambition of the Oxford Castle Heritage Site to be a social and cultural hub for residents and visitors continues to grow year on year, Creation Theatre Company held open-air productions, Opera for Everyone performed at the site, together with other groups. There have been family focused events with competitions and face painting and an outdoor ice-skating rink for the winter season.

A recent Oxfordshire County Council's Citizens' Panel poll highlighted that the development of the Oxford Castle Heritage Site was one of the most important things to have happened in the County in the last five years. The Malmaison Hotel in the former gaol is their most successful hotel within the group, and was voted hotel of the

year, with the development winning numerous awards including the RICS Project of the Year, RIBA, Civic Trust, Academy of Urbanism and numerous others.

A dynamic place – going forward ..

The success of the Castle development was an important influence on the establishment of Oxford's West End project. This partnership between the City and County Councils, was initially with funding from SEEDA, involving various other organisations and landowners. Its purpose is to plan and deliver further regeneration to the west of the city centre from the railway station to Oxpens and the Westgate. A West End Area Action Plan has been approved and, over time, will guide further schemes including the redevelopment of the station, improvements to Frideswide Square, Oxpens, a new Science Centre on the Macclesfield House site and the redevelopment of the Westgate Shopping Centre. The Castle is at the heart of the success of these and opportunities for physical, operational and educational links, in particular with the Science Centre, are being explored. The redevelopment of the closed former Morrell's brewery in St. Thomas' with good quality housing, retaining the attractive brewery buildings is in place and progress is being made on several individual projects, though this has inevitably been delayed by current economic conditions. However, the AAP continues to provide a vision for the future of the area, with the Castle there as a shining example of what successful partnership can achieve.