

£15m plan includes 1.8km lake, two marinas, sports facilities, wildlife area and bridge from Osney

Giant rowing lake plan

By Reg Little

A GIANT rowing lake stretching from Osney Mead almost to the Redbridge park-and-ride is the centrepiece of a major leisure scheme unveiled today.

A 1.8km water course running parallel to Abingdon Road, Oxford, is being proposed in a £15m plan to create a major recreational facility close to the city centre.

The rowing lake would be developed to Sport England's specifications and used by the university, local boat clubs and schools.

It would also be open to the public for canoeing, dragon boat racing and other water sport activities.

Two marinas for up to 180 pleasure and narrow boats would be created, along with new sports pitches and a 20-acre nature and wildlife reserve with lakes.

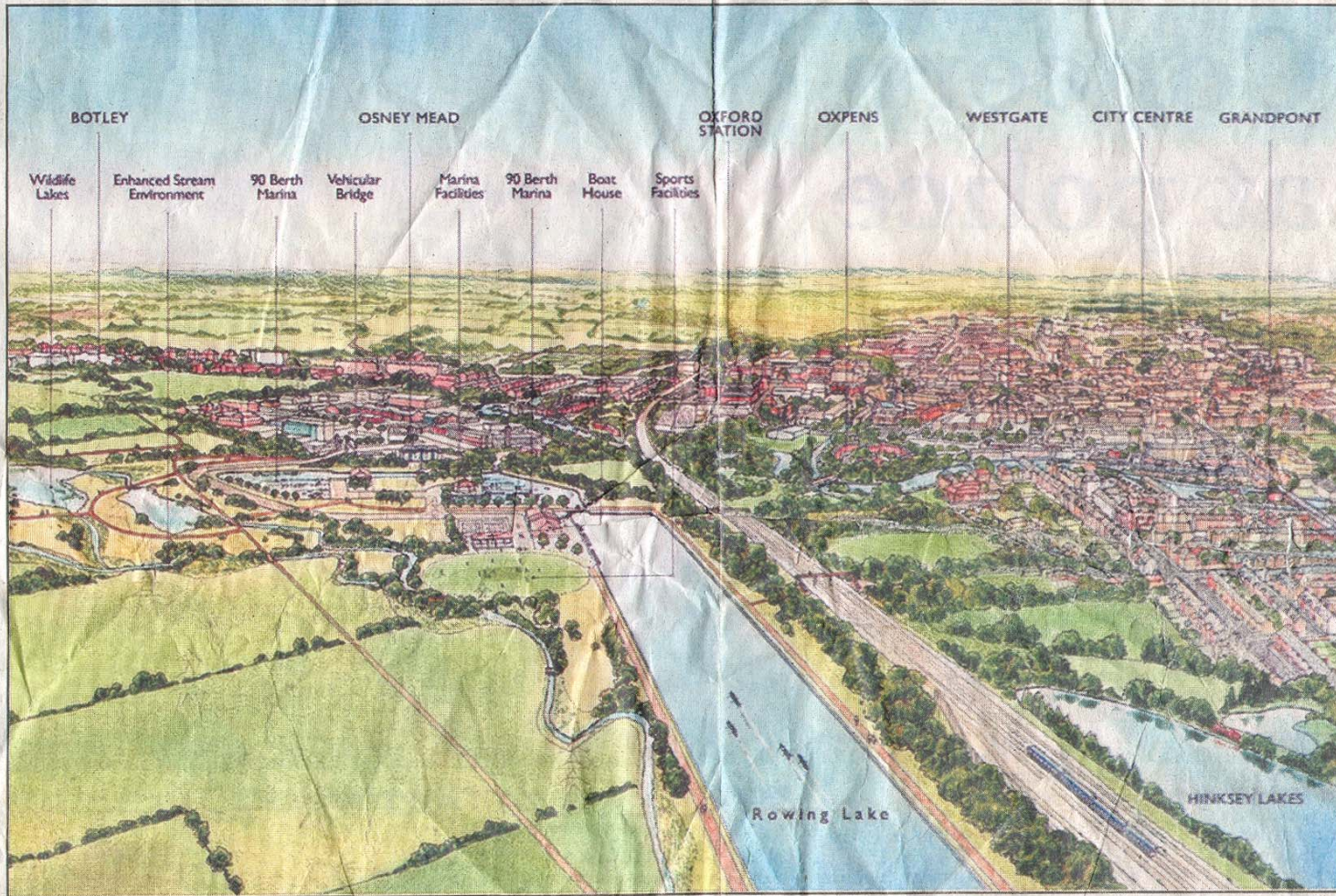
The company behind the proposal, Grandpont Waters, says the idea would be largely funded by the sale of gravel excavated from the flood plain site.

The idea has been welcomed by the city's rowing fraternity, who say it could rival the large rowing lake planned at Cambridge.

But it failed to impress the city council, which dismissed it as environmentally damaging and implausible.

An environmental study is being planned says Grandpont Waters, whose founders include the Oxford sand and gravel company H.Tuckwell and son, which owns part of the site. Other land owners in the vicinity include Oxford City Council, and two Oxford colleges — Pembroke and Corpus Christi.

The scheme was unveiled at a meeting of sports groups and local representatives. The consultation document



'It's all about digging gravel'

says that "existing protected and newly-created wildlife areas" would be incorporated into the scheme. A series of wildlife lakes would be dug, with existing watercourses and hedgerows enhanced.

It says the two 90-berth marinas would be developed to "provide the city and this

stretch of the River Thames with a suitable water tourism venue, with a network of footpaths and cycleways linking the development into the city centre".

It is proposed that flood relief measures would be incorporated into the plan, allowing it to fit into any

Environment Agency flood relief scheme for Oxford's western water corridor.

Len Key, business development director of the builders Knowles and Son, and one of the main figures behind the new company, said: "Rowing on the river now presents serious health-and-safety

issues. The Thames is congested and as a result increasingly dangerous, particularly in times of strong stream following heavy rainfall.

"It would be in a uniquely central position. We have spoken to the Environment Agency.

"We now need to see if there is general support for the idea and assess the environmental impact on the

floodplain before we even consider making a planning application."

He said the possibility of extending the 85m wide lake to a length of 2km was being considered.

He said: "While the rowing lake might host occasional national or international events its principal use would be for Oxford and not exclusively one sector."

The massive gravel

excavation would take six to eight years to complete. The gravel could be carried away on rail tracks which run along the edge of the site.

Mr Key said the huge quantities of gravel involved could help Oxfordshire meet extraction targets imposed by Government.

He said the site might be accessed via a new bridge through the Osney Mead industrial estate.

The feasibility of access on to the ring road was also being examined.

City of Oxford Rowing Club's development coach, John Hill, said: "The Isis is perhaps the busiest stretch of water in the country in terms of man-hours of rowing.

"Anything that could be done to relieve that would be welcome. We need more space. It's like teaching learner drivers on the M25."

But a member of Oxford City Council, Alex Hollingsworth, said: "It sounds a fantastically far-fetched idea.

"I don't think we can regard it as plausible until it is shown to have serious backing from a sports body, or someone with sufficient finance to pay for it. It seems everyone wants gravel and that's what this seems to be about."

Oxford Mayor Bob Price, who represents Hinksey ward, said: "This would be environmentally damaging to Oxford and its green environment. It would massively disturb the water table in the area and be visually intrusive."

He also feared the scheme would significantly add to traffic congestion in the area.

Similar rowing lakes have been created at Reading and Nottingham.

The Eton rowing lake, where £8m was derived from gravel, is to be used in the 2012 Olympics.