



SOME NOTES

ON THE BUILDINGS

OF FARINGDON



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SOME NOTES ON THE BUILDINGS OF GREAT FARINGDON

THE OLDER BUILDINGS

The Church of All Saints, presiding over the town from the North end of the Market Place, is the oldest surviving building in the town as well as the most imposing from the outside and the most interesting within. It should resurrect a thousand years of history about the town. The Red Lion, profitably built in the Corn Market, is claimed to go back to 1432, while there are medieval parts in the Crown Coaching Inn and the Bell Hotel, north and south of the Market Place. Other venerable buildings are the Old Town Hall, built soon after the Civil War, and The Society of Friends Meeting House, built in 1696.

Other places of worship were built by dissenting groups, Congregationalists (1799), the Wesleyans in Gloucester Street (1837), the Baptists at the corner of Bromsgrove, and the Methodists (1896). The new Methodist and United Church was opened at the corner of Coxwell Road and Gravel Walk in 1974. This allowed the Roman Catholics to rededicate the second Congregationalist Church (in Marlborough Street) to the Blessed Hugh. Each serves its own congregation, as the place of worship, and as members of "Churches Together" they all serve the whole town, as venues for meetings, lectures or concerts.

Buildings also illustrate the growth of educational facilities in Faringdon. The National School was opened on Stanford Road in 1825; a century later it was called the Boy's Church of England School, and has recently been converted into two dwellings. The Female School for Industry was opened at the top end of London Street in 1833 and, ninety years later, has also become a private house. During the 1840s there were also four private boarding/day schools, two for girls and two for boys. The British School on Lechlade Road was opened in 1872. It is now, with modern extensions, the Infants School. The Elms, behind the Faringdon Town Library, was once a girls' school; it is now the Primary School. In 1964 Tollington School was opened off the Fernham Road and has become the Faringdon Community College for secondary and further education, with its playing fields and the Faringdon Leisure Centre conveniently nearby. The private sector is catered for by Ferndale School in Bromsgrove.

The County Police Station was built in stone in Coach (originally Coach-house) Lane, later extended in brick to hold the local Magistrates' Court and two cells. It was converted into six dwellings in 1986. After law enforcement in this area was taken over by the Thames Valley Police Authority, the brick Police Station in Marlborough Street was built.

The former court was in Market Place, as were the Parish Council Office and the Offices of the Faringdon Rural District Council (Camden House, with its suggestive shield of arms over the door, featuring a bull's head and two sheaves of corn).

In 1799 the town had three "surgeons". The Cottage Hospital [six beds], built in 1894, has since 1949 housed the two medical practices, White Horse and Fernhill. Plans to move to a new purpose-built medical centre are currently under discussion.

A man-handled fire engine was once housed under the Old Town Hall. Later a garage was provided for a motorised model at the corner of a Church Farm [Berners Estate] field at the junction of Church Path and Coach Lane. There are now two modern engines run by retained firemen at their brick station, with its drying tower, near the corner of Coxwell Street.

On the east side of Market Place there remains an apparently inexhaustible well, indoors, beside the old cobbled access that ran past the present Information Centre. It supplied the hand-pump and drinking basin, called the Portwell, said to have originally been set up in the 16th century by Sir Henry Unton for the Tuesday cattle market. The Portwell was rebuilt during the 18th century and later surmounted by two lanterns for gas lamps. A large circular open cistern was built lower down Market Place to provide a temporary emergency water supply as part of the Air Raid Precautions.

The watercourse (once used by the local tannery) flowing down the little valley from the area of the former railway station in Park Road had been a chronic nuisance for all traversing the Cornmarket. A conduit for this was in place by 1848. Its course marked the old division between the aptly named Westbrook ward and the Port ward. It is now all underground, piped beneath Taylor's (the fishmonger in Cornmarket, which closed down in 1998), and runs into the lake created in the park of Faringdon House.

The brick Post Office (GPO) building (erected 1898) in Marlborough Street replaced the former “post office”, which had been conveniently next to the Crown posting Inn. Plans to move the present Post Office into a shop have thankfully been rejected. Telegraph poles can be seen in photographs from the twenties; one or two survive but cabling now has to be buried. The Telephone Exchange was erected in Marlborough Street next to the ‘new’ Police Station and is fronted by a small terrace with a tree-shaded seat.

The gasometer of the Gas and Coke Company was in use by 1877 in Canada Lane; its site is now occupied by an engineering firm. Gas lamps were set up in various parts of the town; one was still in place in Gravel Walk as late as 1953. By the 1960s streets had begun to be lit by electric light from standards, later replaced by the orange fluorescent lights now all over the town and at the A420 roundabout.

OLD HOUSING IN FARINGDON

On the Rentcharge map of 1848 (scale 1:2500: preserved in the Town Council archives) all the buildings then relevant are marked in pink. The town grew little during the next century. Small versions of Victorian back-to-back housing include two brick-built terraces, Liddiards Row and Cadels Row at right angles to Southampton Street. They are set within a walled enclave entered through an iron-gated arch. Liddiards Row has gardens to the south, and Cadels Row of smaller houses, is entered off a narrow walled alley.

Rebuilding, or re-fronting produced several larger, sometimes double-fronted houses in the town. The Moss Chemist shop (with its boldly sculpted inscription BALLARD) is a notable example of nineteenth-century rebuilding which characterises the lower ends of Marlborough Street and London Street. All the houses in Market Place are old and of three stories. Some terraced cottages along the main streets were altered, others rebuilt. The area between Lechlade Road and the Faringdon House Park was infilled with a small warren of cottages which had only pedestrian access.

‘Hillside’, one of four grander private houses at the top of London Street opposite Sudbury House, is set back with a gravelled coach entrance, and a large garden to the rear. It was built in 1873 for £960: although three detached modern houses and a bungalow have now been built in its garden, it is now (March 2001) on the market as a commercial property for £425,000. Two less dramatic examples of rises in the value of house property may be cited from London Street. ‘Thelma’ and the adjoining ‘Farthing Cottage’, (an 8ft wide ‘infill’ which had been crammed into the access to an area of outbuildings) were sold in 1926 for £150 and £90 respectively. They were united, thoroughly restored, modernised and extended in the 1980s. The new complex fetched £95,000 in 1994 and is now valued with its rear garage/studio at £200,000. Next door, double-fronted ‘Melrose’ was sold in 1926 for £600, again in 1949 for £1,600, and is now on the market for £225,000.

POSTWAR ESTATES

Keeping chickens, pigs, and other livestock in the garden of the house had been commonplace, up to and during the Second World War, as was maintaining a vegetable garden. Fuller and more stressful employment, however, together with plentiful and relatively cheaper food from the growing supermarkets, rendered this domestic effort unnecessary; increased labour costs virtually forced abandonment of the larger garden. Nowadays the garden is mainly a private outdoor room for

recreation and pleasure, rather than self-sufficiency. Developers, to make the best and most profitable use of expensive land, keep the gardens on their new estates as small as possible.

Building technology and related legislation since 1945 have completely changed the character of the small home. Regulation concrete is now used for foundations, instead of a shallow level trench. Cement, instead of lime and sand mortar, is employed for bonding brick and block. Efficient measures against rising damp are demanded. Cavity walls have been introduced instead of nine-inch brick or fifteen inches of stone, with insulation against damp, noise and heat loss. Manufactured fired tiles, in variety, are now used instead of thatch, stone or slate. Factory-made double-glazed windows without glazing bars, sometimes of plastic, have commonly replaced traditional wooden casement or sash widows. Nowadays gas vents make pot-topped chimneys unusual; low or lowish pitched ridge roofs are general for the less costly house, instead of the local conventional pitch. We have concealed wiring for electricity, telephone and aerial and concealed piping for water and gas. There is hard plaster for finishing. Convenient bathrooms upstairs, and additional WCs downstairs; fitted kitchens and integral or nearby garages are usual.

During the fifties and sixties a growing percentage of the population was beginning to own cars, partly because of growing prosperity, and partly as a result of the closure of the railway branch in 1963. The large post-war housing estate had been built without provision for cars so ranks of garages had to be provided in places for which they had not been planned. Garages were built thereafter with or into the newer houses. Turning circles were needed at each spur, and wider access roads became essential.

These generalities, - almost standard characteristics of recent estate building, whether for sale or rent, large or small, give great scope for small variations by each developer for, and within, each estate, and, therefore, to the individual preferences of each home seeker.

NEWER BUILDING

Between the old Faringdon Parish Council and the old Faringdon Rural District Council before 1976, and the new VWHDC since 1976, great care has been taken to provide a full spectrum of housing from singles through families of all kinds to the elderly and infirm. Between the rates and the rents and the various grants, this physical enlargement of the town has resulted in overall benefits.

Planning is naturally influenced by existing roads. The main turnpike roads, London Road through to Lechlade Road (1733) and Stanford Road (1752) were well maintained. In 1799 sixty loads of stone had to be spread along the latter. Main drains and piped water and other services have long been installed. All roads are now metalled and are under the care of the Oxfordshire County Council.

The opening of a canal wharf at Longcot and the junction of the Severn and Thames canal with the Thames southwest of Lechlade at the beginning of the nineteenth century allowed cheaper imports of bulky goods into Faringdon. The main line of the Great Western Railway passed some eight miles to the south of Faringdon and a branch line was opened in 1864 to the terminal station (now Scats in Park Road). This further enhanced Faringdon's trade, mainly agricultural. But its final closure in 1963, together with the construction of the relieving by-pass in 1979, isolated the town.

Private developments range from single or clusters of dwellings flanking main roads, individually designed and built, to spacious housing estates. There are many distinctive small units, mainly in reconstituted stone, scattered about the town. Small clusters of infilling can be seen between larger buildings in the central areas. Demolition of the Regent Cinema (the only building in Faringdon that aspired to Art Deco) has yielded Regent Mews. Demolition of Parkers Corn Store in Marlborough Street has given us the Telephone Exchange and the Police station, while substantial internal alterations (1999) inside Langford's Corn Store in Gloucester Street has resulted in flats. A more ambitious scheme was the demolition of the large garage at the corner of Church Street and Swan Lane to provide the thirty 'retirement' flats of Eastfield Court.

Large-scale building by local councils is a thing of the past. Housing associations are now the providers of low-cost or 'affordable' housing for rent, and there is often a requirement for developers to integrate a proportion of low cost housing in new estates. A recent example is Badgers Walk where, according to plans passed by the local authority, twenty six affordable units are to be set in two clusters among the fifty eight Bryant houses. Apart from the most up-market private developments it is now often impossible to distinguish, solely by their address, freehold estates from housing association [formerly "council"] estates.

THE NEW ESTATES

A very brief analysis of the extensive housing estates developed since the Town and Country Planning Act of 1948 follows. The full records, on microfiche or in dossiers, of the Vale of White Horse District Council Planning Department at Abingdon are far too elaborate to condense here; they cover bureaurocratic decisions from first proposals to final approval, but not practicalities from the turning of the first sod to the sale of the last house on an estate. Nor are the original sale prices of each different style of house easy to refer to.

COUNCIL ESTATES

A dozen semis with large gardens were built along Station Road (now Park Road) during the thirties, followed by the first post-war estate, Marlborough Gardens, with over 170 dwellings. This is a mixture of two-storey terraces and semis around a central village green with trees. Grass verges border the circuits and the spurs, where bungalows are sited. They are brick/block built, with rendering, with single ridge, and chimneys at a gable end. Water, drainage, gas and electricity were standard, as were bathrooms and indoor WCs. The windows feature large panes, reflecting continuous sheet-glass techniques. .

The Pitts estate followed, - Goodlake Avenue and its spurs, - similarly verged with grass; all built of brick and tile, but lacking chimneys, with varied styles and accommodation. Finally, development of the area behind Carters introduced a car park and public lavatories. The bridging road-link between Bromsgrove and Ferndale Street truncated Southampton Street. The Lees, Portway, and Westbrook comprise three rectilinear three-storey blocks with white cladding and ground-to-roofline pilasters separating each narrow frontage. They have built-in garages and parking space to the central road.

PRIVATE DEVELOPMENTS

The larger estates are all on greenfield sites and the more recent developments have been produced by well-known national and local companies (Bellway Homes, Bryant, J.A. Pye (Oxford) Ltd, etc). They, more than any, have enlarged the built-up area of the town enormously, spreading to the west and south-east. They vary in size from Bellway's Berners Way complex down to the half dozen units in Combes Close developed by Lechlade Homes.

Among the earliest is the unashamed 'ribbon' of Folly View Road which links Coxwell Road, via a short stretch of Fernham Road, with Marlborough Gardens, a junction distinguished by the Spar store. It is a string of almost continuously grass-verged varied dwellings, including small blocks of flats, and bungalows, all with small gardens. Similar in style and diversity is Westland Road (63 units), a cul-de-sac with a single spur, entered from, and parallel to, Highworth Road.

During the seventies two bigger estates followed. The Pines is a spacious hilly nexus of detached and semi-detached houses, with a short circuit of mainly straight roads and five spurs. Two later spurs lead to blocks of sheltered accommodation, Ferendune (58 single rooms) and Oakwood (flats).

Sands Hill marks the limit of building (so far) off the west side of Park Road. It is accessible through Butts Road and divides westwards into a circuit with five inward pointing spurs. The names of the two roads, Town End and Marines, aptly define their original position at the end of the old Station Road, and the replacement of the Royal Marines camp.

The next decade shows a continuation of these characteristics. Opening eastwards from Highworth Road and meandering downwards with four spurs is Orchard Hill, an almost American up-market estate of detached houses, with an occasional bungalow, all with garages at their side, and connected by a footway with the contiguous Pines. Coxwell Gardens is a compact group of 29 labour-saving units restricted to purchase by the over fifties. At the east side of town, from the old Stanford Road, Berners Way continued to spread its tentacles southwards down the slope incorporating and overtaking Spinage Close - (named after local builder and undertaker Russell Spinage).

During the nineties Berners Way was extended with Harding Close and now ends with a cul-de-sac and a footway into the tail-end of Southampton Street. It now boasts ten spurs and some hundred units. Further up Stanford Road a delightful smaller group in similar style is graced by mature shrubs and trees from the old nurseries and its name appropriately commemorates the former owner, Michael Tucker. Below the crest of Stanford Road is the adjacent south-west facing estate, Nursery View, of superior detached houses set behind high walls along the very curvaceous road that currently ends in mud and uprooted saplings as though it would reach down to the row of cypresses preserved at the bottom of Tuckers former orchard. Over the brow of Stanford Road the traffic noise from the bypass fortunately rules out new building.

The present millennium sees starts at three new estates, some houses in each already having been bought and occupied. The Willows, developed by Bellway on the Esso garage side of Park Road, runs north-east. To the west, at the top of the hill along Coxwell Road, two linked estates, Bryant's Catkins and Pye's Badgers Walk, enjoy a common access and provide together a wide range of very superior houses with 2-6 bedrooms, some on three floors, some with double garages, their smallish gardens separated by mean six-foot wooden fences, together with obligatory proportions of 'affordable' housing built by other such as the Guinness Trust.

A STROLL THROUGH THE ENCIRCLING ESTATES

Since the 1971 census the town's population has almost doubled. Most people now live among the grassy verges and trees of these enclaves that spring from the main roads into a cluster of paved roads and spurs, with footpaths between.

Disentangling the boundaries of the dozen housing estates that virtually surround the town is difficult for the pedestrian. Almost without a break they touch one another from west of the Berners Estate on Lechlade Road anticlockwise to Church Path Farm

Few Faringdon estates occupy level ground - The Lees and Portway, in the valley of the former brook, or Sudbury Court on the shoulder north of Oxford Road. Most are definitely hilly, none more so than Orchard Hill and Nursery View. The angular, uniform estate design of the 60s and early 70s has given way to small groups of varied housing within larger complexes. Some estates are higher with long vistas, others, in shallow vales have shorter views of trees and groups of neighbours' houses and cars. Rooms may face any point of the compass. But, among comfortable curving roads flanked by pavements with mown grass verges, there is little sense of being overlooked or crowded in. Most estates are modern versions of the Garden City. It's possible to walk round through these leafy areas and pass no shops at all.

Start by the entrance to the old outdoor swimming pool below Woodview, cross the Lechlade Road, go into Canada Lane, pass the allotments and the cemetery. With the Pines estate on your left, take the footpath from the end of Canada Lane into Beech Close, go up the hill out of Orchard Hill, turn left across the Highworth Road and walk towards Coxwell Road with Westland Road parallel on your right. Turn right into Coxwell Road, then left at Clocktower Court into Fernham Road. (Glance backwards to see some of the latest additions to the town, Catkins, and Badgers Walk, on the further

side of Coxwell Rd). Take the first left turn and go along Folly View Road, bear right past the entrance to Marlborough Gardens with its village green. Alternatively carry on along Fernham Rd and turn left along Leamington Drive and walk through the alleyway into Folly View Rd. From there go through the passage at the end of the road, and into the top end of the Sands Hill estate. You can go down either side, Marines Drive or Town End Road, and then out of Butts Road and into Park Road. Turn right and then left into the new Willows Estate, up the hill and along the footpath that leads down to Southampton Street. Thence one can walk up the winding Berners Way. You may carry on up to Stanford Rd, where a right turn will take you to Tuckers Road, and on to Nursery View; or you could take the footpath via Jespers Hill through into Lansdown Road, turn right past Brackendale, up Ferndale Street and across the London Road, then into the last cul-de-sac, Sudbury Court, and the end of this tour almost at Church Path Farm.

THE FUTURE

Although the spread of the town has increased hugely and its population trebled during the last half century, another 450 houses [with about 1500 more new inhabitants] are envisaged during the next years. The latest planning forecast shows that land use and other characteristics of the area preclude the building of any more large estates than those already outlined by the local planning authority. This great growth of housing stock in such a short time in one of the less favoured towns of Oxfordshire has recently sucked in an influx of younger families and therefore may hint at a possibility that after twenty years a greater part of the population will be retired, the houses more variegated in a multitude of small ways and the trees and shrubs matured. Can this be such a bad thing for the future when everyone will have been better educated (as opposed to being merely literate and numerate with exam results to prove it), men and women healthier and more at ease with their neighbours of all kinds, all pursuing their own paths without narrow disapproval?



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