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## PRESERVATION OF OXFORD

WHILE it is recognized that without some measure of central direction and regional guidance there can be no re-planning and reconstruction of our towns or countryside which will ensure the best use of the nation's reserves of land, the right balance between industry and agriculture, between work and leisure, that is, the best from the point of view of social and cultural as well as material needs, it is in the application of the planning principles and policy to particular local problems that the individual citizen is most interested. Those are the consequences that are likely to provoke his most speedy reaction, and his support of, or opposition to, any Ministry of Planning. He will judge of its value by the results that he can see in the district most familiar to him.

On that ground the report of the Committee on Planning and Reconstruction appointed in November 1940 by the Oxford Preservation Trust is indeed of more than local interest. The second part of the report which has now been issued (see page 297) deals with questions directly related to the old University City of Oxford, and includes a summary of the conclusions presented in April 1941 in the first part of the report, which was concerned with planning for the Oxford region and how far the measures that are necessary locally are dependent on national action. But the national interest of the second part of the report is actually scarcely less than that of the first part, in spite of its narrow scope, and the announcement of the endowment of a chair of social medicine at Oxford by the Nuffield Trust gives a sufficient clue to the fundamental reason.

The report gives a good historical sketch of the changes in Oxford in the last generation and of the acute problems which continued development presents. The evils described still remain and may be greatly intensified in the future. Indeed, the unique character of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge is something worth cherishing and worth defending as a national rather than as a local inheritance only. It would be a national disaster and no mere local tragedy if we allowed rapid and uncontrolled industrial development to thwart either the growth of the university in such directions as Nuffield College has stimulated or the remoulding of the City of Oxford itself and its preservation from the sordid encroachments that have been allowed to sully it.

No city, in fact, has a greater duty and a greater opportunity than Oxford to take a leading part in the movement to remould social conditions and to add fresh splendours of architecture, new beauties of park and garden and spacious emplacement to our heritage. The study that has already been given to the physical planning of town and country has eased the way, and the times are favourable, not only for taking further preventive measures to safeguard the University and City from further detriment, but also to remedy, so far as practicable, the injuries already suffered, as well as to adopt a broad constructive policy for the future. The report outlines

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a complete scheme for the preservation and ordered development of Oxford, undeterred by doubts as to its financial feasibility. It recognizes the need for careful consideration of existing interests—that a city is not a mere collection of buildings with services of roads, light, water and the rest. With its emphasis on the community and its individual and social needs, it advances a plan bold and comprehensive enough to command wide approval.

The report points out that it is almost impossible to forecast what may be the extent and nature of future developments in the University, and it is of the utmost importance therefore that a generous view should be taken of the need there may be for expansion on the part of the University and the colleges. Through lack of foresight and collaboration, they have made not a few mistakes in the past, and the University can already provide examples of the consequences of defective planning. Moreover, the tendency noted in recent years for research institutes to seek establishment in Oxford may develop very greatly after the War; and should the number of university students even equal that at Cambridge, much fresh building would be required for their accommodation. It is doubtful whether it has been sufficiently considered how many new sites of liberal extent may be required if, after the War, Oxford were to prove, as it well might, a far more powerful magnet for the attraction of specialists and students from all over the world than it has in the past.

The splendid new facilities for bringing research into contact with the problems of medicine and of social and economic organization made possible by Lord Nuffield's benefactions are a pointer in this direction which should not be overlooked any more than their implications for civic development. The University of Oxford is no longer an institution catering for only one section of the nation. At least half its students are drawn from the less wealthy classes of the community. Its teaching and research embrace the social sciences, and members of the University have proved themselves as leaders in many departments of the national life. Moreover, just as the welfare and environment of the University is not a matter of merely local concern, so the embellishment of the City of Oxford with a civic centre and other developments recommended in the report to rescue it from its present disfigurements, and with the new features that are proposed, and adequate hotel accommodation, should lead to an even greater number of visitors to Oxford, with much financial benefit to the catering and other trades of the city. Its proximity to Stratford-on-Avon would help to make the district one of the principal centres for visitors from the Continent, the Dominions and Colonies and the United States.

In regard to industry, the report concludes that the industries now established should not be subjected to any harassing restrictions, but every effort should be made to serve their welfare. On account of the historic character of Oxford, any tendency to develop it into a great industrial city is to be deprecated and should be forestalled. No heavy industries should be permitted to establish themselves and no

sporadic industrial expansion should be allowed. Certain facilities should be given for the establishment of additional light industries, and any proposal that might be made for creating an industrial estate for this purpose should be considered sympathetically. The most valuable location for such an estate would be in the neighbourhood of Cowley, on land already zoned for industry in the Mid-Oxfordshire Planning Scheme.

According to the report, there are strong reasons for an entirely new departure in connexion with a civic centre. Such a centre should be designed so as to meet all the requirements of a modern municipality, and the error of cramping the site and leaving no room for future developments, committed by so many of our towns, should not be repeated here. Again, in regard to housing, the report stresses the importance of making sufficient provision for social needs in planning all new housing estates.

The committee has wisely included as an annexe to its report a report of the Oxford City Council's proceedings on the plan for redevelopment, which indicates the measure in which the Oxford Preservation Trust's proposals are likely to find local support. What emerges from this report is, in fact, the extent to which local opinion is ahead rather than behind Government action, and the general impatience at the slow progress under the Ministry of Works and Planning. This is notably true of several of the badly damaged towns which, following the example of Coventry, have been quick to realize the opportunities now to their hand for redressing past mistakes and errors.

The procedure suggested in the report is that the Oxford City Council—in conjunction with the two neighbouring County Councils, if they concur—might approach Parliament with a view to the passage of a special Act, for the establishment of a statutory commission to carry out such improvement scheme as might be adopted. The City Council should have the right to nominate a majority of the members of such a commission, on which both the County Councils of Oxfordshire and Berkshire as well as the University would be duly represented. The commission would have executive powers to carry out schemes in co-operation with the local authority concerned. Such a plan would avoid difficulties and delays which would otherwise occur from existing local boundaries, and would enable new financial sources to be tapped while protecting local interests. Any special powers for the acquisition of land could be embodied in the Act.

The broad outlines sketched above of the scheme for the re-planning of Oxford and its environs put forward by the Oxford Preservation Trust will serve to indicate the active interest which is being shown in the future utilization of the countryside of Great Britain. It is typical of many local efforts, which when integrated should make of the country a better place—a place in which both cultural and material needs are duly considered. The Ministry of Works and Planning must see that this local interest is fostered and, where necessary, guided to serve the needs of the country as a whole.