

Malcolm Graham (ed.), *Minutes of the Oxford Paving Commissioners 1771–1801*, Oxford: Boydell & Brewer for the Oxford Historical Society, 2023, 492 pp, 2 b/w illustrations, £50.

A modern visitor to Oxford City centre sees clean, well-paved streets, mostly broad vistas, elegant buildings with decorative street furniture and helpful signs, the streets and buildings brilliantly lit at night with welcoming shop entrances, restaurants and pubs. Few obstructions remain except jostling crowds and traffic, much of which has been removed, although bicycles and scooters have taken the place of cars in the pedestrian areas.

However, go back a couple of centuries or so and the scene would be very different: open drains, rutted streets mired in filth; slippery, narrow labyrinthine lanes; rotting, timber-framed buildings excreting filth and dirty water from overhanging roofs and water spouts; obstacles and encroachments on every corner; dunghills and rubbish heaps; hidden staircases and cellars; the stench of excrement and uncontrolled industrial processes; the nocturnal gloom barely illuminated by the occasional tallow candle or oil lamp.

The Oxford Paving Commissioners were appointed to resolve the age-old challenge of improving urban sanitary conditions. They were the principal local authority in Oxford between 1771 and 1865 and united Town and Gown leaders after centuries of rivalry in a common purpose to clean up the town. As H.E. Salter wrote in 1912, ‘The truth is that as regards the geography of Oxford the year 1771 is the end of the Middle Ages’.

This volume by celebrated historian and local treasure, Malcolm Graham, is the latest product in the Oxford Historical Society’s New Series; a sturdy, octavo-size book classically (and classily) bound in navy green cloth with gold-foil lettering, and scholarly approach in its arrangement. In accordance with the usual OHS formula, the bulk of the volume consists of a verbatim transcription of the minutes of the Oxford Paving Commissioners from 1771 until 1801. As Malcolm points out, this was the period of their greatest activity and achievement. Great attention has been paid to the details of the transcription, such as inconsistencies in contemporary spellings, word-forms and names, and the ‘Editorial Note’ provides a full explanation of such issues. It turns out that record-keeping was not one of their greatest achievements (despite the survival of quite a large archive including a comprehensive series of minute books) and Malcolm’s research has uncovered an interesting history of some of the records

Most OHS volumes have detailed indexes at the end which enable researchers to quickly identify names of individuals and places as well as topics as an entry to the historical sources. For the general reader, a more satisfying approach is to read Malcolm’s monumental ‘Introduction’ before examining the transcripts. This sets out very clearly the historical background, legal framework, financial and administrative structure, and work and achievements of the Paving Commissioners. One ends up understanding very clearly who they were, the problems and challenges they faced, what they accomplished or failed to achieve, and their place in the evolution of Oxford’s urban environment.

Prior to 1771 the university was the pre-eminent local authority and appointed annually Masters of the Streets, whilst householders were responsible for maintaining street surfaces outside their own properties. Common scavengers were appointed by both town and university to clear street refuse. None of this was very effective and conditions became

increasingly squalid as the population grew (by more than 100 per cent between 1580 and 1667). The spread of university-sponsored grand architecture such as the Ashmolean Museum (built 1679-83), the Clarendon Building (1711-15) and Radcliffe Camera (1737-49) increased demands for improvements. Given the inadequacy of contemporary local government, the creation by Local Act of Parliament of specialised improvement agencies – statutory paving or improvement commissions – which required the support of all major local stakeholders including influential townspeople, gentry and the majority of inhabitants, was a popular contemporary method of achieving reform. Oxford was particularly influenced by the City of London and Westminster Paving Commissions.

From the 1750s a number of main roads were turnpiked and traffic was increasing but often it avoided Oxford, for instance coaches between London and Gloucester or Worcester diverted via Abingdon or Islip. Oxford academics, such as Nathan Wetherell, Master of University College between 1764 and 1807 and Vice-Chancellor (1768-1772), and leading citizens like James Morrell, city and university solicitor, and Thomas Walker, town clerk from 1756 to 1795, were involved in earlier attempts to improve transport such as the Botley Causeway and the formation of the Oxford Canal Company. All three led the petition and promotion of a Bill in Parliament which received the Royal Assent on 28th March 1771 and passed into law as the Oxford Improvement Act 1771. The objectives of the Act, which applied to the parish of St Clements as well as the City proper, included repairing or rebuilding Magdalen Bridge, making commodious roads from the bridge through the University and City, cleansing and lighting the streets, removing nuisances and annoyances, and regulating markets.

The Act included requirements for the administrative and financial operation of the Paving Commission which to some extent paved the way for later Victorian reforms of local government, including the election of future commissioners and money-raising powers – they could erect turnpikes and toll gates and borrow money on the security of the tolls and, most importantly, collect rates for their services. They were also given powers to purchase property for street improvements and make contracts for providing services as well as apply penalties and prosecute offenders. The Act imposed a number of controls and restrictions, banning a wide range of nuisances such as projecting signs, pig styes and necessary houses, slaughtering of animals or trading in the streets. It even included early forms of planning and traffic control: new buildings were to be kept within street lines laid down by the commissioners and carts were not to be left permanently in streets. The Act also provided for existing street markets e.g. the butchers shambles in Butcher Row (now Queen Street), to be removed and a new market, now the Covered Market, to be built and managed by a joint university and city committee.

The Act named a large number of individuals and positions to the Commission from both the University and City, around 300 people, and there were a number of ex officio members. Meetings were held at the Town Hall, and the University Vice-Chancellor, Nathan Wetherell, was the first chairman. The volume includes tables with interesting statistics on attendances at meetings (with numbers of both dropping markedly after the first ten years) and the social and economic positions of regular attendees. The Commissioners appointed a few important officials such as James Morrell and Thomas Walker who shared the posts of clerk and treasurer and John Gwynn, architect of Magdalen Bridge and the New Market, as the first surveyor. However, many positions and services were contracted out, including collectors at the St Clements toll gate as well as street cleansing and lighting services.

As with all OHS volumes, ultimately the greatest pleasure comes from reading the historical sources which illuminate the work of the Paving Commissioners and the lives of our ancestors, for example their attempts to mitigate the hazards of increasing traffic on the roads [spellings and word forms reproduced exactly from the printed transcripts]:

‘Ordered that a Post and Board be put up directing that all carriages going over Magdalen Bridge shall pass on the left hand side thereof.’ (10th March 1778, *page 168*)

‘Ordered that a Meeting be holden.....to take into consideration whether any, and what Compensation shall be given to the Birmingham Coachman who was much injured & had his leg dislocated in Febry last by the Coach being overturned in St Giles’s by a parcel of stones laid there’ (2nd June 1796, *page 359*)

Bear in mind that anaesthetics had not yet been discovered! They faced a never-ending struggle to persuade people to abandon old bad habits and prevent the build-up of filth in the streets:

‘Ordered that Notice be given to the Inhabitants who have Dung Hills now lying in Broken Hayes [now Gloucester Green] to remove the same immediately and not lay any Dung or Soil there in future ...’

Most houses lacked piped water supplies or drains and at best ‘necessary houses’ with ash or soil pits were the only means of human ablution. In the absence of a modern police force or professional hygiene inspectors the Commissioners relied on interested or well-disposed (or otherwise) inhabitants to enforce its regulations:

‘Ordered that Mr Geagle Badcock be desired to Wait upon the Vice Chancellor to Lay an Information against Mr Kennedy of the Crown Inn in Corn Markett for Pumping or emptying his Cest Pool and Stale of Horses,...’ (25th February 1772, *page 39*)

Vandalism seems to have been as prevalent then as now:

‘Ordered that the several Persons whose Names have been Returned as having Wilfully broke Lamps be prosecuted and that Three more Lamps be put up...’ (24th March 1772, *page 40*)

The Minutes give a clear picture of the progress and methods in paving and ‘pitching’ the streets:

‘Ordered that the Foot Ways of the High Street shall be paved with the Northleigh or Hedington hard Stone and no other’ (3rd February 1778, *page 165*)

‘Ordered that the Carriage Way of St Giles’s Street be increased to Eighteen Feet and Pitched with Dry Sandford Stone or with Stone equally durable’ (25th January 1785, *page 249*)

Despite all this work, as Malcolm points out, the Paving Commissioners were ultimately overcome by the continuing growth of Oxford’s population in the early nineteenth century

and the lack of resources and technical ability to deal with the two greatest problems, inadequate water supplies and lack of an efficient drainage system. These problems would be solved later by the Oxford Local Board of Health (established in 1865) and ultimately when full environmental responsibility was transferred to the City Council in 1890.

Geographical and visual understanding is enhanced by four pull-out maps, three of which are reproductions of John Gwynn's drawings of parts of the City, including, in the east, parts of the High Street, Magdalen Bridge and adjacent parts of St Clements, and the northern area around Magdalen Street, the North Gate and Bocardo Gaol. There are also two fascinating plates of John Gwynn's original plan and elevation of Magdalen Bridge in 1772 and John Buckler's copy of a drawing by an unknown artist of houses on the northside of High Street near Carfax circa 1785.

In conclusion, I am sure there are many people who will find this volume particularly interesting in explaining a less well-known aspect of Oxford's history. The very name, like most aspects of local government, doesn't initially grab much interest unless you are prepared to engage your imagination and drill deeper into the unfamiliar. The colourful historical transcripts and Malcolm's masterly 'Introduction', supported by a breadth of reading and knowledge and acuity of detail, provide a visceral understanding of late eighteenth to early nineteenth century conditions and personalities and the important part the Paving Commissioners played in creating the grandeur of modern Oxford.

Chris Gilliam, Oxford City Archivist, 2024