

STATEMENT OF THE OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

My name is Dr Ian Scargill and I am the present Chairman of the Oxford Green Belt Network and speak in the name of that organization. The aims of the Oxford Green Belt Network, set up 10 years ago, are to protect the Oxford Green Belt from inappropriate forms of development and to make the purposes and benefits of the Green Belt widely known to the public. The need for an organization committed specifically to the protection of the Oxford Green Belt was thought to be necessary because of increasing pressures on the Green Belt from developments held to be detrimental to the setting of the city.

Our statement to the Inquiry is being kept short because we fully support, in particular, the evidence that is being given to the Inquiry by the Oxford Preservation Trust and we have no wish to duplicate that evidence. The shortness of our statement should not be construed, however, as representing a lukewarm feeling towards the application under consideration at the Inquiry since we feel passionately that the proposed book depository is in the wrong place and that if it were to be built it would be highly damaging to the setting of Oxford.

Our great concern is with the views of Oxford when seen from the west across the Hinksey meadows. We are sure that your attention will have been drawn to policies in the approved Oxford Local Plan 2001-2016 which bear on this case. Policy NE.2 is that which refers to the visual amenity of the Green Belt not being harmed by development conspicuous from it and, of course this policy reflects government advice afforded in paragraph 3.15 of PPG.2 on Green Belts. Policy HE.10 is specifically intended to protect views of Oxford and states that planning permission will not be given for buildings that would detract from those views. It is our understanding that approved planning documents are meant to carry weight when applications are made and we fail to appreciate how permission for this book depository could possibly be allowed since it is so obviously in conflict with these clearly stated objectives in the City Plan.

It will no doubt be argued by those promoting the book store that it will virtually disappear into some leafy middle ground or be absorbed into the landscape, therefore not detracting from the views. Frankly we find this idea absurd and one only has to observe the visual impact of the Newsquest building when viewed from the meadows at North Hinksey to understand our alarm. A building that is up to 20 metres high and on the scale of the proposed depository cannot be hidden and will be visible from many vantage points.

This matter of the views of Oxford from the west is important because they are classic views, on a par with other famous views like the one represented in Constable's painting of Salisbury cathedral across the river meadows of that town.

Here in Oxford we have plentiful proof of the views' importance in the written works of people like Matthew Arnold and in paintings like that of J.M.W. Turner of Oxford from the vicinity of the Conduit House above North Hinksey village. John Buchan observed that "half of Oxford's beauty lies in her setting ... It is only from her adjacent heights that her charms can be comprised into one picture and the true background found to her towers." We urge this Inquiry to take note of the significance of these views, a significance that is of national, some claim international, as well as local in nature. The meadows, watercourses and trees are the setting of Oxford and provide the frame to the historic buildings at the centre of the picture. The one, the natural features, complement the other, the built environment of towers and spires. You don't put an old master in a cheap frame; you choose one that will set off the beauty of the other. So, here, everything should be done to protect the green setting, the frame for those views of historic Oxford. It would be quite wrong, therefore, to allow visual distraction by permitting the introduction to the frame of jarring and intrusive elements like the proposed book store.

Over the years that I have lived in Oxford people have worked hard to protect these famous views. The gas holders were removed from St Ebbe's and the high tension electricity grid lines were put underground between South Hinksey and Botley despite the high cost involved. The plan to build a huge science park on the Hinksey meadows was eventually withdrawn in response to the strength of opposition to it, and there has been similar opposition expressed to a company's wish to extract gravel from the same area and to create a marina and rowing lake. Plans for a stadium for Oxford United Football Club and for a relief road from Osney Mead to the A.34 were defeated. Of course there are detractors, the A34 if you are on Hinksey Heights, but that road was built in the 1930s. More recently there has been the Newsquest building to which I have referred. It was a mistake and is widely regretted but past mistakes should not be made the excuse for saying that this book store should be allowed. The depository would be much worse than anything else on Osney Mead and, if built, generations to come will ask how we possibly allowed it to happen.

Cardinal Henry Newman wrote about the importance of a beautiful setting in the life of a university. As a member of Oxford University for over 50 years it is a great sadness to me personally that the University has been so stubborn about this particular site which it bought from Blackwells in 2002. The University authorities were prepared to change their mind over the site of the Said Business School and they could still find an alternative to Osney Mead for storing books even if they had to use a different design. The Oxford Green Belt Network hopes that this appeal will be dismissed and that a landscape of historic importance will thus be protected from irretrievable damage.