

## Diamond Place: Character Assessment

### Introduction

It is important that any development responds appropriately to the character of the site and the surrounding area. The Oxford City Council Character Assessment Toolkit provides a standard framework for assessing the character of an area. The toolkit is designed to enable the identification of existing positive townscape characteristics, spatial arrangements, features and materials, and particularly attractive views that can be integrated into development proposals. The toolkit has been used as a basis for this assessment. It is explained in the Toolkit that the results of assessments are likely to vary between users as a result of different experiences, knowledge and/or emotional attachment. This is a valued part of the assessment process.

An assessment of the existing character of the site and its surrounding area has been made to inform the supplementary planning document (SPD). The purpose of this assessment is to identify positive characteristics of the area that may be affected by the development and that should be retained and enhanced. It also captures negative aspects of the area that present opportunities for improvements to be made. An understanding of the existing character of the site and its surroundings will add value to the SPD and will help ensure that future development complements the existing townscape.

### Historic context

Before 1820 there was very little development in the Summertown area. The Banbury Road was already an important route connecting Oxford to Kidlington and there was an inn situated near to it on the site of Diamond Cottages, with a few farm buildings dotted around. Diamond House was a notorious inn in the mid to late 1700s but was converted to tenements by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was reconstructed in brick as four cottages under one roof, now the Grade II listed Diamond Cottages.

A sale of freehold land of 7 acres was advertised in 1820, described as being near the Diamond House on the road leading from Oxford to Kidlington. The plots were on the east side of Banbury Road, from Ewert Place to just beyond Mayfield Road. The population increase and housing shortage in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century meant that the cheap building plots only 1.5 miles north of the city centre had a quick take up. A main row of cottages faced the east side of Banbury Road with more behind this and approached by 3 lanes, now Ewert Place, Summerfield Road and Mayfield Road.

At much the same time another area of land was advertised west of Banbury Road between South Parade and Squitchy Lane. The smaller lots were soon taken up by people wishing to build their own houses. The earliest map to show Summertown and name it 'Somer's Town' is from 1824 and it shows a scatter of house on the west



**Oxford and Summertown in 1832.**

Source: Ruth Fasnacht (1977) *Summertown since 1820*

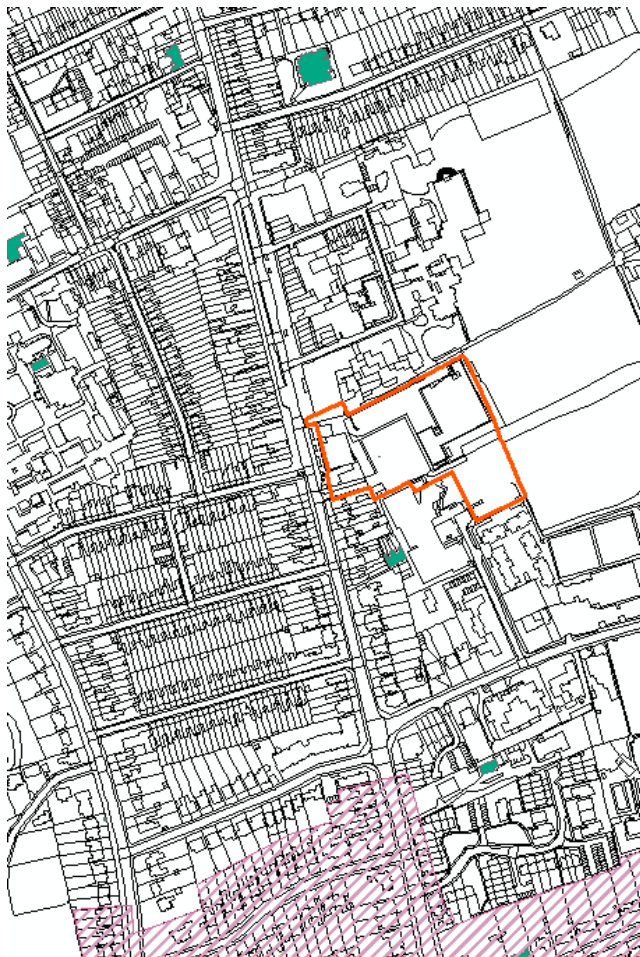
of Banbury Road and the line of South Parade with a few houses on its north side.

St John's College obtained an Act of Parliament in 1855 allowing it to lease land for building. This is when the major development of the North Oxford suburb began. This was built on leasehold, whereas Summertown was built on freehold land.

A workhouse was completed in Summertown in 1825. Although in 1827 the parish appointed an assistant overseer to collect rates and find work for the poor, in 1832.

A school was built in 1848 on land given by St. John's College, in what is now Rogers Street, adjoining St John's Church. An infants' school was later built in Albert Road. Cherwell Secondary school was built in 1963 and replaced the Rogers Street school.

### Listed buildings and conservation areas



**Key:**

 Diamond Place Site

 North Oxford Victorian Suburb Conservation Area

 Listed Building

Photo: Diamond Place Cottages

The Grade II listed Diamond Cottages sit near to the site, between Ferry Leisure Centre and the Banbury Road. The cottages replaced what had been the Diamond Inn, one of the earliest buildings found in the area before larger-scale development began to take place in the 1820s. The cottages are accessed by a small lane from the Banbury Road. The cottages are orientated north south, with frontages to the south. At present the cottages are characterised by their back-land feel. New development on the allocated site could form part of their backdrop, but the backdrop is already of significantly larger-scale and more modern developments. It is important that development on the allocated site does not harm the setting of the listed buildings and that opportunities are taken to enhance it.

## Diamond Place Character Assessment

The North Oxford Victorian Suburb Conservation Area is situated to the south and includes a section of Banbury Road. The conservation area is characterised by large detached and semidetached houses built in the early 1850s. Although Diamond Places falls outside of the conservation area, it is important to consider the views and experiences of people travelling along Banbury Road as this remains a key route in and out of Oxford City Centre.

### Space

The Oxford City Council Character Assessment Toolkit defines 'space' as the gaps between buildings and other built features.

#### Uses and activity

The site includes a large amount of level open space, much of which is used as car parking to serve the shops on Banbury Road, the Ferry Leisure Centre and Ewert House. Diamond Place Car Park is particularly busy in the daytime, with car movements in all directions making the space difficult to read and unpleasant for pedestrians and cyclists to navigate. Vehicle movements also mean that the site is relatively noisy, with a low environmental quality.

Black and white massing plan of site

#### Relationship of the space to buildings and structures



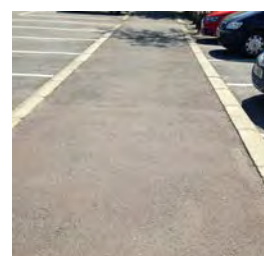
Open Space within the Site: Diamond Place Car Park

There is no obvious relationship between the open space and buildings on the site, except for the functional link established by the car parking. The open space has no clear identity or sense of place and is not somewhere that people would choose to spend their time.

#### Materials + street furniture

The majority of the open space is covered by tarmac, which is grey and monotone and does not provide any positive contribution to the character of the area. There are no significant differences in textures and materials to differentiate pedestrian and vehicular spaces.

Two seating areas have been incorporated within the existing site. The benches at the centre of the Ferry Leisure Car Park are uncomfortably located



in the middle of the parking spaces, providing an unattractive location in which to spend time. The seating outside the community centre benefits from being in a more attractive location, although it backed by a brick wall that is uninviting.

## Buildings

### Buildings within the site



Ewert House



North Oxford Community Centre

There are two buildings within the site boundary: Ewert House and the North Oxford Community Centre. Architecturally these buildings contribute little to the site and there is no clear relationship between the buildings and their context in terms of scale, materials and design.

	Ewert House	North Oxford Community Centre
Size (footprint)	3300m <sup>2</sup>	450m <sup>2</sup>
Scale	Large footprint but low height	Small footprint and low height
Height	Two storey	Single storey
Roofs	Flat roof	Pitched, hexagonal roof
Shape	Rectangular	Hexagonal
Age	1970s	1970s
Materials	Brick and wooden panels	Brick and UVPC
Uses	University of Oxford's Department for Continuing Education + offices	Various community activities. Rooms available for private hire.
Condition	Good condition.	Good condition. Recent renovations.

### Buildings surrounding the site

Surrounding the site is a wide mix of buildings in terms of use, scale, age and design. However, the majority of these buildings do not relate to the space within Diamond Place, but rather form part of the surrounding streetscapes. From the site, it is mainly the backs of these buildings that can be seen. The lack of relationship between surrounding buildings and the site is emphasised in the ways that boundaries have been treated, with high fencing and solid brick walls common features around the edge of the site. This further detracts from the character of the site. There is a real opportunity for new development to relate to surrounding buildings in order to enhance the character of the area.

**Surrounding Buildings**



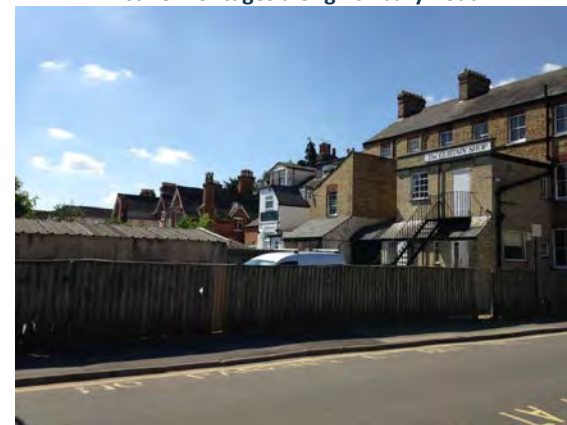
**The boundary with Summer Fields School**

**Summer Fields School**

The side of Summer Fields School adjoins the site to the north, with its main entrance located on Mayfield Road. Established in 1864, it has since expanded with attractive new buildings and extensions. Pupils are aged 8-13 and are a combination of boarders and day pupils. A high wooden fence and mature trees line the boundary with Diamond Place meaning that only glimpses of the school buildings are visible within the site. It is important that any new development maintains the privacy of the school and provides an attractive setting.



**Active Frontages along Banbury Road**



**Banbury Road viewed from within the site**

**Banbury Road**

Banbury Road forms the heart of Summertown's vibrant district centre. Uses are primarily retail (64%) and other Class A uses (32%) which encourage a high level of pedestrian movement. Wide pavements along the eastern side enable cafes and restaurants to spill out on to the street, encouraging people to spend time in the area. Buildings are positioned so that their active frontages face on to Banbury Road, enhancing its character. However this means that the less active backs of buildings face into Diamond Place, further detracting from the character and vibrancy of the site.

**Diamond Place Character Assessment**



**Private Open Space**

Playing fields belonging to Summer Fields School lie behind a high wooden fence that runs along the north-east boundary of the site. The proximity of open space provides an attractive setting for development, however the private nature of the land and use by school children means that any development will need to be designed to minimize overlooking.



**Site boundary with school playing fields**



**Ferry Leisure Centre**

**Ferry Leisure Centre**

Ferry Leisure Centre is the only surrounding building with its active frontage facing into the site. It is a popular community sports centre that attracts visitors throughout the day. New development should strengthen the relationship between the leisure centre and the site.



**Student housing viewed from within the site**



**Student housing frontage along Ferry Pool Road**

**Student Housing**

Student housing adjoins the site to the south-east in a large three-storey brick building. Like other surrounding buildings, its main entrance is on an adjoining street. The side of the building is partially visible from within the site, behind a brick wall and mature trees.

**Access and movement**

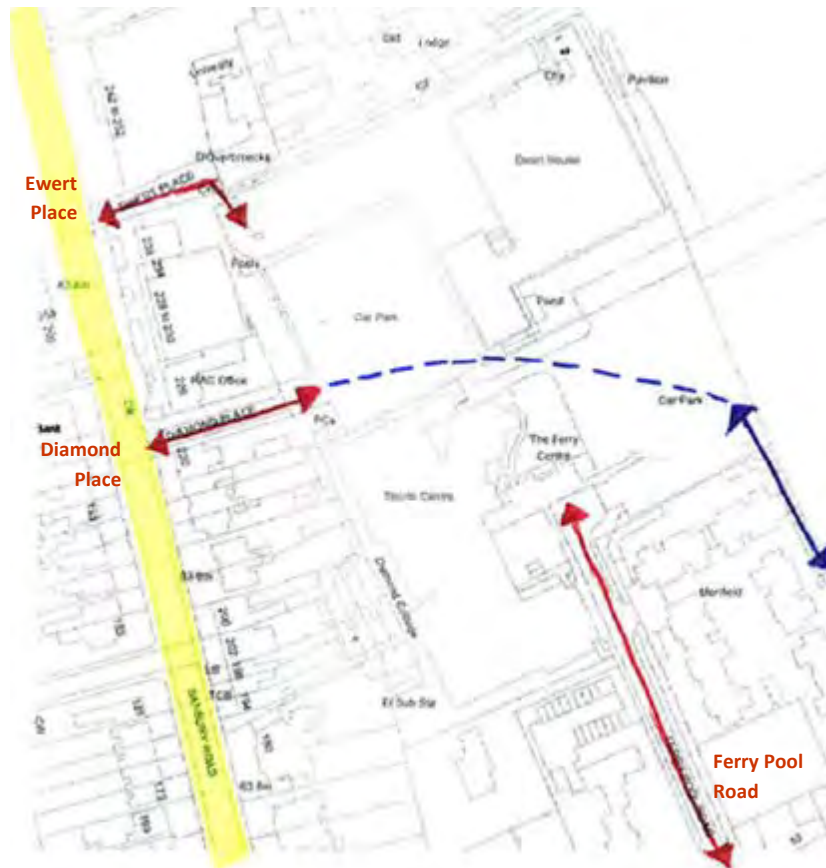
**Vehicles**

There are three vehicular access points to the site, Ewert Place (which provides access to Ewert House Car Park), Diamond Place (providing access to Diamond Place Car Park) and Ferry Pool Road (providing access to Ferry Sports Centre Car Park). All access points allow two-way traffic but there is no vehicular link between the different parts of the site.

Diamond Place is currently the best used of the access points and cars can turn left or right onto Banbury Road relatively easily.

Ferry Pool Road is much narrower and parked cars mean that it is effectively a single lane. Vehicles have to stop to give way to those moving in the opposite direction. It can also be difficult to exit and turn right on to Marston Ferry Road due to vehicles queuing at the traffic lights.

Ewert Place is the least used of the access points as it leads to a private car park. It is not an obvious turning from Banbury Road as there is no view to the buildings behind.



**Pedestrian and Cyclists**

The site provides an important pedestrian and cycle link between the district centre and Cherwell School which is very well used by local people. The route cuts diagonally across Ferry Leisure Centre Car Park and is marked out within the tarmac surface. The route is far less legible within Diamond Place Car Park, as pedestrians and cyclist are forced to move between parked cars. The route is not defined, is difficult for pedestrians and cyclists to navigate and is at times unsafe, particularly for children and people in wheelchairs who may not be visible to moving cars.

**Public Transport**

The site is well served by public transport with bus stops near by on Banbury Road and Marston Ferry Road. Bus services are frequent, with the majority of buses being accessible for disabled passengers and people with pushchairs.

## Greenery & Landscape Features

Within the site there are small areas of planting and soft landscaping that add different colours and textures to the otherwise grey, tarmac streetscene.

Outside the Community Centre is a small grassed area that is separated off from Ferry Leisure Centre Car Park. Despite its limited size, this area is well used, particularly as a place for school children and others to eat their lunch. Its popularity is likely to be partly due to there being little other public open space in the surrounding area.

There are also a small number of mature trees dotted around Diamond Place Car Park and some shrubs marking the border between Ewert House and Ferry Leisure Centre Car Park. Other than this, the rest of the greenery on the site is located around its edges along the boundaries with surrounding properties.



Green Space outside North Oxford Community Centre



Trees in Diamond Place Car Park



Tree in Diamond Place Car Park



Boundary between Ewert House and Ferry Leisure Centre Car Park

Views



The visual link between the two public car parks enables people to navigate through the site.



New development provides an opportunity to conceal unattractive views of the back of shops on Banbury Road.



Looking out of the site via Ewert Place provides a visual link with the district centre. However, there are no clear views into the site from Ewert Place and this is not where movements are focused.



Diamond Place is short and wide and provides a strong visual link between the site and the heart of the district centre. There is potential to enhance this view and to emphasise the site's links with Banbury Road.



Ferry Leisure Centre's roofline is unattractive and detracts from the character of the area. New development provides an opportunity to conceal this negative view.



Ferry Pool Road is long and narrow and provides a limited view into and out of the site.



**Character Appraisal Summary**

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Strong Visual link between the site and Banbury Road via Diamond Place.</p> <p>Public space outside North Oxford Community Centre is well used.</p> <p>Important pedestrian and cycle route through the site.</p> <p>Ferry Leisure Centre’s active frontage faces into the site. As a community leisure centre it attracts visitors to the area throughout the day and evening.</p> <p>Regular bus service.</p> <p>Attractive, mature trees line the borders with Summer Field’s School and the student housing.</p>	<p>Unattractive views of the rear of Banbury Road shops and Ferry Leisure Centre face into the site.</p> <p>Weak views into the site from Ferry Marston Road (via Ferry Pool Road) and Banbury Road (via Ewert Place).</p> <p>The majority of the open space is covered in a grey, monotone, tarmac surface and is dominated by car parking.</p> <p>Low density development does not make best use of the space.</p> <p>Little relationship between the site and surrounding buildings.</p> <p>Surroundings building’s active frontages tend to face away from the site.</p> <p>Access via Ferry Pool Road is narrow. Parked cars make this a single lane.</p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p>New development could conceal unattractive views of the backs of Banbury Road shops and Ferry Leisure Centre roofline.</p> <p>Maintain a visual link through the site to maintain legibility.</p> <p>Plan development to maximise the site’s visual link with Banbury Road via Diamond Place.</p> <p>Formalise pedestrian and cycle links through the site to make it easier to navigate and safer for pedestrians and cyclists.</p> <p>Provide higher quality public open space in a more attractive setting</p> <p>Improve the setting for the Grade II listed Diamond Cottages.</p>	<p>New development could result in overlooking of Summer Fields School. This needs to be considered at the design stage and avoided.</p>

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