



## PART 4

# The Oxford View Cones: Views from the North Eastern Hills

2015 Report



OXFORD  
PRESERVATION  
TRUST



Historic England



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## 4.1 The View from Elsfield

### 4.1.1 Introduction

From Elsfield Oxford is seen in an extensive rural landscape setting contained within an amphitheatre of hills that has been admired for centuries. The views look across the valley of the Bayswater Brook and the medieval settlement of Marston, with the 20th century suburbs of Northway and New Marston hidden by a blanket of low trees up to the edge of the historic City Centre. The City Centre is seen indistinctly as a

mass of rooftops with the historic high buildings rising above as a distant cluster of spires and domes indicating the city's historic character as a centre of religion, learning and prestigious architecture. The Cumnor Hills form a dark green backdrop with fields (including the Hinksey Heights Golf Links) lower down the hill rising to the wooded crest. The pylons on Wytham hill also break the skyline.



*View from Elsfield by J.B. Malchair (1729-1812) © Tate, London 2014*



*The Current View at Elsfield*



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The view of Oxford from Elsfield has remained relatively unchanged since it was recorded by J.B. Malchair and Augustus Wall Callcott in the late 18th century and used as part of the landscaped gardens of Sir Francis Wise. The preservation of the foreground in the 20th century is largely a result of its sympathetic management by The Pilgrim Trust, Oxford Preservation Trust and Christ Church, following the ownership of Elsfield Manor by the writer, politician, viceroy and trustee of Oxford Preservation Trust, John Buchan. From Callcott's painting (below) it is apparent that the dense forest surrounding the city we see today was no less a significant sight at the turn of the 19th Century. The famous spires seem to be more visible than today, we also see the framing of the view within two trees, and the hills in the distance.

Buchan wrote emotively of the importance of the views of Oxford from the surrounding hills, picking out the view from Elsfield among these for the survival of the rural foreground and spread of green up to the walls of the historic city. Buchan encouraged undergraduates to visit him at the Manor as well as hosting parties for the political and intellectual elite of the day, many of whom would have experienced the view of Oxford as part of their visit to Elsfield. In *The Memoirs of an Oxford Student* (1936) the scientist John Wesley (1913-2007) provides a description of the visit to Elsfield and the view

*"We walked up the river past punts with women and punts with men, and finally crawled through fields to get to Elsfield, a village on a tidy little hillock, with a good view of the spires of Oxford showing like teeth of a saw above the trees: on a really clear day it should make a fine photo ... The fields and trees had a lovely golden tinge in the sunlight among the green and were a very beautiful sight below us."*

The John Radcliffe Hospital and Plowman Tower are both visual distractions on the left periphery of the view, as do the Engineering Building and Biochemistry Tower Block (closer to the focus of the view).

*"From the west they had the road through Cotswold, by which the pack-trains of the wool-staplers travelled, descending upon Oxford either by Woodstock or by Eynsham and the Botley causeway. From the north they also followed the skirts of Cotswold, for the valleys were too marshy. To all such pilgrims the first sight of Oxford must have come with a shock of delighted surprise; it is wonderful enough to see your goal on a far hill-top and travel with it in sight for hours or days, but it is more wonderful to come on it suddenly when you have wearily topped the last ridge. In those days Oxford was close and compact, with no sprawling faubourgs, for her ancient stones rose sharply from green meadows—such a view can still be got to-day from the Elsfield hill. The first glimpse of the spire of St. Mary's and the tall tower of Oseney—the third greatest in the land—as seen from Shotover or Boar's Hill or over the Campsfield moor, must to many a foot-sore pilgrim have come like the vision of John in Patmos."*

Memory Hold-the-door, John Buchan 1940



*John Buchan's Library bookplate depicting the view from Elsfield Manor. Reproduced with kind permission of W.D. Jordan Special Collections and Music Library, Queen's University (Canada)*



*'An Extensive View of Oxford from Elsfield'. By Augustus Wall Callcott 1800 ©The Provost and Fellows of Worcester College Oxford*

#### 4.1.2 The Viewers

Experiencing this view provides a connection with past viewers, such as Sir Francis Wise, J. B. Malchair, Augustus Callcot and John Buchan who portrayed the view of Oxford in its broad green setting. It also provides a connection to the many

generations of farmers and labourers of Elsfield who have experienced the view as part of their daily lives. Today, it is valued by the residents of the village and of the suburbs on the northern edge of the city for whom it provides a feature of their walks into the countryside beyond the city.

#### 4.1.3 Present Viewers

<b>An accessible and popular view on the city's edge</b>	Public footpaths in Elsfield connect with paths from Barton and, via a crossing of the A40, with paths through Northway and Headington which provide opportunities for residents of a large part of Oxford's north eastern suburbs to enjoy these views as part of their recreation.
<b>The cherished scene for the local community</b>	The footpaths providing these views are well used by residents of Elsfield as a source of quiet recreation and form part of the cherished local scene of the village. Several houses on the southern edge of the village provide this view from within buildings or gardens, whilst the garden of the manor house provides this view as part of its historic design.
<b>The managers of the landscape</b>	The landscape around Elsfield is first and foremost an agricultural landscape managed by farmers who see they views change throughout the year. The views of the city are an important element of their place of work.

#### 4.1.4 Past Viewers

<b>Living at Elsfield Manor</b>	<p>1726 Sir Francis Wise, Radcliffe Librarian. Decoratively and 'tastefully' re-laid the grounds of Elsfield, to reflect his eccentric personality and to benefit from the views of the city.</p> <p>1919 -1935 John Buchan, a famous historian and politician and fellow of Oxford University. After his death his ashes were returned from Canada and at his request he was buried in Elsfield church. He drew many influential people of his day to Elsfield and wrote emotively about the view.</p>
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<p><b>18th, 19th and 20th century artists paintings and writings</b></p>	<p>Malchair's (1729-1812) drawing 'A view from Elsfield'.</p> <p>'An Extensive View of Oxford from Elsfield' By Augustus Wall Callcott 1800.</p> <p>Buchan's library bookplate depicting views from Elsfield.</p> <p>Memory Hold-the-door John Buchan 1940. Various references to the welcome view of Oxford in the glen, to the weary traveller 'but it is more wonderful to come on it suddenly (Elsfield) when you have wearily topped the last ridge.</p>
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**4.1.5 The Viewing Place**

The viewing place adds to the significance of the view through the aesthetic qualities of the foreground it provides, the associations it has with those who have appreciated it in the past and those who have worked to preserve it as a place for viewing over the years. It also has value in providing access to those who continue to appreciate the view today.

The public footpath and the field viewing point provides 'kinetic' views - that is a series of changing views seen as a person moves around the fields, with views changing as a result of different angles, changing elevation in the fields and the framing effects of trees. Elsfield lies within the Green Belt of South

Oxfordshire, designated to protect the setting and historic character of Oxford, to prevent urban sprawl and to protect the countryside from encroachment. The survival of the fields, hedgerows and trees in the rural landscape surrounding the village provide the continuity of experience between today's viewers and those of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries and contributes to the character of Elsfield as a historic isolated rural community set among its own woods and fields.

In 1932 the Pilgrim Trust helped Oxford Preservation Trust acquire fields next to the Northern Bypass, and added further land later to protect the green setting of the city and the quality of the views.

<p><b>Aesthetic value of the foreground</b></p>	<p>The green rural foreground view evokes the memory of the past but is also a beautiful environment with wildlife supported by hedgerows and trees.</p>
<p><b>Historical value of the green setting</b></p>	<p>Elsfield was a strategic location during the civil war, because of its proximity and vantage over Oxford, becoming important marching land for troops.</p> <p>The role of the hill as a viewing place has been recorded in paintings and written about over the centuries by scholars and artists.</p> <p>The land purchased by the Pilgrim Trust and Oxford Preservation Trust on Elsfield hill to protect its role as a viewing place provides evidence of the concern to protect the view throughout the 20th century.</p>
<p><b>The unchanging views</b></p>	<p>The rural landscape of the hillside has remained largely unchanged since it was drawn and painted by artists in the 18th and early 19th century allowing a shared experience with these historical admirers of the view.</p>



*The View of Oxford from Elsfeld at the time of the view cone's designation in the 1960s*

#### 4.1.6 The Landscape in the View

The focal area of the city centre is seen as a small and distant cluster of the distinctive spires and domes within a wider landscape setting framed by the 'amphitheatre of green hills' as described by historical writers. The survival of the rural foreground and green backcloth of woods and fields provides a timeless experience of the view of Oxford set within the ancient groves of the Cherwell Valley. Whilst the historic village of Old Marston can be glimpsed among trees in the middle ground the 20th century suburbs of the city that occupy much of the middle ground are low lying and do not interfere with the viewer's appreciation of the City Centre as the focus of the view, which is enhanced by the position of the city centre, raised slightly above the valley floor. The more exposed areas of Northway on the side of Headington Hill are

more apparent on the left edge of the view, with the tall Plowman Tower in particular drawing the eye away from the focus of the City Centre. The crest of the hill has a wooded character due to the trees of the large gardens on Jack Straws Lane and Pullens Lane, providing a green setting to the city centre, although just to the left, the mass of rectilinear buildings of the John Radcliffe Hospital has a significant negative impact by breaking the green character of the middle ground and holding the eye with a large rectilinear building of very limited aesthetic value. At best it provides evidence of the development of Oxford as an international centre of healthcare and medical research, whilst the origins of the hospital's location can be traced to the availability of clean air on the hilltop that was necessary for the treatment of Tuberculosis sufferers in the early 20th century.



**4.1.7 Topography and layout of the View:**

<b>Rural open foreground</b>	The scenic footpaths that run from Elsfield Church to Old Headington offer a 'kinetic' or continually changing view of the City of Oxford with foreground and backdrop of green hills. The continuity of the historic land use provides a rural foreground setting to the views of Oxford from the hills. Whilst movement through the foreground provides a number of changing frames and settings to the view.
<b>Mixed middle ground</b>	<p>The slopes of the hill provide a vantage over the lowlands of the Cherwell Valley with the settlement of Old Marston identifiable as a cluster of red clay plain tile roofs along with the low tower of St Nicholas' Church at the transition from the foreground to middle ground.</p> <p>The suburbs of New Marston and Northway occupy a large part of the middle ground and are characterised as low level (mainly two storeys) and largely concealed in the view by the canopy of trees within the estates or along their northern edge. As such there is little to hold the eye or distract from the primacy of the City Centre as the focus of the view.</p> <p>Taller mature deciduous trees in the spaces either side of the River Cherwell contribute to the wooded character of middle ground above which the compact group of historical buildings punctuate the rear of the middle ground. The panoramic views appear as lush and verdant swathes of densely wooded land enclosing the outskirts of Oxford.</p>
<b>Distant focus to the view</b>	At three miles distance the buildings of the City Centre, including the historic high buildings, are indistinct, although the characteristic forms of the spires and domes can be recognised. Many of the spires cannot be individually identified without the aid of binoculars although this is no impediment to photographers with powerful lenses. Nevertheless the distance of the city centre emphasises the great extent of its green setting. No other buildings are seen beyond the historic high buildings, ensuring their pre-eminence as the focus of the view and protecting the historic and architectural interest.
<b>Hills frame the City Centre as the focus of the view</b>	On the left the rise of Headington Hill forms the southern side of the Bayswater Valley and provides a frame to the middle ground. Wytham Hill, to the right, is further from the focus but still provides some framing to the view. The Cumnor Hills provide the backdrop to the City Centre.

**4.1.8 Green Characteristics**

<b>Green agricultural foreground</b>	The character of this view is heavily influenced by its soft landscape, most notably the foreground farmland, with its network of neatly trimmed hedgerows and trees.
<b>Green 'forest' middle ground</b>	The dense mass of trees which surrounds the centre of Oxford in the middle ground formed by Headington Hill, the suburbs of Northway and New Marston (as well as Old Marston village) and the green spaces of the Cherwell Valley (amongst which parts of the suburbs of Oxford can be glimpsed), preserve the sense of the historic City Centre rising from 'those ancient groves' described by writers in the early 19th century.
<b>Green woodland and pasture of hills in the background</b>	The pastoral and tree covered Cumnor Hills in the background and Wytham Hill, to the right, form the backdrop to this view and complete the amphitheatre of green hills that enclose the vale surrounding the historic city. This helps to make the city the natural focus of the view. The survival of the green setting to the city provides a timeless view that is recognisable from the descriptions and illustrations that have passed down the centuries.



#### 4.1.9 Architectural Characteristics:

<b>The dreaming spires as a focus</b>	<p>The historic high buildings are distinct as a group with a clear focus surrounding the spire of St Mary the Virgin Church and the dome of the Radcliffe Camera. Other buildings in the group are harder to identify individually without binoculars or a powerful photographic lens. Nevertheless, these include the towers and rooftops of New College, All Souls' College and the Bodleian Library, along with Tom Tower and the spire of All Saints' Church (Lincoln College Library). The cupola of the Sheldonian Theatre stands on the right edge of this group while the short spire of Christ Church and the Tower of Merton College Chapel form its limit to the left.</p> <p>The tall spire of St Mary the Virgin Church and the Radcliffe Camera's Dome are the most easily recognised features in this skyline and are emblematic of the City and University.</p> <p>Further spires and towers are spread across the skyline either side of the focal group. The tower of Magdalen College chapel stands out on the right hand side for its isolated position compared to the other historic high buildings. Its location marks the eastern entrance to the historic city.</p> <p>To the right the pyramid of the Museum of Natural History, the Tower of the Winds of the Radcliffe Observatory and the spire of the Church of Ss Philip and James represent the northern expansion of the city and the developing role of the University as a centre of learning in the sciences in the late 18th and 19th centuries.</p>
<b>The rooftops of the city centre</b>	<p>Although indistinct the rooftops of the city centre form a complex mix of materials and forms with some larger buildings standing out but with none seen clearly. The level of the rooftops varies, rising and falling in areas, but is sufficiently low to allow the historic high buildings to stand above the mass of buildings and gain the prominence that supports their historic and artistic interest.</p>
<b>Rooftops of the suburbs</b>	<p>The large areas of suburban housing in the middle-ground are seen as areas of roofscape of more uniform form and materials, following a consistent level. These are mainly covered in clay or concrete plain tile of dark colour that is recessive in the view. On the side of Headington Hill the houses of Northway are consistently clad with white render providing cohesion to them as a group of buildings representing a single estate.</p>
<b>Old Marston buildings</b>	<p>The farm houses and cottages of the historic village of Old Marston are identifiable through their large steeply pitched roofs clad in red clay plain tile. The village provides evidence of the historical landscape of small communities surrounding the city that characterised the view prior to the city's 20th century suburban expansion.</p>
<b>Later 20th century high buildings</b>	<p>The eight storeys of the Biochemistry (Hans Krebs) Tower Block and Department of Engineering tower block (Thom Building) on the Banbury Road are prominent buildings here, representing the modernist architecture of the Science Area. They are bulkier in form than the surrounding spires and domes; as a result they draw the eye.</p>

#### 4.1.10 The Influence of Light and the Seasons:

<b>Seasonal changes</b>	<p>In summer the landscape is strikingly green with the spires of Oxford, nestling amongst woodland. In late summer this is transformed as the arable fields become golden catching the light and providing a contrast with the green in the valley and complementing the limestone of the historic high buildings beyond.</p> <p>In the colder months, the wooded middle-ground trees thin out and the views into Oxford reveal the striking building spires and pinnacles that pierce the skyline of the ancient city. However the dark brown of exposed soil can hold the eye more, whilst lower light levels result in the historic high buildings receding in the view. Photographs taken at this time of year need to be zoomed in closer to the focus of the view to get the best effect.</p>
<b>Sunlight changes</b>	<p>On a sunny day the light coloured buildings of the city core glow, especially when lit from the left side (in the morning). From the late morning the buildings are seen in silhouette which, against the dark background, means they can become difficult to distinguish.</p>



**4.1.11 Detractors:**

	The view into Oxford is relatively unspoilt and shielded by the wooded landscape that surrounds city. The large bulk of the John Radcliffe Hospital and the Plowman Tower in Northway draw the eye away from the central core of Oxford. The buildings stand tall in the landscape as well as sitting on high ground with long elevations facing the viewer and have a dominating impact on the landscape.
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**4.1.12 Sensitivity to Change:**

Change in the rural foreground	The green, open, rural character of the viewing place and the foreground to the view is an essential element of this view's contribution to the significance of the city. Change that reduces this character, including loss of features such as maintained hedgerows, or change of use to non-agricultural uses would result in harm to the view.
Change in the suburban middle ground and as framing of the view	The suburb of New Marston and a large part of Northway in the floor of the Cherwell Valley is generally hidden from view by the dense tree lines on the edge of the ring road and by its own canopy of suburban trees. Likewise the North Oxford Victorian suburb is largely screened from view by its tree canopy and low scale. As such, the eye passes over these areas as a continuation of the greenery of the rural foreground to focus on the historic high buildings of the City Centre. Development that made the suburbs more prominent in the middle ground of the view, detracting from the role of the distant City Centre as the focus of the view, would be regarded as harming this view.  Furthermore loss of the role of the tree canopy in softening the form of the buildings in the suburb would likewise result in harm to the view.
Change in the City Centre	Development in the City Centre that resulted in loss of the visibility of the historic high buildings as the focus of the view or that competed for prominence in the skyline with them would be regarded as harmful to the view.
Change in the rural background	The prominence of the historic high buildings in the City Centre's skyline is dependent on the contrasting 'backcloth' of the green hills to the west of the city.  Development that created features that stood in this background area and drew attention from the distant high buildings or made it harder to distinguish them would cause harm to the view.



*The Elsfield View zoomed into the focal area of the view cone in 1962*

Figure 4.1.1



*Photograph of the view from Elsfield*

Figure 4.1.2



*Illustration 1: Simplified render of the view from Elsfield*

Figure 4.1.3  
 Illustration 2:  
 Annotated render of  
 the view from Esfield





