Steve Hurst, ***Drawn From Life, The Ruskin Diaries 1949-1953***, Warm Porch Publishing, 2021. 354 pp., 29 chapters, introduction, illustrations and some in text, plus two introductory maps. £15.

In the years after World War II, Oxford was a dark and sooty shade, its buildings not cleaned and restored to their natural stone colour until after 1957, while industry in Cowley and other areas had to scavenge off war debris to keep production going. To the south-east of the Morris car works lay Sandford-on-Thames, a village community where the book's author grew up, and describes as having 'village life on the edge of the Cowley factories'. This juxtaposition meant that though a rural village in many aspects, it was dominated not by dreaming spires, but by the chimneys of a paper mill and a brick works. Author Steve Hurst later became a sculptor and with his wife set up a foundry to cast sculptures in Oxfordshire. When he was 89 he looked back to his post-war diaries to recreate a picture of Oxford and its surroundings during this period.

The 'village life' is evident in his depiction of his childhood. His so-called cottage home, though it was three storeys high, dated from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was supported by huge ship's timber beams dating from the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. Two acres of land went with the cottage on which, as in most cottages of the village, hens, geese, ducks and pigs were kept. The cottage also had a large area of wild land alongside the Thames called the Ham (from the Anglo Saxon for marsh); on the opposite side, a caravan site was crammed with bombed out homeless from London, Birmingham and the Black Country. This area was prone to flooding. The winter of 1947 was noted for its ice, snow and subsequent floods; the Sandford pub, the King's Arms still has a plaque recording how the floods rose above its bar. In the 1951-2 winter when Oxford and low lying areas around it were threatened by rising waters, Iffley and Sandford lock keepers were ordered to open their sluice gates, causing major floods between Sandford lock and Radley.

The 'factories' side is similarly much in evidence during this period. The paper mill's riverside yard was also liable to flood. It was vital to the village as most of the men worked there and lived in tied cottages, each with an allotment along a lane from the mill towards the lock, with a line of privies at one end. It was nearly as important to the local children as an illicit playground on the large bales of waste paper which were stored in the mill yard. During the war, the danger of shipping wood pulp from Canada meant paper rationing for books and magazines, and recycling continued to be important in post war years. Most of the reused waste paper came from government offices and the armed services; the United States Air Force in particular seems to have been prodigal in its wastage of materials of all kinds. Dumps around American bases all over Oxfordshire became treasure troves of discarded equipment, vehicle parts, uniforms and tinned food. The author notes the Americans seemed to care little for security when discarding scrap paper and he collected photographs and technical drawings for vehicles and guns removed from the paper mill dumps under his jacket. His loot also included two books; one a handbook on German booby traps and the other a picture book of over a hundred drawings of the Boeing B17 bomber; the Flying Fortress.

Similarly ripe for explorations was the secret wartime aircraft scrap dump at the Garsington end of Cowley, seeming to the young author one of the wonders of Oxford. This dump, officially known as No 1 Metal Products Recovery Division (MRPD), included every part of fighter aircraft and covered a hundred acres. Its huge furnaces were where the BMW-Mini factory is today and the workers were mainly Polish refugees. (This place is known to a wider

world through Paul Nash's "Totes Meer (Dead Sea)" painting in the Tate.) The author having found a foxhole way of entry, spent time removing objects from what he called 'a post war Aladdin's cave, dangerous and full of magical treasures', influencing his later sculpture.

Inspired by a schoolteacher to become a painter, in 1949 he exchanged the calm of Sandford for 'the clever jumpiness of the Ruskin' School of Drawing and Fine Art, joining some eighty full time and about a hundred part-time students, mostly university undergraduates who only rarely attended, it being 'chic while at Oxford to study at being the artist'. The ages of both types varied from 18-30 years; a mix of rich and poor, indolent and hard grafting, with some ex-servicemen, and varied nationalities from Russian to American. The School was then housed in the Ashmolean Museum which in the 1950s was geared to teaching and scholarship; 'the public were only there on sufferance'. This meant no cafe or visitor amenities, so the art students had no communal meeting spot, unlike in the university colleges, and lacked a feeling of unity. Internal teaching under the school's outgoing head, the Ruskin Master Arthur Rutherston who had been originally appointed in 1929, had adopted Bohemianism and the laissez faire attitude of the Slade. In 1949 Percy Horton took over and had a difficult time trying to instil discipline and work ethic, particularly in third year students who were used to being idle. Much time was spent drawing from the classical casts in the museum, progressing to life models. The school was not part of the university as such and the university would have liked to close it down.

Despite this unfavourable outlook, the Ruskin was not ignored by the art world, and well-known artists visited and assessed student work. John Piper gave fresh and useful advice, Ruskin Spear sprawled on a chaise longue, pointed at the paintings with a stick and was rude about them all, and Evelyn Dunbar (then living at Enstone) and Laura Knight were among the women artists who taught there, alongside Enid Marx the textile designer, folk art collector and distant relative of Karl.

Students were also not lacking in a social life. Even as wartime scarcity continued, student life still included summer picnics, punting parties, river swimming and endless hours of talking about art. In term time between classes, Ruskin students headed to coffee at Cooper and Boffins, a subterranean cafe on the corner of St Aldates and Queen Street, and to the British Restaurant on Gloucester Green for 'low priced wartime style lunch'. On high days the back bar of the Randolph was considered cheaper, though there were also tea parties at which former servicemen, now students, would lace the tea with whisky. For the 1952 ball, Ruskin went to the Randolph and hired Chappie d'Amato and his band, who argued with the then hotel manager, drank heavily and womanised. The ball was considered important enough for the Tatler and the Sketch to send reporters and photographers to cover it.

The dire poverty of some Ruskin students - one had to forage for turnips put out for cattle, steal onions and potatoes from allotments and beg butchers' bones to make soup, wash in the Thames and live in a former Landing Craft - contrasted with the really rich artist Leonard Huskisson who owned a primrose yellow drophead Rolls Royce. With wealth derived from the coal trade, Huskisson rented the Queen Anne parsonage in the 'almost perfect Elizabethan village' of Stanton Harcourt. He gave two outstanding parties for Ruskin students there, apologising at the first that he had only lobsters and champagne to offer. The second party provided a lavish spread of salads, meats, dishes of butter, puddings, cheese, a huge Georgian silver bowl of strawberries and 'a great weight of exotic foods only weeks after the final items went off ration'. Meanwhile, with only a small allowance from his father, the author had to boost his finances through vacation jobs. He worked as a labourer in a scrap yard; as a

van driver for an ice cream firm including selling from a stall at the St Giles' fair; for Payne's engineering firm and for Hinks potato merchants, where banana packing was extremely hard work.

These experiences reveal the lot of ordinary working men's jobs in Oxford's post war years, and the wealth of detail of such lifestyles contrasting with the students' lives is fascinating. However, the book is undermined by too much repetition, excessive jumping back and forth among memories, too much personal emotional detail, and irrelevant descriptions of who the author had tea with or where he cycled. For book by a successful artist, the low quality of the illustrations is surprising. The dust jacket is a powerful and dramatic black, white and orange 1952 engraving of an aluminium cutter. But inside, each chapter heading illustration is very fuzzy and indistinct, including too many similar nude figure drawings, etchings mostly of industrial scenes which look excellent and interesting in composition, but are difficult to see in detail, and old photographs of smudgy shadowy groups; one is just a black blob of the author alongside the back view of a girlfriend. A better editor and more care taken over the images would have allowed the highlights of this book to shine.

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