

**Press release from the Oxfordshire Local History Association
(OLHA)
23 August 2011**

**OXFORDSHIRE HISTORIANS
SLAM COUNTY COUNCIL'S
'DISPROPORTIONATE' CUTS**

The Oxfordshire Local History Association (OLHA)—representing more than 3,000 amateur local historians—today (23 Aug) attacks Oxfordshire County Council for making bigger cuts to its history services than other local authorities.

In a statement sent to county councillors, officials and Oxfordshire MPs the association (a registered charity) claims that ‘the budget reductions imposed on the Oxfordshire History Service ... are disproportionate’ and ‘threaten its viability as anything more than a holding operation’.

Analysing the cuts made by Oxfordshire and other local authorities the statement shows that the county council is cutting the Oxfordshire History Service by 36 per cent over four years. These cuts are deeper than those made by most other local authorities says the association, citing a nation-wide survey by the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association.

The local historians point out that Oxfordshire Studies (the local history centre now amalgamated with the county record office) had already lost staff heavily over the previous four years.

Tony Hadland, chairman of OLHA comments: ‘Oxfordshire's heritage sector has been supported by hundreds of volunteers since long before the phrase “Big Society” was coined. But, just as a loaf needs yeast, the preservation of our county's heritage needs a small core of highly skilled professionals. That already depleted team, based at the Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley, is now under threat as never before.’

Records at risk

The statement by OLHA also points to the behind-the-scenes work of cataloguing, conservation and digitisation all of which are essential to the keeping and using of historical material and all of which will suffer from staff reductions. The history service should also be seeking to acquire important historical collections of papers and recording life in the county today.

Particularly at risk are the ever-increasing number of records now only available in an electronic format or as digitised copies of documents, images and records. ‘These require not only secure electronic storage on a massive scale but also ongoing maintenance and the organisation of files to ensure public access,’ says the association. At an estimated £25,000 a year the cost of a dedicated server is completely beyond the resources of the service.

With no display space, hopes of marking the centenary of the motor industry in Oxford in 2012-13 are dim, and the cramming of the stock and staff of what were until early this year two separate services (Oxfordshire Studies in the Westgate and the Record Office) into the former St Luke's church in Cowley) is restricting the use of volunteers and the use researchers and other visitors can make of the Oxfordshire History Service.

Dr Malcolm Graham, the well-known local historian and author, who for many years headed Oxfordshire Studies in the Westgate, says: 'Oxford is probably the last place on earth where you would expect to find heritage at risk but this is the inevitable result of the county council cuts to its History Service. Collecting, making available and promoting interest in the everyday history of people in the city and county will be hit hard; collections will be lost or remain hidden from view. We're talking here about a community in danger of losing its collective memory—how does that tie in with the government's localism agenda? '

The text of OLHA's statement is attached. For further queries contact Malcolm Graham, m.graham28@btinternet.com tel 01865 250721

ends

Oxfordshire Local History Association statement, July 2011

The Oxfordshire Local History Association (OLHA) considers that the budget reductions imposed on the Oxfordshire History Service (OHS) by Oxfordshire County Council are disproportionate, that they take no account of the challenges facing the service and that they seriously threaten its future viability as anything more than a holding operation. Indeed, the County Council admits to this possibility in its response to the OLHA e-petition in the list of issues which it promises to 'monitor carefully.'

❖ Disproportionate budget reductions

- OHS in 2009/10, before these budget reductions, had the second-lowest revenue budget of all responding record offices in non-metropolitan areas of England.
- A survey by the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) showed that around 40% of local authorities would yield culture, sport and leisure savings in line with the required overall 21% local government CSR reduction in the two financial years 2011/12 – 2012/13. A further 20% of local authorities, 16 in all, proposed savings of 15%+ over these consecutive financial years. This equates to a budget reduction in excess of 30% but few authorities chose to target Archives with cuts of 30%+.
- Oxfordshire County Council has to reduce its expenditure by 16.5% between 2011 and 2014. The Library service was originally asked for a 25% budget reduction

which may be reduced following public consultation and the identification of new Government funding. The Council has chosen to cut OHS by 36% over four years.

❖ **General Challenges facing OHS**

- OHS starts from a very low base in staffing terms and, even before the present budget reductions, Oxfordshire Studies (OxS) had lost four full-time equivalent staff in four years. The huge cataloguing and conservation backlogs in both constituent parts of OHS are clear proof that they have never had sufficient professional and technical support staff to undertake tasks which are essential for public access and, in some cases, for the preservation of collections. External funding is scarcely ever available for this kind of work so moves to reduce OHS staffing still further are bound to have devastating consequences for everyone with an interest in Oxfordshire history.

- The County Council seems only to see OHS as a facility where ‘people will be able to continue to research the past.’ That role is vital of course and it depends not only on the opening hours of the search room but, as discussed above, on behind the scenes work on cataloguing, conservation and digitisation. The service should also be actively seeking to acquire important historic collections. It should be collecting and recording Oxfordshire today, encouraging other groups and individuals to do so and helping to coordinate their efforts. Given the pace of change and the plethora of local initiatives, this should be a major element of the centre’s work, helping to make OHS relevant to a much wider audience.

- OHS faces a special challenge as a county heritage service in Oxford where the Bodleian Library has not only a global reputation but also important collections of local records, books and images. OxS printed materials have been catalogued on to OLIS, the University database, for more than a decade in a unique cross-sectoral partnership and the County Council should be taking initiatives at the highest level to identify further opportunities for joint working between OHS and the Bodleian, e.g. over document storage, digitisation projects, digital archiving issues and improved public access to collections of local records and images.

- Nearly 40 years after local government reorganisation, Oxford city records, in some cases dating back to the 19th century or earlier, are still at risk in the Town Hall and inaccessible to the public. Here again, the County Council has a responsibility to enter into high level discussions with the City Council to resolve a vital issue.

- OxS evolved from the Oxfordshire Local Studies Library in 1990 and inherited its card catalogue. Despite some external funding, the conversion of this catalogue is still incomplete and records of virtually all Oxford material acquired before 1989 are not searchable online through Heritage Search. Since most intending users now begin their research online, this is a huge and unacceptable barrier to the public use of OHS which must be addressed.

- OHS manages one of England's largest local authority image collections with more than half a million photographs in many different formats but this now has no lead professional as a consequence of the cutbacks. Documentation and digitisation of images, conservation of fragile images, the recruitment and management of volunteers, coordination with other local image collections and the ongoing development of the Council's chosen image management system are all major issues.

- OHS is managing an ever-increasing number of digital resources, both records and databases that may only be available in electronic format and digitised copies of documents, images and recordings. These require not only secure electronic storage on a massive scale but also ongoing maintenance and the organization of files to ensure public access. The estimated cost of the necessary dedicated server - £25,000 a year – is completely beyond the resources of the service. OHS should also be encouraging new interest in local history and local records through the development of online resources like the Dark Archivist website linked to but separate from the County Council website. The OHS budget reductions and cutbacks to the County's ICT Services make such developments highly unlikely.

❖ **Specific Challenges at St. Luke's**

- St. Luke's is not an adequate home for the Oxfordshire History Centre. While it is true that most users consulted in 2007 expressed a preference for a joint OHS, they were envisaging a welcome pooling of existing resources on a central Oxford site, not a reduced service three miles away. Some users at least looked forward to a building shared with other services such as the Oxford Register Office which has many relevant records and the Oxfordshire Family History Society which is considering a more central location for its library; beyond this, there was also a vision of engaging with the Bodleian Library over access to local records held by the University.

- St. Luke's is on a good bus route for those travelling from the city centre and east Oxford but, for many public transport users coming from outside Oxford, the extra journey to Cowley will take a most unwelcome chunk out of the day; the facility is also less convenient for many motorists since it has very limited parking space on site. By contrast, OxS at Westgate was within a few minutes' walk of stops on all the city's park-and-ride bus services.

- The very limited expansion space for collections in the newly-converted building will be quickly exhausted if, for example, the County Council has to take on the remaining Oxford City records now inadequately housed in the Town Hall or if the Oxford Mail and Times looks to re-house its remarkable image and cuttings library covering 60 years of local social history.

- Space for researchers is extremely limited since those consulting maps and other large documents will inevitably take up several of the 44 seats and cause other potential users to be turned away. By comparison, OxS and Oxfordshire Record Office (ORO) as separate services had around 100 seats and ORO also had an education room, now lost to office space, which seated a further 20 people. Both OxS and ORO had space for displays and school or adult-education visits; incredibly, the new centre has none and it seems that the Central Library is disinclined to provide a city centre shop window for heritage. 2012/13 will be the centenary of the motor industry in Oxford but will OHS be able to mark it or to emphasise the relevance of the service to the wider community?

- Finally, the cramming of stock and staff, albeit so many fewer staff, into St. Luke's has left little or no accommodation in which existing or new volunteers can support the work of the service. This surely contradicts the whole ethos of the Government's 'Big Society' initiative. Through lack of space at St. Luke's, the Oxfordshire wills digitisation project is currently being undertaken at the Central Library but OHS has no guarantee that this temporary facility will continue to be made available without charge.

❖ **Future viability of the service**

- OLHA considers that the County Council's budget reductions for the OHS are completely disproportionate even in the present climate and risk irreversible long-term damage to the service. Just when the New Bodleian Library in Oxford is being

converted from 'a fortress of books' into an attractive facility, the local record office, whose present building opened just over ten years ago has been forced in the opposite direction. For many existing users and for an untold number of potential users, we fear that OHS will in the future be 'out of sight, out of mind.'

Malcolm Graham pp OLHA

3.7.2011