

Oxford Housing and the Survivor Syndrome

Danny Dorling (draft 3, written for the Oxford Magazine, 30th January 2019)

You read this *magazine* and because of that you almost certainly know how the start of the story goes, but please bear with me, the ending is different. I am assuming that you have lived in or near Oxford for some time. By near, I include London.

You are at a social function. It could be a gathering for new postgraduate students who have just rented their first room in a shared flat. It could be a college dinner and you are sitting next to the newly appointed associate professor. It could be a garden party, or a carol concert, or at drinks after a lecture, or a rather convivial event organised by a head of house, school, faculty or department. Old staff may well carry on working to their retirement, and a few wish to extend their tenure long beyond that; but as the turnover of new staff in this university is so high and you have been around for some time, you will know that the following scenario almost inevitably repeats itself again and again.

You make the mistake of asking how they are settling in. It is a better opening gambit than the predictable 'so what do you do?'. They look a little wary, and then they tell you. They think they have made a mistake in their housing choice. The bus into Oxford takes well over an hour and they are spending three hours a day commuting;

or the rent in Oxford is astronomical and the quality of place they are renting is atrocious; or they cannot get their offer on a home accepted despite it being in the catchment of one of 'those bad' schools and despite being told house prices are falling due to Brexit.

You give them the look, the Oxford look. It is the Oxford way, to give the Oxford look, and you have slipped into the way. You are on autopilot because you have been in this situation so many times before. Your brow furrows, you change your stance to appear to be listening intently, you look concerned, sympathetic, you ooze apparent empathy. You say, "where are you living now?"

Their story unfolds. They are hesitant at first, but they want to know if they have made a mistake. Their implicit question: "What is the secret to being well housed in or near Oxford?" They are new. They do not know.

It is all a little embarrassing. After all, if the young woman you are talking to is a DPhil student her problem would be far less of a problem if she had parents who could help them out. The university has been so generous in offering her a place to study, and she has been so fortunate to receive research council funding for her fees and a stipend to live on; the only problem is the rent and the fact she needs to eat as well as sleep.

It's so much rent every month for such a squalid room. The evening bar job in the White Rabbit helps, but is tiring. She worries about the insecure contract with her landlord, about her friend who is illegally sub-letting the sofa and what should happen if that is discovered. She worries that the rent will rise. She is looking into house sitting for people who go away in the summer. You tell her that a mortgage on that property would only cost half as much as what she and her legal and illegal co-tenants are all collectively paying in rent. It does not cheer her up to know just how much money her landlord is making, enough from just this one letting to spend all his days on cruise holidays. It's 'the Oxford housing market'.

“What is the university doing?”, she asks you. “Well it built some blocks of flats at the south end of Port Meadow” you reply. “Some even have a little kitchen in them and an oven! But because there was so much uproar about how the flats spoilt the view, when the old paper mill site at Wolvercote was to be developed the university bottled it and sold to a private developer,” you tell them, knowingly, showing off your detailed knowledge of all things Oxford, while not actually being at all impressive.

You continue: “I would have built an Italianate mock village, looking a little like Portofino or Portmeirion”, you joke, “in front of those new block of flats. Imagine how much better the view south across Port Meadow from Wolvercote would have been then? They could have been built to be let to university key workers”, you suggest. The bursar, who used to work in the City of London, overhears you and inwardly sighs. ‘There you go again, displaying your complete ignorance of the way money markets work’ he thinks as he smiles pleasantly and wonders away towards a potential donor, glass (for them) in hand.

A week later the new Associate Professor tells you of his problem renting. Your brow furrows and you look concerned and shift your stance to appear to be interested. His partner is expecting a baby and no landlord will rent the couple an apartment in Jericho, or anywhere nearby where they want to live. Why rent to a family with a child and risk the inevitable extra wear and tear? But they have finally found somewhere to live on the eastern edge of the city, and it will work until the child is aged four. As you talk there is, as always, the potentially embarrassing issue that might be raised of money. He is American so the risk is higher. He has not yet been in Oxford long enough to know that you can talk about anything, sex, politics, whatever, as long as you don’t mention inherited wealth or where the children go to school.

“My college doesn’t help”, the new professor tells you, as if the city’s problem would be solved if only all the colleges helped all their associate professors to buy a house. That would be a little like going back to the days when the dons lived in college, you think to yourselves. Where if you left your job you also left your home. You quip

about how Oxford initially expanded only when the dons could finally stop having to pretend that they were celibate. Only then could they build grand houses for themselves on the Woodstock and Banbury roads; town houses with a basement for the male servants and an attic for the female ones. The quip doesn't help, but to quip is the Oxford way.

An older member of staff tells you of a problem with their children's primary school. The staff keep on changing every year, often during the school year, and "they are all so young and inexperienced", she says. "The last head teacher they appointed was incompetent and has already resigned. It is as if they can't find someone who wants to do that job for any length of time who can also live in or around Oxford." You tell them you once saw a series of maps of how Oxford expanded over time. The light grey areas on the map were what had been newly built. The maps showed that the city abruptly stopped expanding after the 1970s. "The reason" you say, to show (in the Oxford Way), just how very clever you are, "was not because of the green belt, but because the car factory was no longer taking on any new staff".

You warm to your theme. "Tens of thousands of men used to work in the factory in Cowley. Almost all were married and had children. When their jobs were not replaced it was mostly people from the hospitals and universities that took over living in their homes. Just a few thousand people work in the factory today. Oxford did carry on expanding outwards in the 1970s, 80s and 90s; but into other peoples' neighbourhoods and communities, not onto green fields. That is why we have such a crisis now, much worse than before".

It doesn't help to explain. They know that your children don't go to a school like their children's school. They know that somehow you managed to navigate the Oxford way. They don't know how. You change the conversation.

Is there another way? The university has plans, but they mostly involve bringing in more students and staff to the city, a new graduate college and a new trunk road so that those without some financial advantage can commute in from further and further

away each morning. The high turnover of young academics makes the snapshot at any one time look particularly impressive. So many amazing CV's to hand at any one instance in time for the smiling snapshot picture that is the Research Excellence Framework, like baubles on a Christmas tree. Those who have made it are not unduly concerned. The most pressing perennial issue in the Oxford Magazine is why invitations to the grandest of summer garden parties were not given out this year to some of the retired academics who still live in the city.

Two local people died homeless in Oxford in late January 2019. As children they had both been pupils at Cheney school, then the average school in the city. Most of the homeless people who have died recently in Oxford grew up in the city or nearby.

The government has plans. A million new homes in the countryside between Oxford and Cambridge, along the route of the first quarter segment of the new M25+. Initially they will just label it an 'expressway' to imply it will not be gridlocked. It will feed into the M40, and on to London. And, if ever built, it will be gridlocked as it approaches Oxford. Their plans will not solve the housing problem.

In great contrast, her majesty's opposition have plans, including a commitment to the compulsory purchase by the state of agricultural land on the edge of those cities in which there is the greatest housing need, and no support for the new expressway, just for a better rail link. The rail link would not be gridlocked; and much of the new housing would be allocated on the basis of need, not to make profit for greed.

The governing bodies of colleges with land around the edge of Oxford prick up their ears. Someone had told them that the Oxford way means it is their duty to do whatever they could to maximise the growth of the college endowment. To do less would be a dereliction of their duty as a trustee of an educational charity. Education is, apparently, all about amassing enormous wealth.

Key members of the governing body hold confidential talks with property developers who wanted to build detached homes on the edge of Oxford, large houses with

double garages for the most affluent of London commuters. These will be “homes for your children” the oily executive from the property company lied at the public meeting held in Old Marston back in 2018, as he looked the scruffy man who had asked the question directly in the eye. He assumed the man knew little about housing. That man was me.

The bottleneck will be broken. It was broken before, between 1930s and the 1960s. The homeless have been well housed before, many decades ago. The university and its colleges have never played a progressive role in this story, that may just be their way. It is a very long and old story. One day, when I am a very old man, I may still be here. I don't want to end my days clogging up a family house in New Marston for years after my children have finally left home. If I fail to escape this city in retirement, I would like to end my days in an apartment with a lift and no stairs that had been carefully built into one of the hill sides overlooking the city. I don't need much space, moving recently to Oxford has taught me how few material possessions you really need to retain. But you would be amazed just how many apartments could be built into those hillsides, especially if very little space were reserved to park cars.

I would hope that a new family were living in the house I now live in, and that they could then walk to work or school. A family of five last lived in it in the 1930s. I would hope that all around me were cycle lanes, students, primary school teachers, head teachers, and associate professors. And I would hope that the biggest worry I had would be whether the invitation to the summer garden party would arrive each year, so that I could set off in my gown in my electric buggy down into the city where the university now funded itself on the back of the tourist trade, rather than relying on arms dealers or plutocrats attempting to white wash their reputations. In my ageing regalia, I would continue to play my part in the entertainment.

I imagine a conversation with a newcomer and confide in them, annoyingly, “in my day you know, it was almost impossible to afford to live in this city, the roads were choked with cars and the colleges were choked with the lingering scent of bigotry. There were people sleeping on the streets, locals were considered to be miscreants,

and the tourists resented". And they will listen politely, without a care in the world over the truly affordable rent they pay for the home on the hillside that they too have right to live in for as long as they wish, regardless of who they work for, or if they work.