

Malcolm Graham, *Wholesome Dwellings; Housing Need in Oxford and the Municipal Response, 1800-1939*. Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology, 2020, 78 pp., circa 40 illus., £30.

Like all British towns of any size, Oxford was transformed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Population growth and economic change led in the short term to the spread of slum housing, notably on low-lying, poorly drained land in St Ebbe's, to the south of the city and in the noxious courts and alleys leading off St Aldate's between Christ Church and Folly Bridge. But in the longer term social and political change precipitated moves to provide publicly financed housing around the urban fringe, and it is this story which is told with characteristic lucidity by Malcolm Graham in this short but revealing publication.

The first examples of improved working-class housing in Oxford took the form of blocks of flats along Osney Lane, built of red brick in 1866-8 by the landlords, Christ Church, to designs by the city architect E.G. Bruton. They still survive, and have been recently been renovated, but, despite the efforts of the Oxford Cottage Improvement Society, founded in 1866, it was not until the passing in 1919 of the so-called Addison Act by Lloyd George's post-war coalition government that the fundamental problem of providing cheap and habitable housing for at least the better-off members of the working class began to be addressed. The results are graphically shown in a useful map of council estates built or proposed between 1919 and 1939, and are listed in tabular form. And the houses can still be seen, albeit with modern windows and sundry extensions, along streets such as Addison (sic) Crescent, laid out in 1920-21 at the far end of the Iffley Road, and in the 'White City' – so-called on account of the ubiquitous whitewashed pebbledash facing – to the south of the Cowley Road. Here, as almost everywhere outside the largest cities, barrack-like tenement blocks were eschewed in favour of small cottages with large gardens laid out at a low density along curving, and, at the time, traffic-free streets, as shown in well-chosen contemporary photographs. The opening of the Cowley Works led to more building, both by the City Council and by private developers, the latter including an estate off Hollow Way in 1927 dubbed at the time as 'Misery Town' (p 29) on account of the high mortgage payments. Some of the council housing of the same period meanwhile, notably at the foot of the tree-lined Morrell Avenue (1929-31), was mingled with housing offered for sale by the City Council, and resulted in the creation of an urban landscape which is still both attractive and well-maintained.

The onset of the Depression in 1929, coinciding with the resumption of slum clearance in the city centre, led both to the flattening of most of the 'courts' off St Aldate's and to a resumption of large-scale council building at Marston, Rose Hill and Cutteslowe. The latter estate provoked the building of the notorious wall demarcating the council housing from a neighbouring private estate: the subject of P. Collinson's *The Cutteslowe Walls: a Study in Social Class* (1963). But much-publicised squabbles over this development, Graham argues, have distracted attention from the city council's genuine achievement in rehousing at least a substantial proportion of Oxford's working class: a conclusion from which it is difficult to dissent. Meanwhile in 1934 at Florence Park, south of Cowley, the Cardiff firm of Nathaniel Moss & Son adopted a differently financed, and in many ways more visually attractive, development of small houses for rental (at fifteen shillings per week). Despite teething problems, this estate survives largely intact with its central tree-lined boulevard leading to a well-landscaped park, which still flourishes as a greatly valued 'lung' for the neighbourhood.

Illustrated with helpful, previously unpublished plans and well-chosen pictures, informed by thorough primary research, and enlivened by a close knowledge of Oxford's 'bricky skirt' accumulated over many years, Graham's book is a model of careful research and lucid historical analysis. It is a major contribution to our understanding of Oxford's built environment, and can be read with enjoyment by anyone who cares for the city and its history.

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