

Report on the former Fire Station and Corn Exchange George Street, Oxford

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Introduction

This report was prepared as a micro-internship project hosted by Purcell Architects in March 2020. The report was researched and drafted by Amanda Westcott, a History Graduate from St Olaf College Minnesota, USA. She undertook the internship whilst studying for a Masters in British and European History at Keble College, Oxford. She was supervised by Will Holborow, Senior Heritage Consultant at Purcell Architects.

For the purposes of this report, the Old Fire Exchange refers to a range of buildings on the north side of George Street completed in 1895, with the rear facing Gloucester Green. This includes the original accommodation built for the Volunteer Fire Brigade, the Corn Exchange and a range of shop units along George Street. Although it is not included on the national heritage list as a building of special architectural or historic interest, the Old Fire Station is of undoubted architectural interest in a local context and is locally important, both as a civic building and an important resource for the arts and for homeless people.

The report describes the history of the site, Gloucester Green, and the Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade. Further information and a corresponding timeline explains the building's evolution from its construction in 1894 to the present day. The report also describes features of the building's façade and the interior elements found in the original 1894 plans and how this complex, historic space was transformed in the 2009 project to become the Old Fire Station.

The project was assisted by staff of the Old Fire Station - Jeremy Spafford (Director) and Justine Malone (Development Manager). However the internship coincided, unfortunately, with the Covid-19 virus which resulted in the sudden closure of the building in March 2020.

Much of the archival material and some secondary resources were not accessible during this time, nor was the interior of the building. For future reference, the Oxfordshire History Centre contains many of the relevant historical sources, from records of the Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade (as part of the Oxford City Council Records) to the Oxford Area Arts Council Archive (1974-1987). Julie Kennedy's book, *The Changing Faces of Oxford City Centre* (1998) is also recommended for those seeking further historic context.

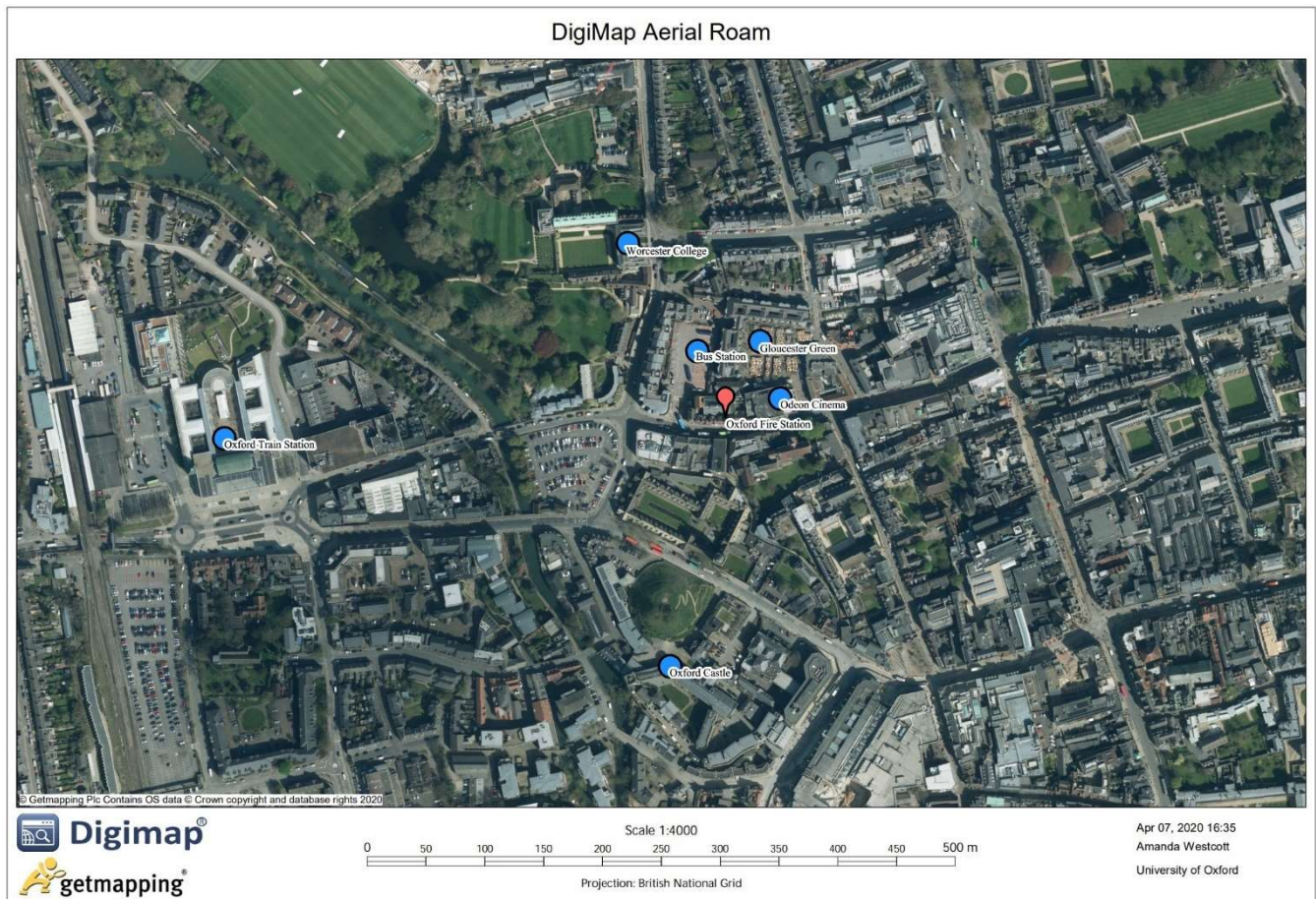
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Location

The Old Fire Station is located on the north side of George Street in Oxford, next to the Odeon Cinema and Gloucester Green.



Context: Gloucester Green

Gloucester Green Fair

According to one source, the open space of Gloucester Green was used as early as 1783 to hold an annual fair and this tradition lasted until 1915. In Figures 1 and 2, both photographs taken by Henry W. Taunt of the fair in 1908, the rear of the Old Fire Station, the hose tower, and the slanting roof of the Corn Exchange stand above the carousel, with the Chapel of St George the Martyr to the left, its crucifix visible along the skyline.¹



Figure 1: Henry W. Taunt, *General View of People at the Fair with Stalls and Merry-Go-Round*, 1908, Photograph (Negative), [Historic England](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/).

¹ The Chapel of St George the Martyr was originally consecrated in 1850. See Stephanie Jenkins, "George Street, Oxford," Oxford History, 15 January 2019, http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/george_street/timeline.html.



Figure 2: Henry W. Taunt, *A Crowd Gathered beside a Carousel during the Small Fair Held Annually on the 3rd of May. The Fair Continued to Be Held on the Green until 1915.*, 1860-1922, Photograph (Negative), [Historic England](#).

City Gaol

By 1789, the city of Oxford built a gaol in Gloucester Green, a local prison operating under the municipality's jurisdiction, which was active until 1878.²



Figure 3: J. Buckler, *North West View of the Jail, on Gloucester Green, Oxford*, 1827, Drawing, [Oxfordshire Country Libraries Picture Oxon](#).

² "Oxford City Gaol and House of Correction," Prison History, accessed 23 March 2020, provided by The Open University Centre for the History of Crime, Policing and Justice, <https://www.prisonhistory.org/prison/oxford-city-gaol-and-house-of-correction/>. This source also provides a wealth of information and material related to the management, finances, and prisoners of the gaol.

Cattle Market

By the early nineteenth century, Oxford was known not simply for its marketing of corn but of bacon and cattle, too.³ A cattle market was established in Gloucester Green in 1835, later to be moved to Oxpens in 1932. Figure 4, another photograph taken by Henry W. Taunt, is not dated exactly but captures the busy activity of the cattle market, likely in the early twentieth century.

The gaol, cattle market, and Chapel of St George the Martyr can all be seen in a map made c. 1870 (Figure 6). There are some obvious differences distinguishing this map from Henry W. Taunt's photograph of an earlier map dating seventy years earlier, from 1750 (Figure 5). The buildings next to the chapel – which stood before the Old Fire Station and Corn Exchange were constructed in the 1890s – are reported to have been seventeenth century houses, though neither map denotes them.⁴

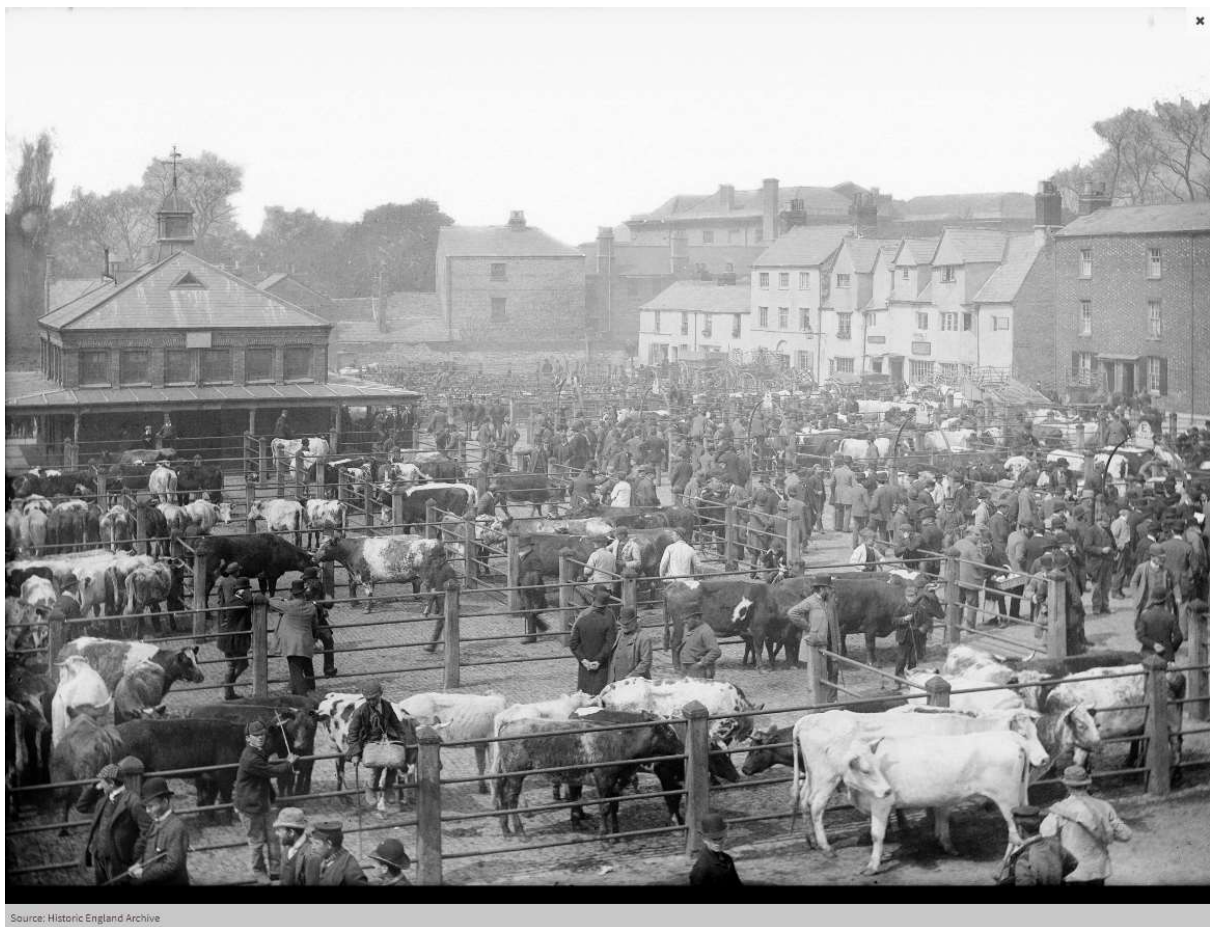


Figure 4: Henry W. Taunt, *Exterior General View of the Cattle Market*, 1860-1922, Photograph (Negative), [Historic England](https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol4/pp181-259#fnn204).

³ Eleanor Chance et al., "Modern Oxford," in *A History of the County of Oxford*, ed. Alan Crossley and C.R. Elrington, vol. Volume 4: The City of Oxford (London: Victoria County History, 1979), 181–259, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol4/pp181-259#fnn204>.

⁴ Ibid.

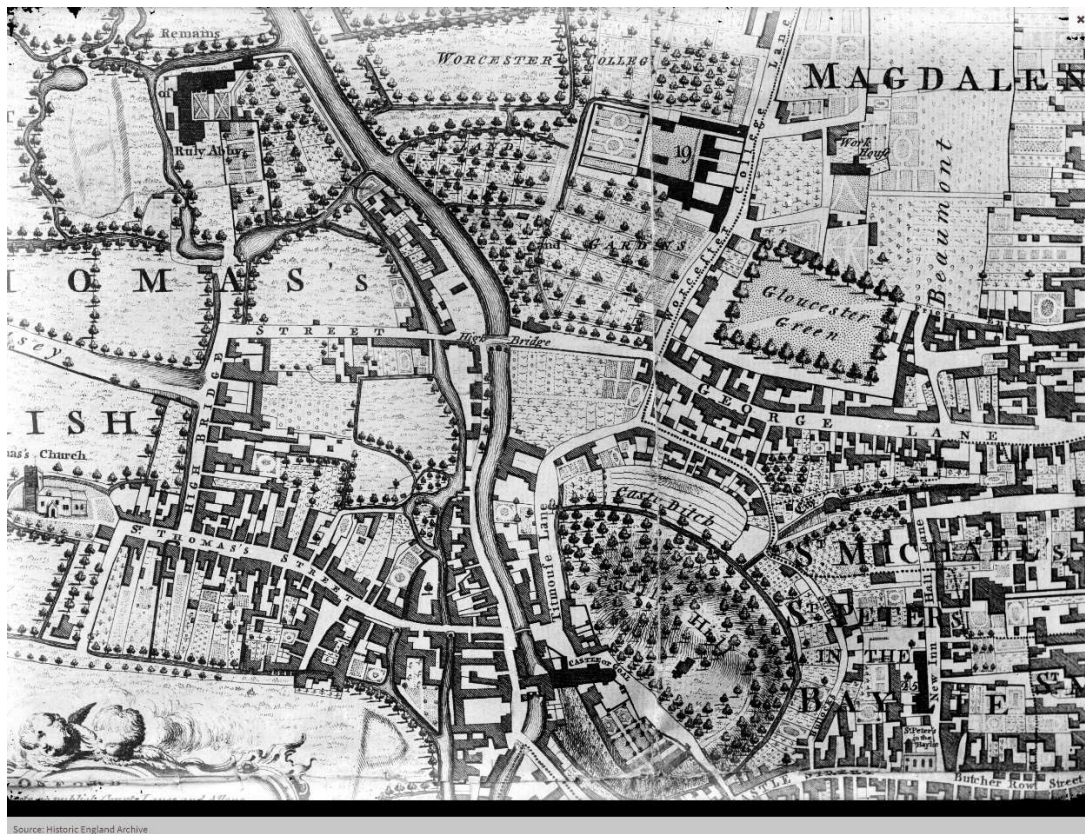


Figure 5: Henry W. Taunt, *An Image of a Detail of Taylors Map Dating to 1750 Showing the West Side of the City Including the Castle Precinct, Rewley Abbey, Worcester College, George Street Etc.*, 1907, Photograph (Negative), 1907, [Historic England](#).

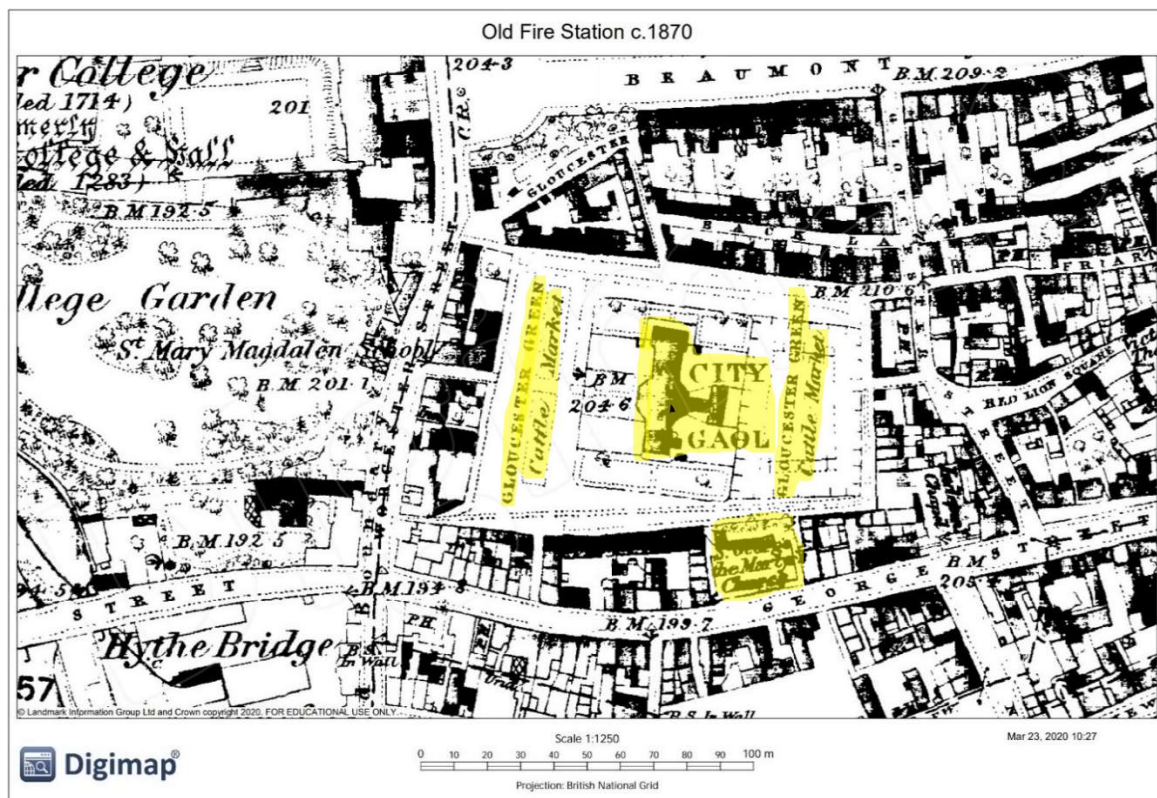


Figure 6: *Historic Map of the Old Fire Station c. 1870*, 1:1250, DigiMap, accessed 23 March 2020, <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/roam/map/historic>.

The Volunteer Fire Brigade

The founding of the Volunteer Fire Brigade was allegedly prompted by a fire in 1870, possibly the one referenced in Figure 7, an engraving featured in the *Illustrated London News*.⁵ But Oxford had also suffered previous, often deadly, destruction from fire as referenced in some archival photographs.⁶ Thus, the city was in need of an organized brigade to supplement the University of Oxford's own part-time fire service, which it eventually replaced in the 1880s (see Figures 8 and 9).⁷

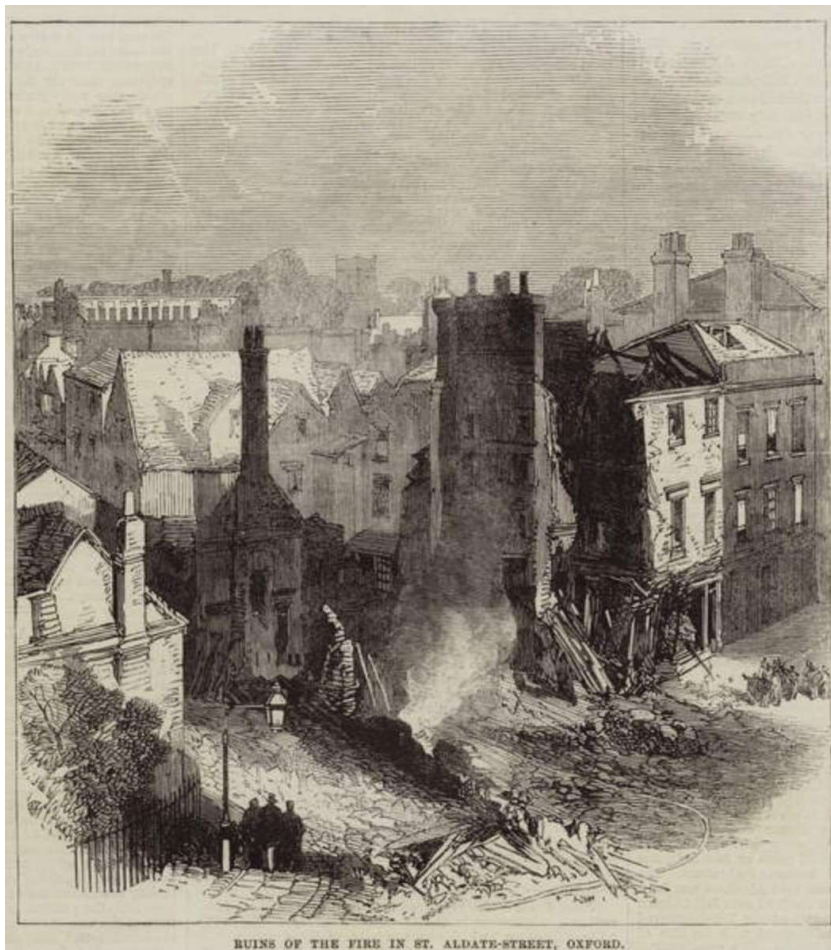


Figure 7: English School, *Ruins of the Fire in St Aldate-Street, Oxford* (Engraving), accessed 23 March 2020, <https://www.bridgemaneducation.com/en/asset/1104460/summary>.

⁵ “The Fatal Fire at Oxford,” *Illustrated London News*, July 9, 1870, Gale Primary Sources Online. This fire took the lives of two young women. It is also referenced in the article “The New Corn Exchange: Laying of the Foundation Stone,” *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* [1809], October 27, 1894, British Library Newspapers. The article states: “Called into existence by a fatal and disastrous fire in 1870, the Volunteer Fire Brigade of Oxford has not ceased as years go by to pursue that object with unfaltering heroism” (5).

⁶ Henry W. Taunt, *Copy of a Photograph Showing the Remains of a Shop Destroyed by a Second Fire in 1863. In the Street People Are Watching Firemen Attending the Blaze, Their Hand-Operated Fire Engine Blocking the Road.*, 1922 1860, Photograph (Negative), 1922 1860, Historic England, <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/item/CC62/00070>.

⁷ Not included among the Figures, see also Henry W. Taunt, *A View Showing Fire Fighting Equipment, Including Steam Powered Pumps, in Front of Balliol College. The University Had Its Own Part-Time Fire Service until the 1880s.*, 1890, Photograph (Inkjet Print), 1890, Historic England, <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/item/HT13399>.



Figure 8: Henry W. Taunt, *Members of the Oxford Fire Brigade Posing in Line and with Their Equipment in Broad Street*, 1888, Photograph (Inkjet Print), [Historic England](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/).



Figure 9: Henry W. Taunt, *Members of the Oxford Fire Brigade Posing in Line and with Their Equipment in Broad Street*, 1888, Photograph (Inkjet Print), [Historic England](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/).

It is also reported that the first building to house the Volunteer Fire Brigade in Oxford was located in New Inn Hall Street in 1873/1874.⁸ Regardless of their station's location, the Brigade was already well-established and endowed with equipment and uniforms by the time the city decided on the plans for the George Street buildings. In Figures 8 and 9 above, we can see members lining Broad Street in full display. A newspaper article from 1870, detailing a general meeting of the Oxford Fire Brigade and its supporters, testifies to the adoption of a uniform in the very first year of the Brigade's existence.⁹ Almost thirty years later at the twenty-eighth annual meeting of the Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade, described in the same newspaper, a sense of pride in their organization is again expressed, touting "the fact that every man was thoroughly drilled, and efficient in the working of the appliances for extinguishing fire."¹⁰ There are several archived photographs by Henry W. Taunt that record the presence of the Oxford Brigade at an event on the grounds of Blenheim Palace in 1899, demonstrating the use of their equipment and even winning a medal for their drilling practices (see Figures 10, 11, and 12).



Figure 10: Henry W. Taunt, *A Group from the Oxford Fire Brigade, a Volunteer City Force Housed after 1896 in George Street, Parading at Blenheim Palace, with Their Winner's Medal and Merryweather Engine.*, 1899, Photograph (Inkjet Print), 1899, [Historic England](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/).

⁸ Stephanie Jenkins, "Old Fire Station and Corn Exchange," Oxford History, 11 August 2018, http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/george_street/fire_station.html. No primary source material could be found in the research for this report to support the claim of the original New Inn Hall Street fire station.

⁹ "Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], August 27, 1870, British Library Newspapers. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Y3202717692/BNCN?u=oxford&sid=BNCN&xid=db5133cb>.

¹⁰ "Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], March 4, 1899, British Library Newspapers. The Bodleian Library also holds archival material from the Oxford's Volunteer Fire Brigade, with handbooks titled "Duties of officers and firemen" dating as early as 1870.

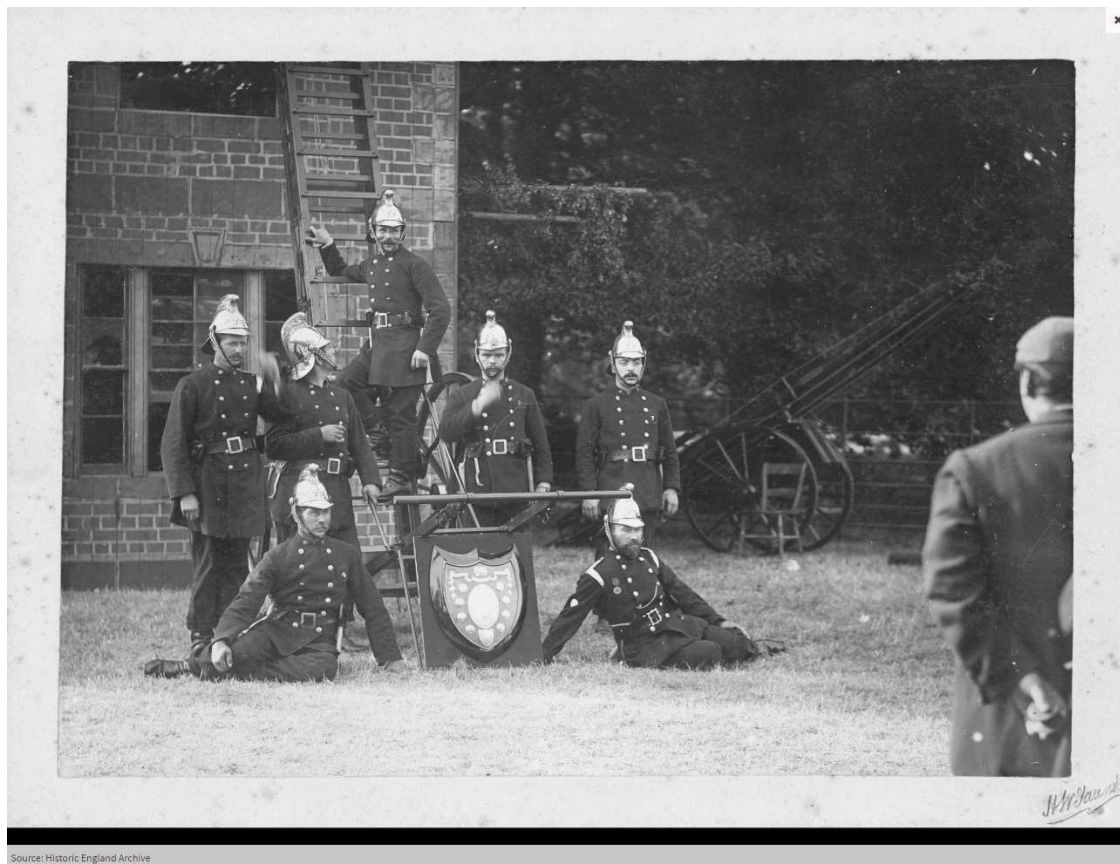


Figure 11: Henry W. Taunt, *A Group from the Oxford Fire Brigade, a Volunteer City Force Housed after 1896 in George Street, Parading at Blenheim Palace, with Their Winner's Medal.*, 1899, Photograph (Inkjet Print), 1899, [Historic England](#).



Figure 12: Henry W. Taunt, *A Group from the Oxford Fire Brigade, a Volunteer City Force Housed after 1896 in George Street, Parading at Blenheim Palace, Demonstrating Their Equipment to Spectators.*, 1899, Photograph (Inkjet Print), 1899, [Historic England](#).

Another aspect frequently stressed in the reports from *Jackson's Oxford Journal* is the Brigade's dependence on subscriptions and charitable donations. From its formation in 1870 until it was subsumed under the National Fire Service in 1941, the Brigade remained outside of municipal control.¹¹ Its members – excepting the resident fireman and the call-boy – were all volunteers, so the service operated at a “trifling cost.” At their twenty-eighth general meeting, the newspaper also reported the following:

He [the Sheriff of Oxford] noticed that attention was called in the report to the meagre result of an appeal to the citizens of Oxford, and he thought the result of that appeal was very miserable indeed. He was astonished to think that in a city like Oxford there should be a lacking on the part of the citizens, such a want of public spirit in helping forward the work of this most admirable brigade. If they fully realised the importance of the work done by the brigade, the self-denial of the members, and the saving to them from a financial point of view, the subscriptions would be very largely increased. If they had to pay an efficient and proper brigade it would be a very serious charge upon the finances of the city, but the work done by them in such a splendid manner could not possibly be excelled, and every citizen in Oxford was very largely indebted to the brigade for a feeling of security in the event of a fire breaking out that they would be able to cope with it in a most masterly way. This must be a satisfaction to every citizen in Oxford, and he hoped in future that they would have to report an increased number of subscribers and an increased amount of subscriptions, as it would be only a proper and timely recognition of the valuable services they rendered to the city.¹²

Discussed in later sections, the Old Fire Station building was indeed subsidized by the City of Oxford. But it was only in 1948, when the fire service was restored to local authorities, that the Corporation of Oxford fully funded it for the first time.

¹¹ Chance et al., “Modern Oxford” (1979). There exists archival material in the Oxfordshire History Centre to this effect. Available is the “Annual report and list of subscriptions and donations” for the year 1871 and “Circular dated October 29, 1870, from John Galpin, honorary secretary of the Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade, requesting donations.”

¹² “Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade,” *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], March 4, 1899.

The Former Corn Exchange

The corn exchange built in 1894 in George Street was preceded by a corn exchange which formed part of the town hall buildings constructed in 1863 on St. Aldate's Street.¹³ Figure 13 below shows The Oxford Commemoration Ball, held in the 'New Corn Exchange' on the 16 June 1863. This illustrates the impressive scale and architectural status of space.



Figure 13: English School, *The Oxford Commemoration Ball, given to the Prince and Princess of Wales in the New Corn Exchange, by the Apollo University Lodge* (Engraving), July 4, 1863, Engraving, July 4, 1863,

With the elevation of Oxford to the status of county borough in 1889, however, the city decided to rebuild a new town hall where the original stood, thereby displacing the corn exchange. After the building's demolition in 1893, many complaints were made by traders left to do business in the streets during the winter, and soon after, planning began for a new Corn Exchange on George Street.¹⁴

¹³ David Hey, "Markets" (Oxford University Press, 2008). See also David Hey, "Corn Exchange" (Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Chance et al., "Modern Oxford" (1979). See also "The New Corn Exchange," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], May 4, 1895, British Library Newspapers.

The New Corn Exchange and Fire Station

George Street Development

George Street in Oxford did not become a part of the city's commercial center until New Inn Hall Street was extended to it in 1872. Several building projects preceded the Old Fire Station in 1894, such as the boys' High School (1879-1881), the New Theatre (1885-1886), Lucas's clothing factory (1890), and the YMCA (1891).¹⁵

As described earlier, the original buildings that were demolished and replaced by the Old Fire Station were said to be seventeenth-century houses.

In Figure 14, a map made c. 1900, we see the continued presence of the cattle market alongside the many new additions. The Fire Station and Corn Exchange are highlighted. The city engaged H.W. Moore as the Old Fire Station's architect and Thomas Axtell as its contractor. Work began in 1894 and was completed by Michaelmas in 1895.

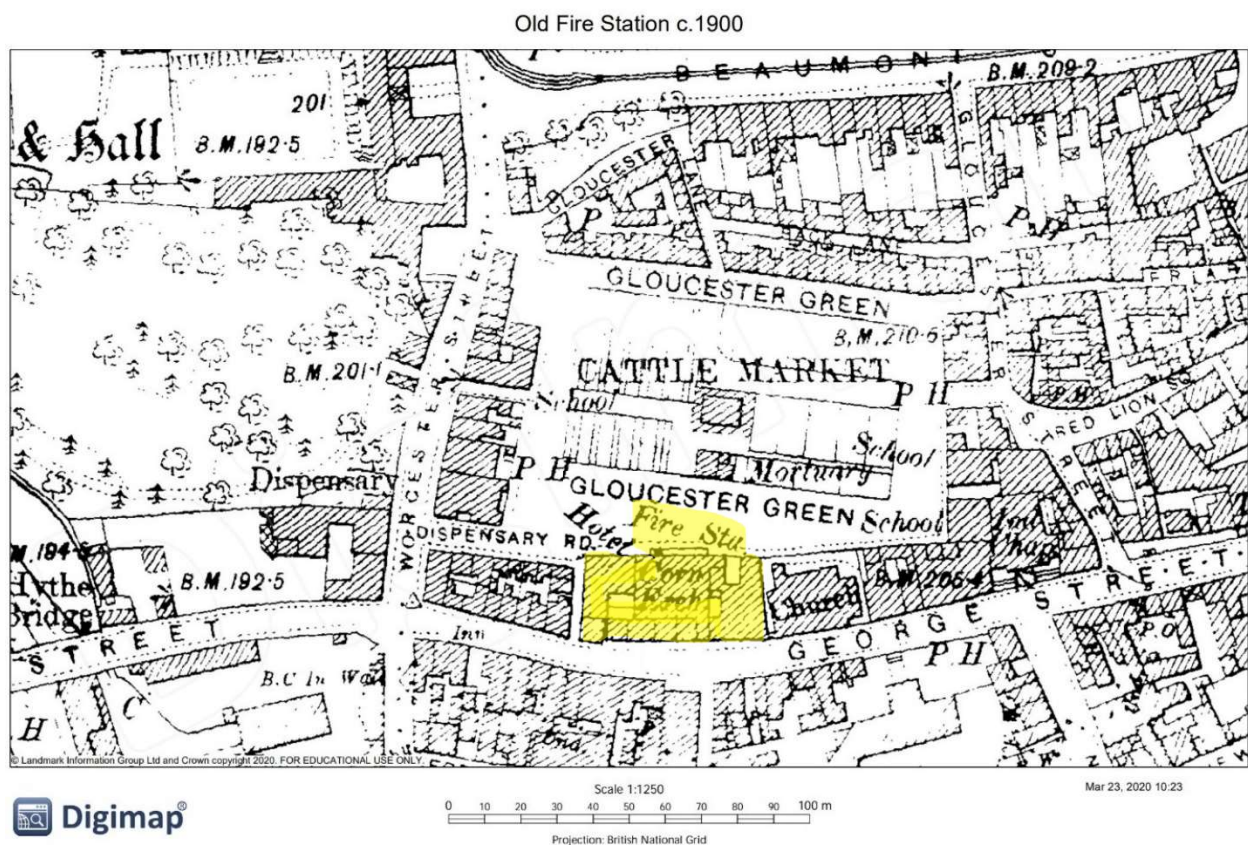


Figure 14: Historic Map of the Old Fire Station c. 1900, 1:1250, DigiMap, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/roam/map/historic>.

At the laying of the foundation stone for building, *Jackson's Oxford Journal* describes both the corn exchange and fire station thus:

¹⁵ Chance et al., "Modern Oxford" (1979).

*The Corn Exchange is a large roomy place, 71 feet long by 53 feet wide, abutting on the Gloucester-green side of the site, but the main entrance is arranged from George-street, forming the chief feature in the elevation towards this street. The entrance leads up an easy flight of steps into a vestibule, and thence into the Exchange. Other entrances are also provided from the Gloucester-green side. A gallery is carried all along the east side of the Exchange, with staircases at either end of it and a recess in the centre forming a band stand. Good north lighting is provided by a range of windows in the Gloucester-green front, and there is ample roof lighting. Lavatory accommodation, offices, heating vaults, and store cellars are duly provided. The Fire Brigade station is placed on the east side of the site [of the new corn exchange], adjoining St. George's Church... The accommodation includes a commodious engine house, drill shed, watch room, messenger's room and workshops; also a hose tower, about sixty feet high. On the upper floor are arranged the club rooms, committee rooms, and stores. A dwelling-house is also provided for the resident fireman. The remaining portion of the George-street frontage is taken up by a range of four good shops, with residences over. The buildings are being executed in red brick with free stone dressings, and the design looks to be well adapted to the purpose.*¹⁶

An excerpt of the digitized article can be seen in Figure 16, detailing the laying of the foundation stone with praise given to the city's volunteer firemen.

Jackson's Oxford Journal on 4 May 1895 reports that the cost was £12,500. £8,125 was allocated for the Corn Exchange, and the balance of £4,375 for the Fire Brigade Station.¹⁷

Hopes for the new Corn Exchange and Fire Station could be in part related to the feelings of civic pride that accompanied the city's elevation to a borough in 1889 and the subsequent building projects both of Carfax and the new town hall. Much of what was reported *Jackson's Oxford Journal* during the Old Fire Station's construction displays a strong sense of public participation and celebration for these new George Street developments.

In the 1894 article reproduced below, the building was considered an equally public and city-owned space; it was a "visible embodiment of civic public spirit" and hoped to be a "union of commerce and righteousness."¹⁸

In Figure 15, on the archway above one of the George Street entrances to the Old Fire Station today, there still exists stonework detail of a fireman's helmet, with ladder, axe, and hose, accompanied by the phrase "SEMPER PARATUS / SEMPER VOLENS [always ready / always willing to go]." Even in its architectural detail (which will be explored further in a later section), the Old Fire Station shows added support of its righteously civic purpose.

¹⁶ "The New Corn Exchange: Laying of the Foundation Stone," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], October 27, 1894, British Library Newspapers.

¹⁷ "The New Corn Exchange," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], May 4, 1895, British Library Newspapers.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

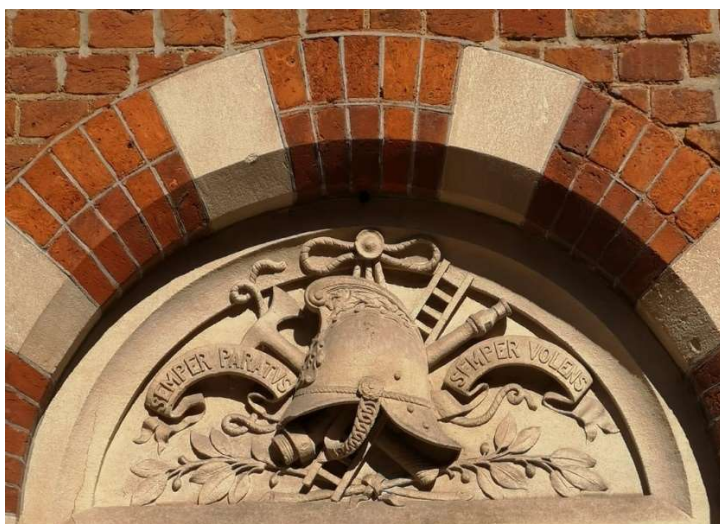


Figure 15: Detail of the George Street frontage, above the entrance to the fire station. © Suzanna Crabtree-Condor 2020.

The stone laid by the Mayor is the eastern pier of George-street entrance, and is ornamentally treated in the form of a tablet having the city crest carved at the top and inscribed as follows:—

THIS STONE WAS LAID
On the 22nd day of October, 1894,

BY
WALTER GRAY, Esq., J.P.,
Mayor and Alderman.

THOMAS H. KINGERLEE, Esq., Sheriff.

The platform on which the Mayor stood was covered with red baize, and when he and the other members of the Corporation had taken their places.

The TOWN CLERK said—On behalf of the City Council, Mr. Mayor, I have the honour to request you to lay this foundation stone. These buildings have been designed by an eminent local architect, and are entrusted for execution to a citizen of high repute. They are, as you are well aware, intended to serve a two-fold purpose. Owing to the exigencies of spaces, the Council were unable to erect a new Corn Exchange in the vicinity of the old one, but in allocating this site for that purpose they have placed at the disposal of the corn dealers one of the best properties they have in Oxford, in a street that is easy of access, and that is destined to become one of the main arteries of the city. The Council hopes that as these buildings rise the fortunes of a great industry, the agricultural industry too long depressed, may rise with it—(hear, hear)—and that this may become the busy centre of a thriving and prosperous trade. The other purpose for which these buildings are intended is to be a station for the Volunteer Fire Brigade of Oxford. (Hear, hear.) The men, Sir, who have formed the guard of honour for you are the survivors and successors of those who for the past twenty-five years have voluntarily given to the citizens of Oxford that quiet confidence and security from the ravages of fire which they had not previously possessed. Called into existence by a fatal and disastrous fire in 1870, the Volunteer Fire Brigade of Oxford has not ceased as years go by to pursue that object with unfaltering heroism, and year by year they have rendered themselves more efficient for the public duties which they have set themselves to perform. At

Figure 16: An excerpt from “The New Corn Exchange: Laying of the Foundation Stone,” *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* [1899], October 27, 1894, British Library Newspapers.

Evolving Uses

The fire station on George Street remained active until 1971, when a new station was established on Rewley Road. The corn exchange, by contrast, was used until merchants reportedly moved with the cattle market to Oxpens in 1932; it no longer appears on the map from c. 1930 (Figure 18). Following the removal of the cattle market from Gloucester Green, according to the map in Figure 18, the open site was partially occupied by an “Omnibus Centre” and car park.

The Chapel of St George the Martyr, consecrated in 1850 and standing just next door to the Old Fire Station (to the east), was eventually deconsecrated and demolished in 1935, to be replaced by a cinema.¹⁹ Figure 19 is another photograph taken by Henry W. Taunt in 1907 of the chapel, and just beyond is the partial frontage of the Old Fire Station.

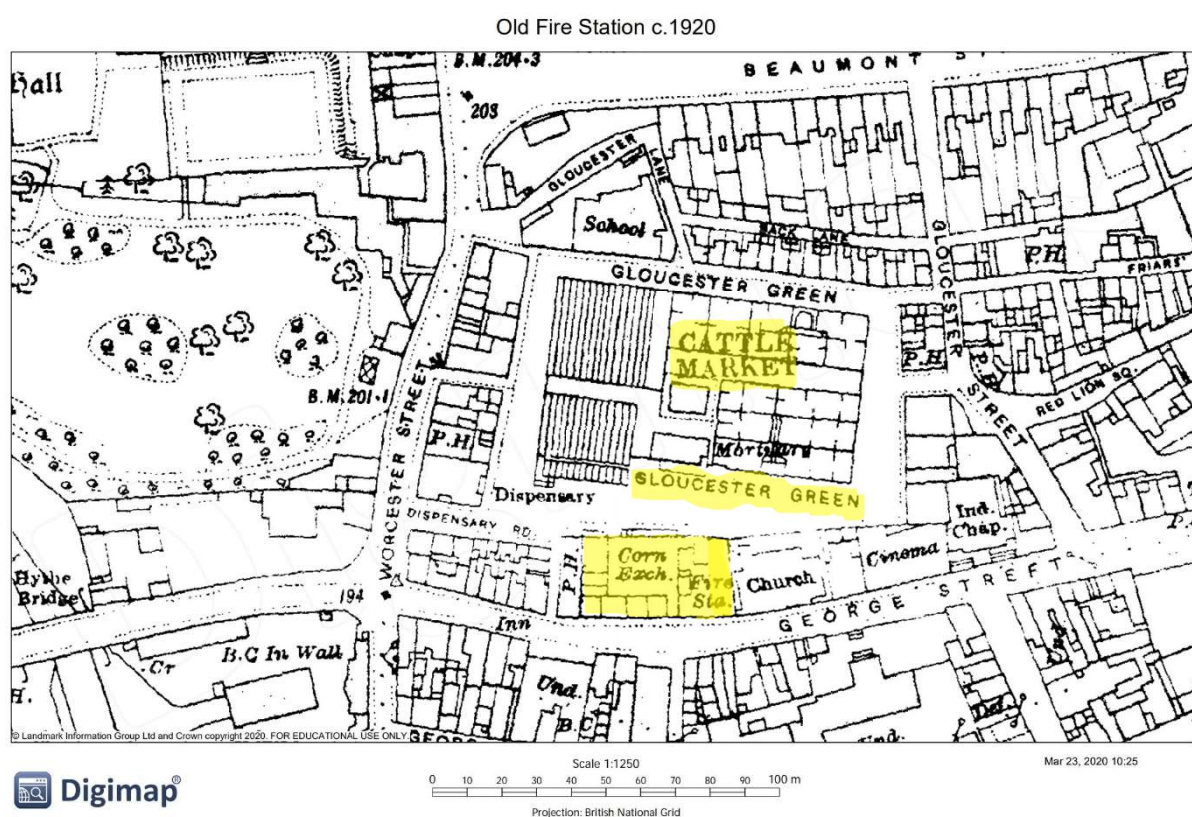


Figure 17: *Historic Map of the Old Fire Station c. 1920*, 1:1250, DigiMap, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/roam/map/historic>.

¹⁹ Stephanie Jenkins, “George Street, Oxford,” Oxford History, 15 January 2019, http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/george_street/timeline.html.

Old Fire Station c.1930

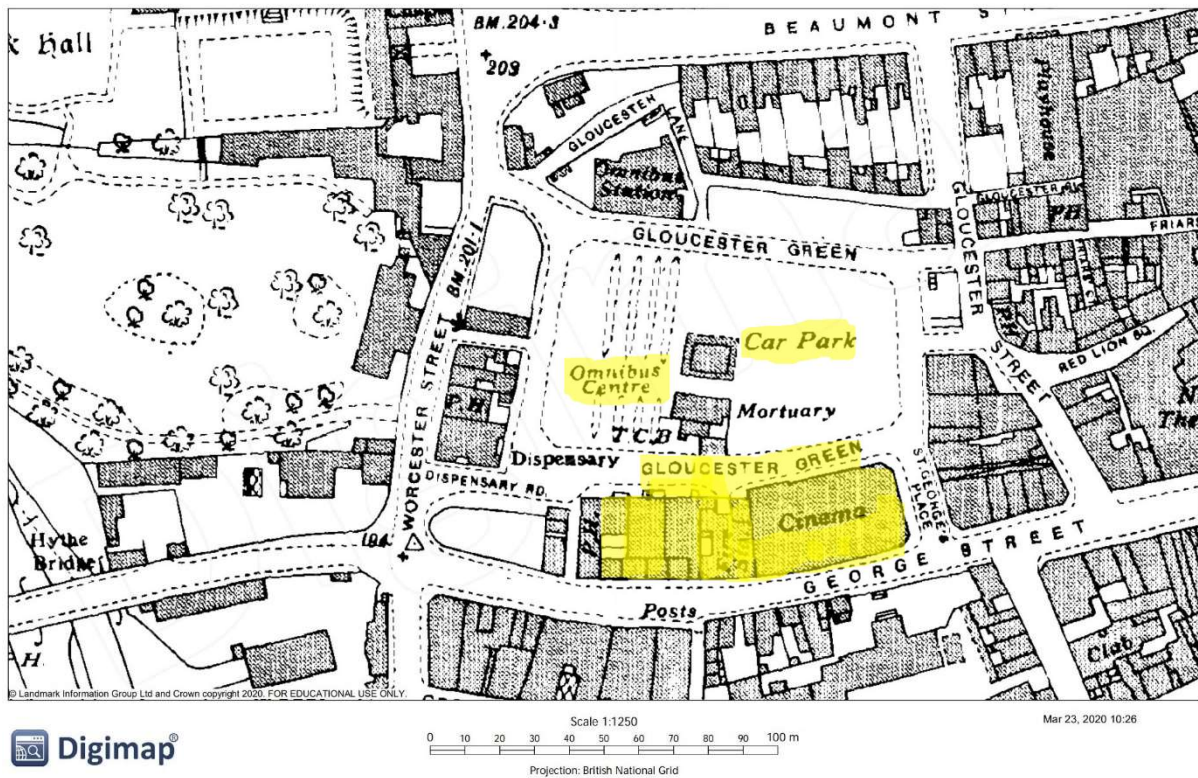


Figure 18: *Historic Map of the Old Fire Station c. 1930, 1:1250, DigiMap, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/roam/map/historic>.*



Figure 19: Henry W. Taunt, *The Gothic Style Chapel, Built in 1850 to Serve the Poorer Population of St Mary Magdalen. By 1880 the Congregation Had Dwindled and the Church Was Closed c. 1918. A Cinema Was Built on the Site Just before the Second World War.*, 1907, Photograph (Negative), 1907, [Historic England](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/).

As of 1918, the four shops to the west of the Corn Exchange were numbered and occupied as follows:

1. Kirk & Co. (scale-makers)
2. Pickfords Ltd. (general carriers)
3. W. Humphries (hairdresser)
4. Miss Harris (restaurant), later described as temperance hotel and the YMCA by 1928

Pickfords later expanded into the old Corn Exchange itself, presumably after the merchants acquired stands at Oxpens in the 1930s.²⁰ However, not much else is known about the occupation of the corn exchange building until the former Oxford Playhouse Company, Meadow Players, leased the building as offices, wardrobe and property storage and for scenery painting in 1971.²¹

Just two years later, however, in 1973, Meadow Players ceased operations due to financial difficulties and withdrew their lease of the Old Fire Station.²² The Oxford Area Arts Council was then formed and took over the building to use it as a space for “performance and participation arts, dance, drama and musical performances, exhibitions, lectures, and recitals.”²³

From 1987 to 1990 Gloucester Green was redeveloped to designs by architects Kendrick Associates. The Connexions office and public WCs were built at the rear of the Old Fire Station, creating the connection through to George Street. And in 1989, the Oxford Area Arts Council closed as the Gloucester Green development progressed. At the completion of the project, Gloucester Green then became a space for shops, offices, and flats, with an underground car park and two open spaces, one for a weekly open-air market and the other for a new bus station.²⁴

In 2005 OVADA, a local arts organization, undertook the renovation and expansion of the dedicated arts space and re-launched it as a professional gallery.²⁵ And by 2009, the Old Fire Station (its upper floors) was occupied by the Live Nation Club while the Corn Exchange building continued to house the OVADA Gallery and OFS Theatre.

OVADA vacated the Gallery in 2010 to allow for the re-development of the Old Fire Station complex to designs by architects Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios. This joint project between the Oxford City Council and the homeless charity Crisis was awarded £2.8 million in capital funding by the Homes and Communities Agency through its Places of Change programme. The existing gallery and theatre spaces were retained whilst new arts facilities and a Crisis Skylight Centre were added.²⁶

²⁰ Stephanie Jenkins, “Old Fire Station and Corn Exchange,” Oxford History, 11 August 2018. See also “Pickfords’ History,” Pickfords, accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.pickfords.co.uk/pickfords-history>.

²¹ “Oxford Playhouse: A Short History,” Oxford Playhouse, accessed 6 April 2020, <http://www.oxfordplayhouse.com/about-us/oxford-playhouse-a-history/>.

²² P. Hartnoll and P. Found, “Meadow Players” (Oxford University Press, 1996),

²³ PCBStudios Design and Access Statement (November 2009).

²⁴ Geoffrey Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 335.

²⁵ “About Us | OVADA,” OVADA, 2013, <https://www.ovada.org.uk/about/>.

²⁶ “The Old Fire Station,” Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://fcbstudios.com/work/view/old-fire-station>.

Timeline²⁷

- 1783** The first known Gloucester Green fair is held and continues annually until 1915.
- 1789** The Oxford City Gaol and House of Correction is opened in Gloucester Green.
- 1835** Gloucester Green becomes home to the Cattle Market.
- 1863** The Oxford Corn Exchange is relocated to the town hall on St. Aldate's Street.
- 1870** Oxford's Volunteer Fire Brigade is founded.²⁸
- 1873** An engine house (fire station) is built on New Inn Hall Street for the Volunteer Fire Brigade.
- 1878** The Oxford City Gaol in Gloucester Green is closed and demolished.
- 1893** The town hall on St. Aldate's is demolished for a new building, thereby displacing the corn exchange.
- 1894** The foundation stone for the new corn exchange is laid. The construction of the new buildings on George Street is completed at the end of 1895.
- 1932** The cattle market moves from Gloucester Green to Oxpens and the corn merchants also acquired stands in the settling room there, leaving the Corn Exchange building on George Street inactive.
- 1935** The adjoining Chapel of St George the Martyr (to the east of the Old Fire Station on George Street) is demolished, to be replaced by a cinema (what is now the Odeon).
- 1971** The fire station moves from George Street to Rewley Road. The former Oxford Playhouse Company, Meadow Players, then lease the building as offices, wardrobe and property storage and for scenery painting.
- 1973** The Meadow Players company closes, and the Oxford Area Arts Council was then formed to take over the building.
- 1987** Gloucester Green is redeveloped. The Connexions office and public WCs were built at the rear of the Old Fire Station, creating the connection through to George Street. Some structural work was also done to the building.
- 1989** The Oxford Area Arts Council closes as the Gloucester Green development progresses. At the completion of the project, Gloucester Green is now a space for shops, offices, and flats, with an underground car park and two open spaces, one for a weekly open-air market and the other for a new bus station.

²⁷ Much of this timeline references the information given in the Design and Access Statement by the Feilden Clegg Bradley [FCB] Studios in November 2009 and a timeline prepared by Poppy Richards.

²⁸ "Oxford Volunteer Fire Brigade," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], August 27, 1870, British Library Newspapers.

According to one source, before its renovations, the Old Fire Station incorporated a gallery, studio theatre, and nightclub, but specifics on its uses in this period are unknown.

- 2005** OVADA undertakes the renovation and expansion of the dedicated arts space and re-launches it as a professional gallery.
- 2009** The Old Fire Station (its upper floors) is occupied by the Live Nation Club while the Corn Exchange building continues to house the OVADA Gallery and OFS Theatre. Development plans prepared by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios.
- 2010** Planning permission is granted by Oxford City Council for ‘part change of use to provide a centre for performance, arts, education and training plus café, offices and ancillary spaces. Alterations to existing building to include reconfigured entrance and foyer, new glazed link roof garden, stairs and lift’. OVADA vacated the Gallery to allow for the re-development of the Old Fire Station complex. Oxford City Council and the homeless charity Crisis run the existing gallery, theatre spaces, and arts facilities; a café and Crisis Skylight Centre are added.

Architectural description

H.W. Moore, Architect

Harry Wilkinson (H.W.) Moore was in partnership with his uncle William Wilkinson from 1881 until the latter's retirement in 1886. Moore inherited the practice, and with it, the expansion of the St. John's estate further north. Moore had a considerable influence on the architecture of the city as architect for St. John's College in the 1880s and 90s. One scholar claims that "it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the whole of Oxford between St. Giles' Church and Summertown, bordered on the west by the Oxford Canal and on the east by the Cherwell, is the conception of Wilkinson and Moore."²⁹ A number of Moore's buildings in Oxford have been included in the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

Planning and Design of the Original Building

The Old Fire Station is a good example of the style of buildings emerging in the 1840s and 1850s created specifically for the specialist functions of a fire brigade. These were typically designs of the 'English Free Style' or 'Domestic Revival', drawing on English vernacular traditions. They would usually be built in brick with stone dressings, using hardwearing materials inside.³⁰

Along the George Street frontage, on the far east side of the complex, are the arched appliance bay doors (Figure 20). A smaller, unassuming door (though also decorated with a brick arch) stands just to the left and was presumably the main private entrance to the fire station. Perhaps to denote the building's separate functions, the main entrance to the corn exchange by contrast is much larger and recessed. The building is signed by architect (H.W. Moore) and contractor (Thomas Axtell) on the inside of a doorway arch. It is framed in stone along with a small first-floor balcony just above it (decorated with another arch) and prominently engraved with the words "CORN EXCHANGE" (see Figure 21). Throughout the brick façade, most all the windows are framed with stone. Two bay windows decorate the front of the fire station on the first and second floors, centered between the appliance bay doors on the ground floor. Another bay window adorns the first floor of the shop (no. 4) that sits directly next to the corn exchange entrance.

²⁹ Andrew Saint, "Three Oxford Architects," *Oxoniensia* 35 (1970): 57-58. Due to the Victorian concept associating the fire service with strong civic pride, it was quite unusual for the Corporation to employ a non-borough architect such as Moore for the project.

³⁰ Billy Reading, *Fire Stations, Britain's Heritage* (Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2017), p.30.



Figure 20: Detail of the openings which originally contained the fire station's two appliance bay doors. The main entrance to the fire station is on the far left with detail stonework in the arch (see Figure 15).

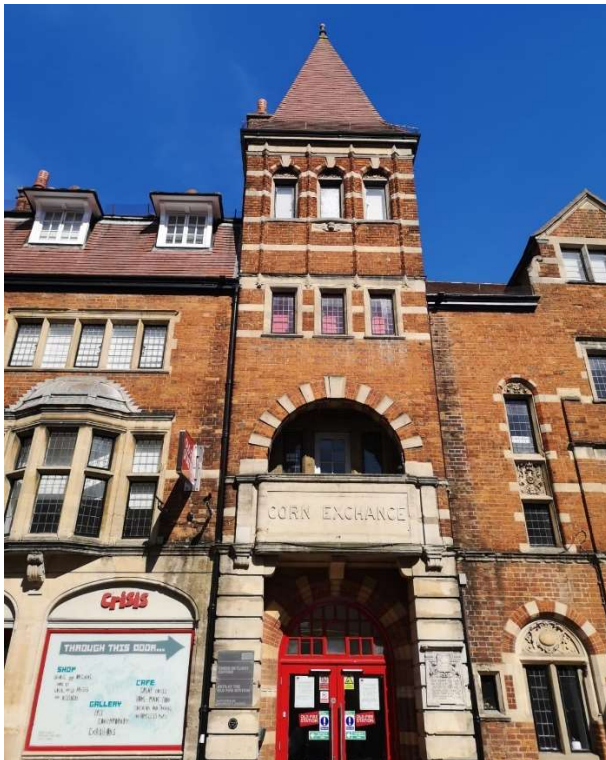


Figure 21: Detail of the main entrance to the corn exchange building.

Upon entering the corn exchange, there was a small flight of steps into the tiled lobby area, or vestibule, which then led to the commodious exchange room with a wood block floor, reported to be 71 feet long by 53 feet wide (see Figure 22). It ran the length of the complex and bordered Gloucester Green, where there was another, almost parallel, tiled entrance into the exchange. The room also had high ceilings supported by iron girders.³¹ According to *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, "A gallery [was] carried all along the east side of the Exchange, with staircases at either end of it and a recess in the centre forming a band stand."³² There was also natural light provided by the north windows looking out over Gloucester Green.

Each of the four shop units along the south side of the building was fitted with the necessary store fronts on the ground floor and more private areas just beyond with stairway access to the upper floors.

The ground floor of the fire station housed the engine room, so the Brigade had direct street access to store and carry out their equipment. A "kit room" would likely be located nearby.³³ The watch room acted as an important space overlooking the engine room where calls were received and accommodation provided the officer on duty. Next door was the messenger's bedroom, likely for the call-boy, one of the two paid employees of the volunteer brigade. Beyond this, there is a W.C. and "Wash House" for the Brigade men on duty in addition to a workshop.

On the north side of the engine room, was a ground-floor "yard," possibly open-air, but the planning document is again cut off. The view from the rear of the building does suggest a type of courtyard (see Appendix 3). If the brigade owned horses, this yard space could possibly have been used for stabling, as was generally common behind appliance bays.³⁴ Directly to the left is the base of the hose tower, along the north side of the building. Here is where the brigade would hang their hoses to dry properly after use.³⁵

³¹ FCB Studios Design and Access Statement (10).

³² "The New Corn Exchange: Laying of the Foundation Stone," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* [1809], October 27, 1894, British Library Newspapers. The gallery described is visible in the 1894 cross-section of the building (see Appendix 3).

³³ Reading 31.

³⁴ Reading 30.

³⁵ Reading 38. In popular imagination, hose towers have often been mistaken for watch towers. While there was an outside viewing platform and entrance near the top of the brigade's tower (see Figures 1 and 2), its more likely and common use was found on the inside, its tall and narrow space perfect for drying the hose instead of distinguishing true fires among the many smoking chimneys of the town.

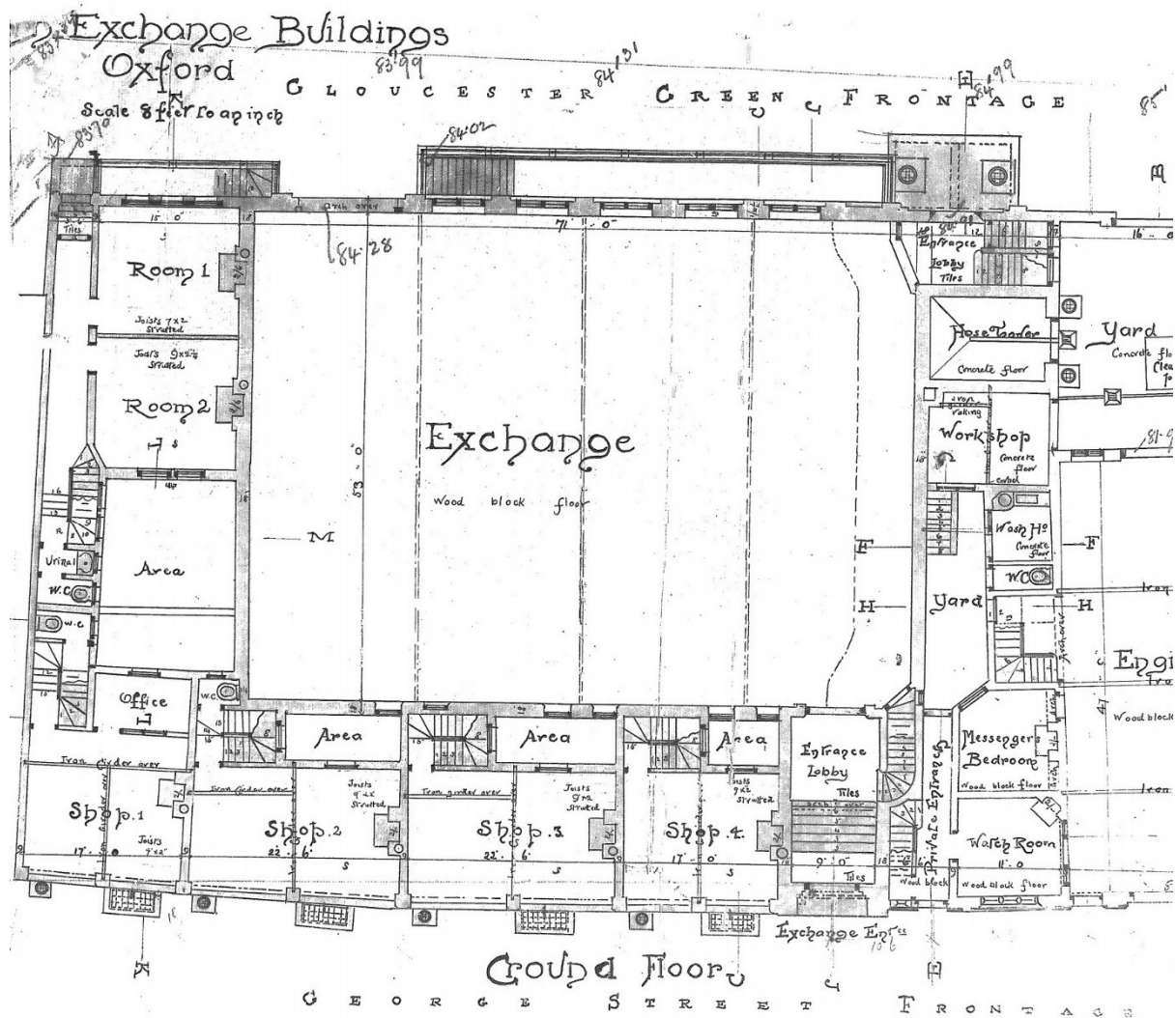


Figure 22: "Corn Exchange Buildings" blueprint of the ground floor, 1894.

Just below the ground floor is a basement for which a floor plan from 1894 is provided and shows what lay directly beneath the corn exchange (see Figure 23). The north half of the corn exchange consisted of cellars, whereas the south provided warehouses for three of the shop units. Directly underneath each shop was a kitchen and "yard" space with connecting W.C.s for shops no. 3 and 4. Between each kitchen was a space to store coal lined with blue brick. For those visiting the corn exchange, there was lavatory access located underneath the lobby. Along the west side is another kitchen, more yard space, coal storage, and a scullery. Along the east side, north of the corn exchange lavatory accommodation, were the heating vaults for both the exchange and the fire station, with more storage for coke and coal as fuel.

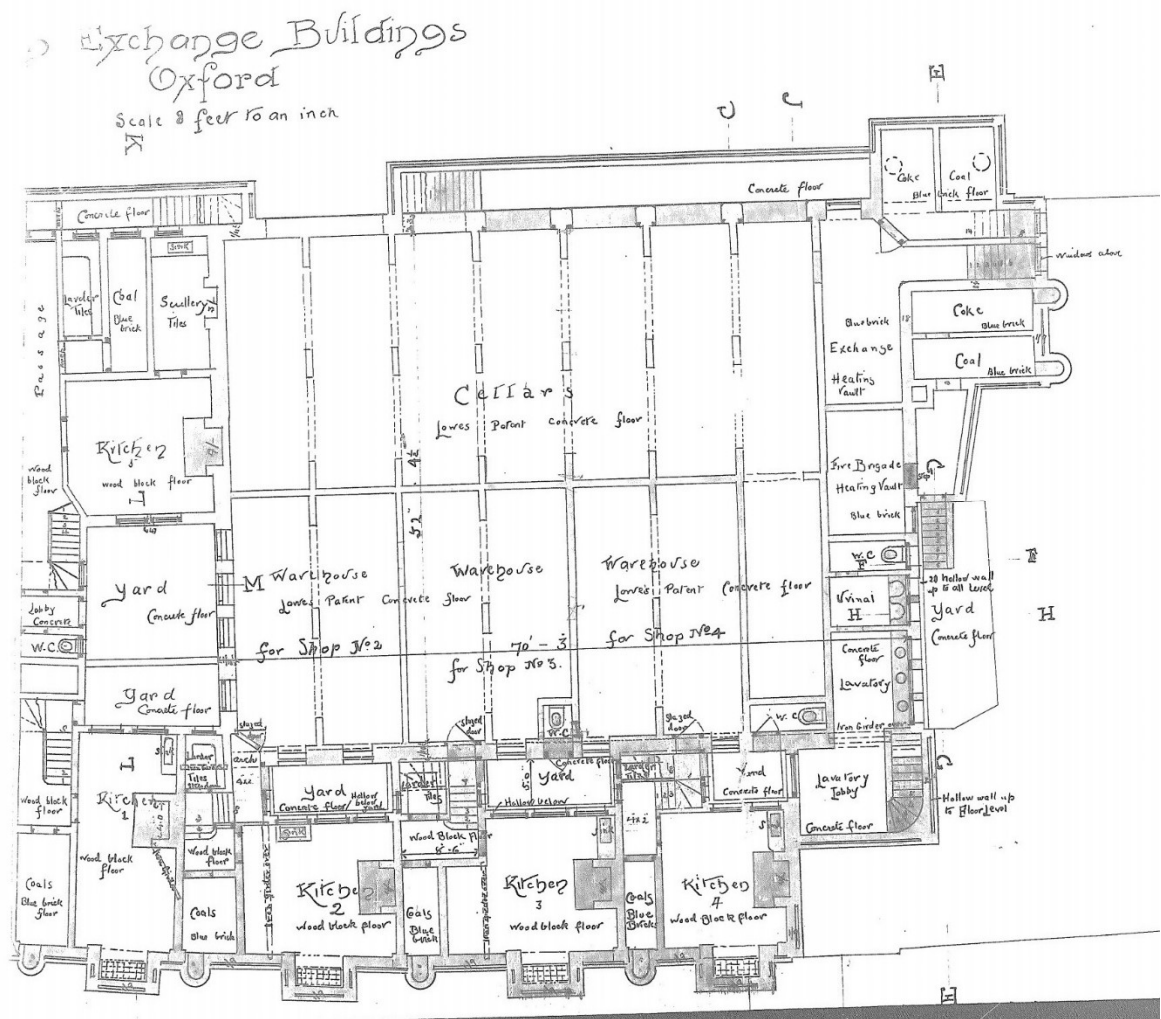


Figure 23: “Corn Exchange Buildings” blueprint of the cellars/basement, Old Fire Station Planning Documents from 1894.

The first-floor plans are mainly focused on the areas surrounding the high-ceilinged corn exchange (see Figure 24).

On the southwest side of the fire station, bordering the corn exchange, there seems to be a private residence on the first floor, complete with kitchen, sitting room, and W.C. This is possibly the “private dwelling house” provided for the resident fireman referenced in a *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* article.³⁶ Though it is difficult to determine from the provided documents, there might not have been upper floors on the northeast side of the building next to the hose tower, above the yard. Planning documents above the first floor are not available, but per *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, we might imagine that, in the fire station, the spaces above the engine room held “club rooms, committee rooms, and stores.”³⁷ Just north of the hose tower on the first floor is a balcony, which can also be seen in the document displaying the rear view of the building from Gloucester Green (see Figure 26 below).

³⁶ “The New Corn Exchange: Laying of the Foundation Stone,” *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* [1809], October 27, 1894, British Library Newspapers.

³⁷ Ibid.

For the corn exchange buildings, the four shop units along George Street act as private residences on the upper floors, with sitting rooms on the first floor and (plausibly) additional living spaces above, accessible via staircase on the northwest corner of each unit. On the far west side there is again supplementary space, its particular uses unknown.

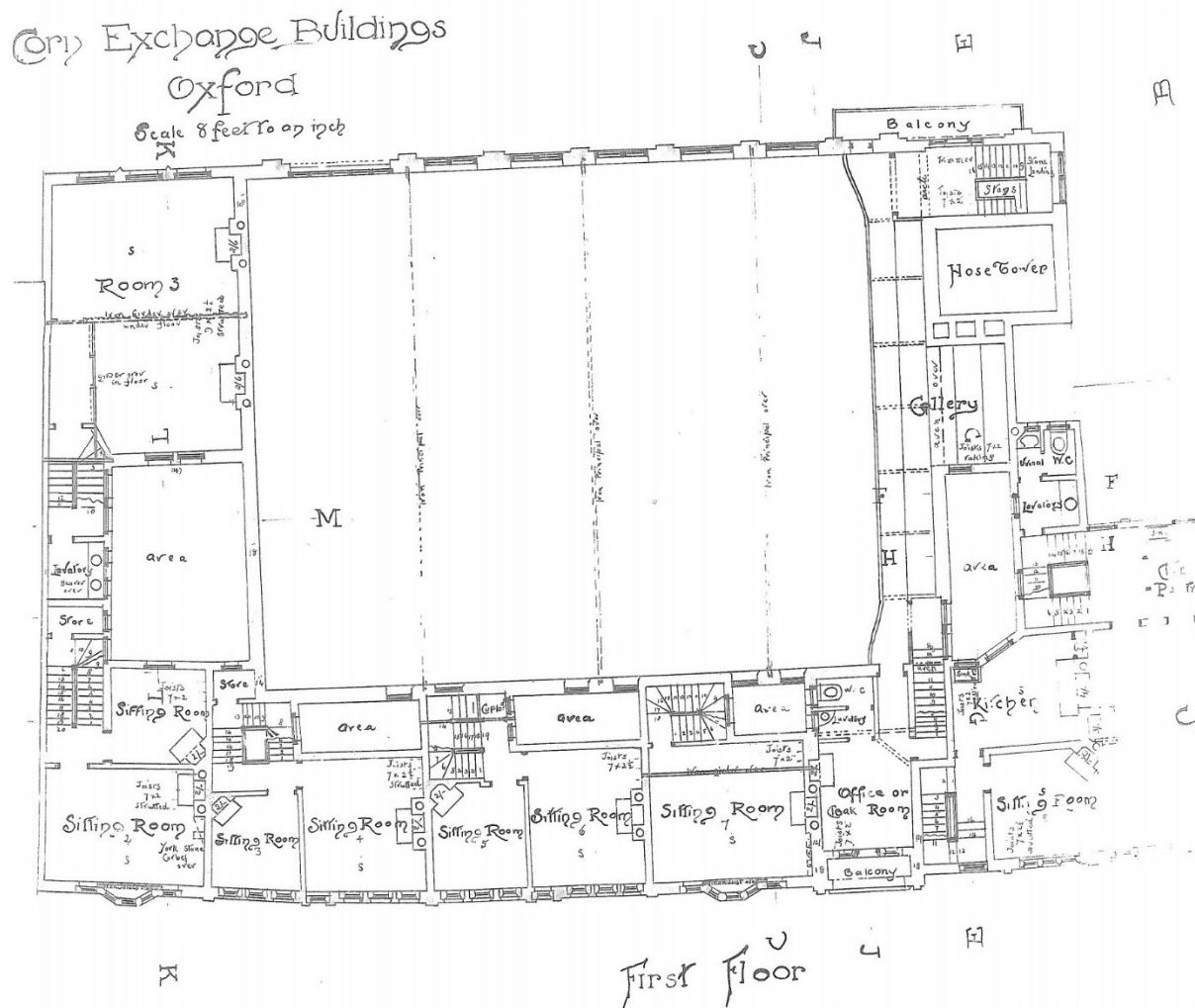


Figure 24: "Corn Exchange Buildings" blueprint of the first floor, 1894.

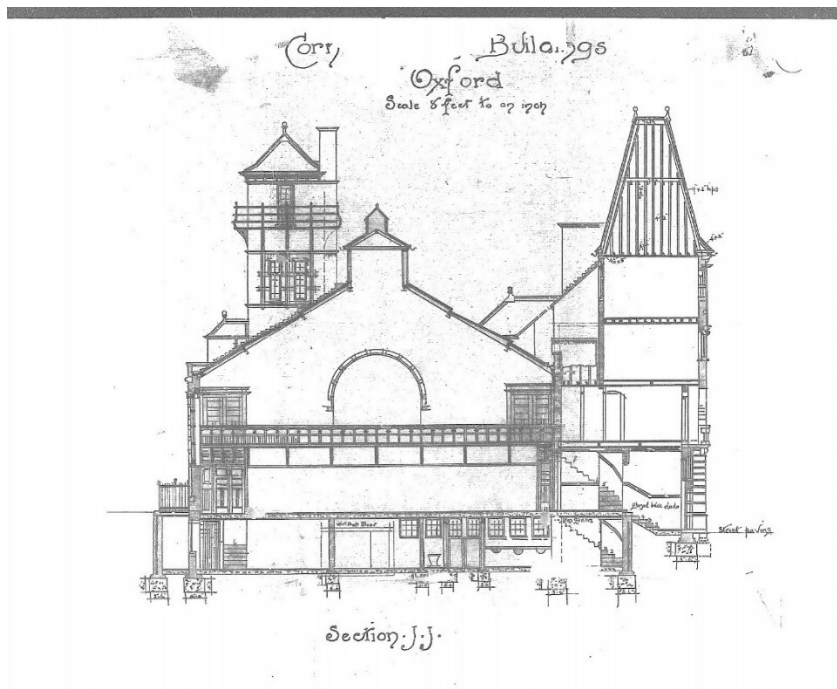


Figure 25: "Corn Exchange Buildings" Section through the corn exchange, 1894.

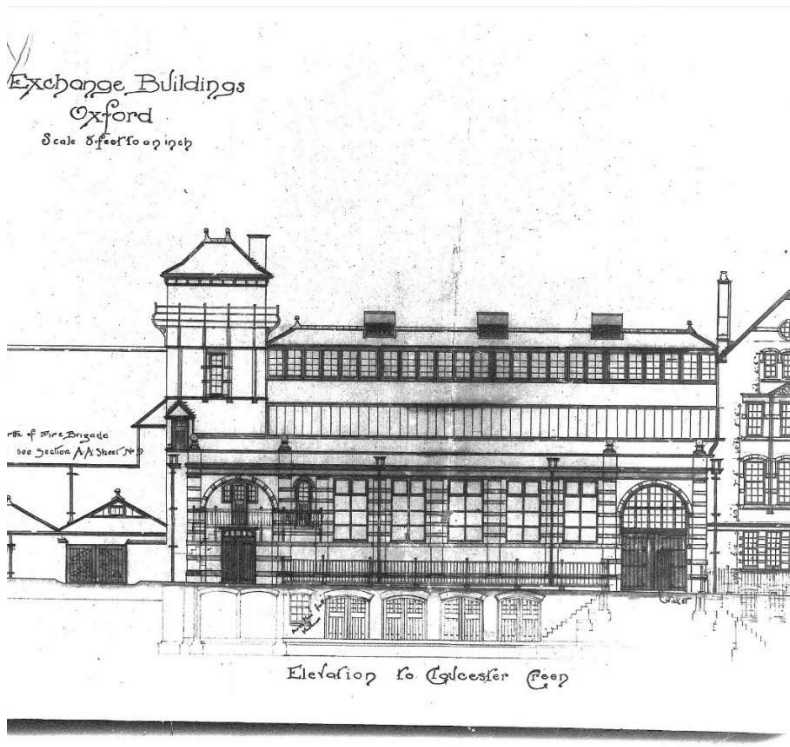


Figure 26: "Corn Exchange Buildings", Elevation to Gloucester Green, 1894.

The Old Fire Station, 2009

The current layout and use of the former corn exchange and fire station dates from the major project designed by Feilden Clegg Bradley in 2009. In 2005, OVADA had undertaken some renovation to the corn exchange buildings in order to house a professional art gallery and theatre space. The 2009 renovations retained some of these features on the ground floor while also seeking to provide greater accessibility around the building's twenty-seven staircases. The entire complex comprises most of the original 1894 buildings, including the fire station, corn exchange, and one of the original shop units (no.4). On the plans below, the spaces outlined in yellow are a part of the Skylight Centre, while green indicates the public arts facilities.

On the whole, the façade was left untouched in the renovations to the building, but the entrances were made to be more “transparent and inviting,” according to the Design and Access Statement. The entrance to the fire station is now the café entrance, both seating and kitchen extending through the space that was originally the engine room (see Figure 27). Just beyond lies the gallery space, which was extended into the Connexions office built in 1987 for a new Gloucester Green entrance on the ground floor.

The hose tower located to the north of the building was cleared of its ventilation ductwork and is now a part of the main staircase for the Crisis Centre on the east side.

The main entrance to the corn exchange on George Street became the entrance and foyer to the auditorium, which seats 163 and occupies a little over half of the space that was originally the main corn exchange with its high ceiling. Next door, on the far west side of the complex, what used to be the other half of the corn exchange was converted on the ground floor to a dance studio and changing rooms.

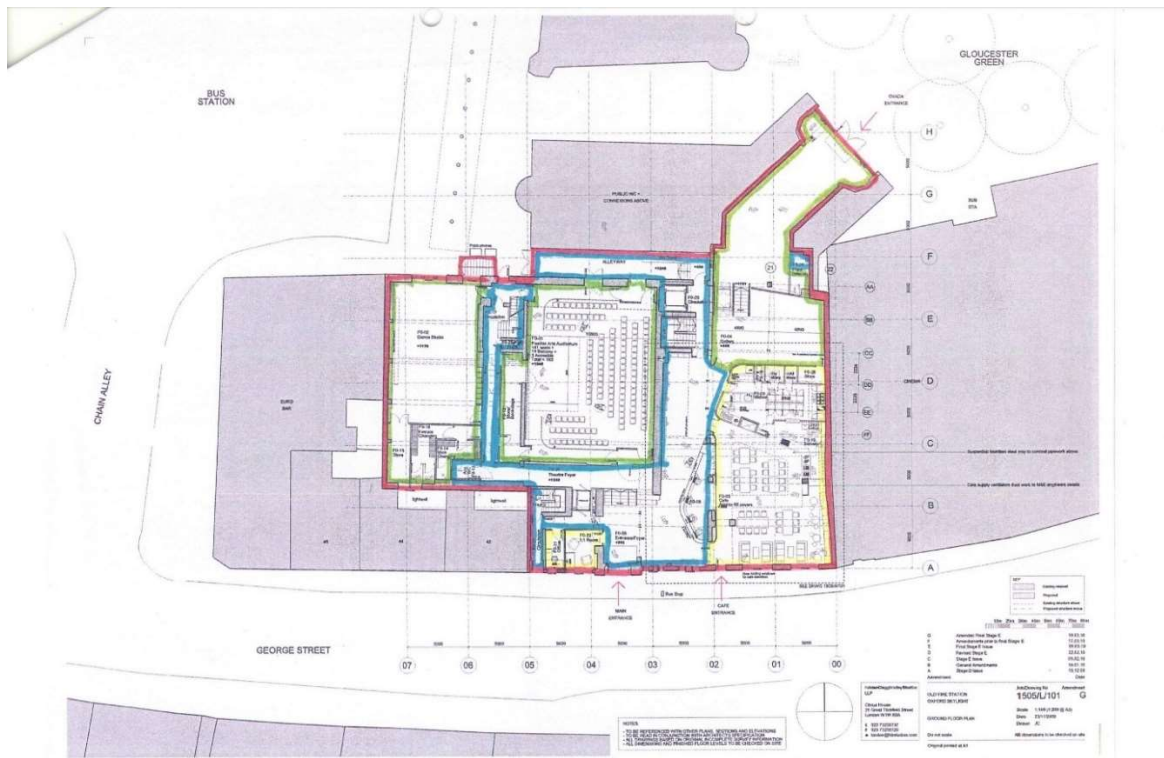


Figure 27: Old Fire Station ground floor planning document, FCB Studios, 2009.

On the first floor, above the new dance studio on the far west side of the complex, are the creative workshops and IT room. Originally the sitting room of shop unit no. 4 and the space above the lobby on the south side is now office space for Crisis.

Over the café, what used to be the private rooms of the resident fireman in 1894 is an art room. There is also a hallway that runs the length of the building to connect the fire station and corn exchange areas on the ground and first floors.

And to the north, sometime before the 2005 OVADA gallery, the fire station's yard space had evolved to hold a nightclub on the ground floor with a flat roof. The 2009 renovations included a rooftop garden accessible from the first floor (see Figures 28 and 29).

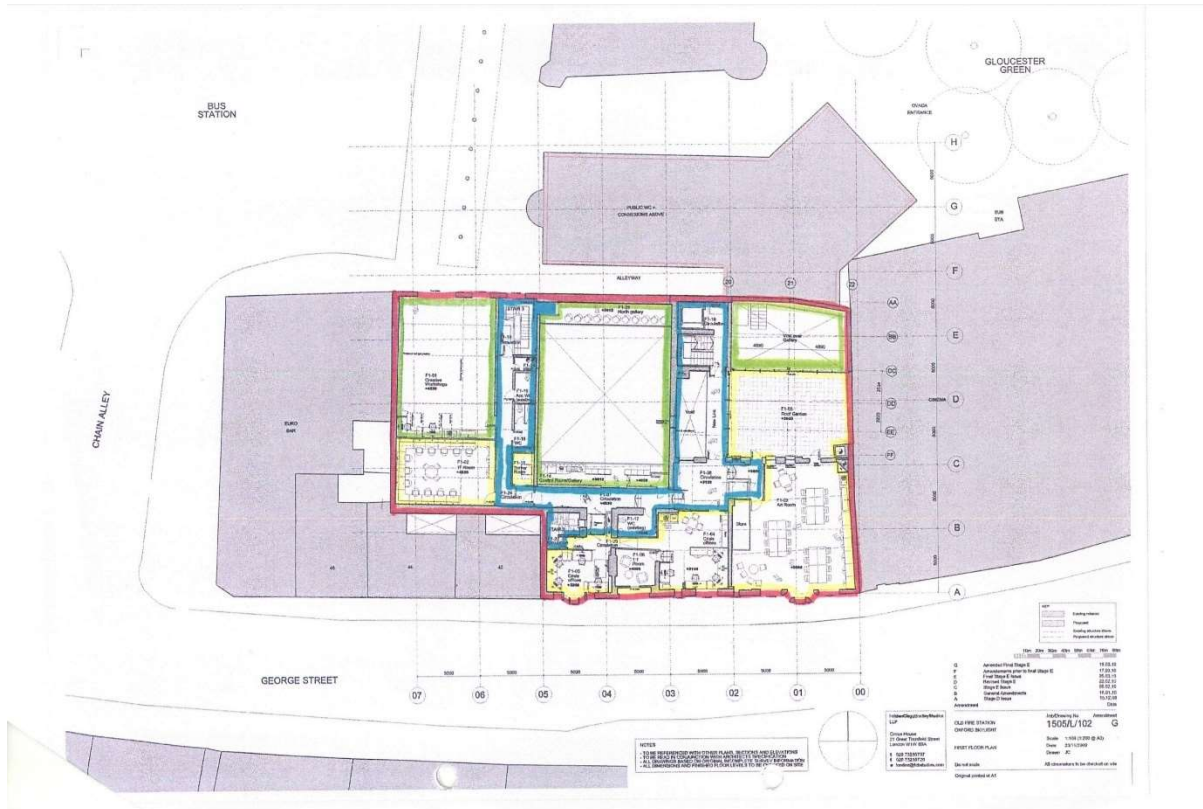


Figure 28: Old Fire Station first floor planning document, FCB Studios, 2009.



Figure 29: Detail of the roof garden on the eastern side of the building, next to the hose tower (also pictured). © Will Holborow 2019.

The second floor includes further workspaces for the Skylight Centre on the east and south sides of the building, such as the training and activity rooms and “employability zones” for the charity.

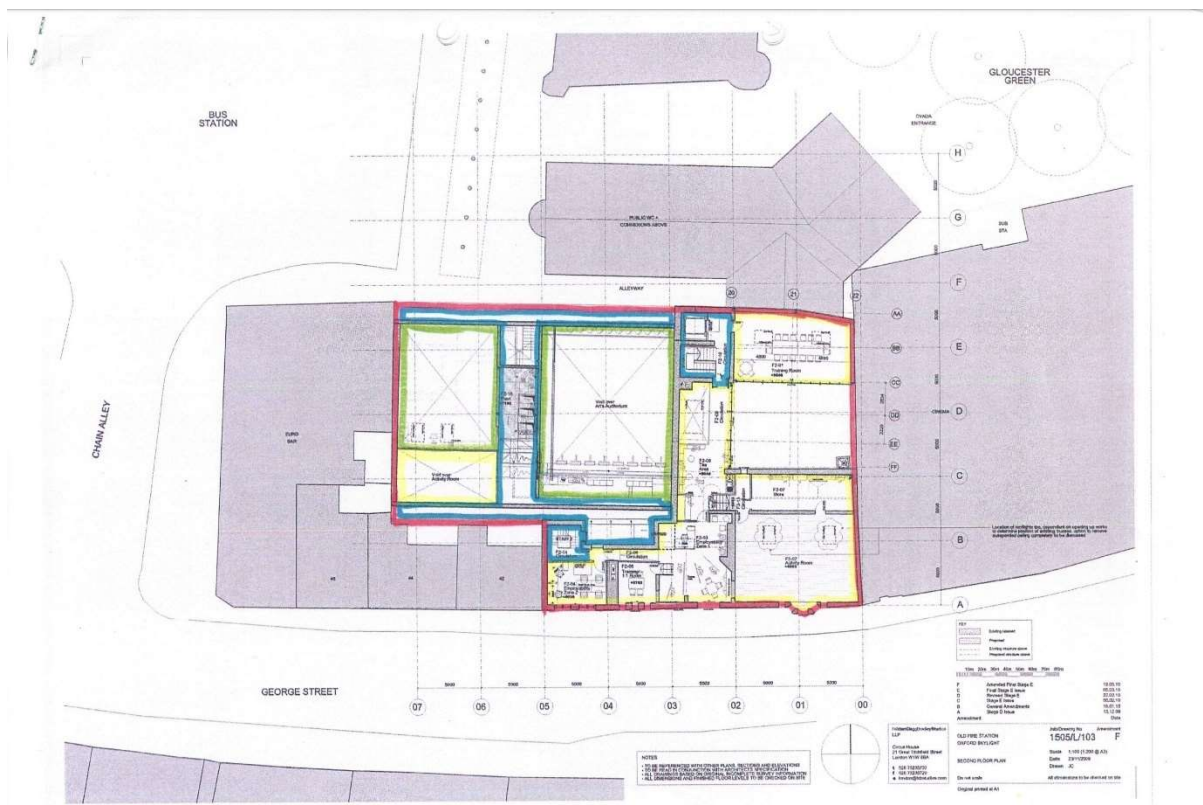


Figure30: Old Fire Station second floor planning document, FCB Studios, 2009.

The planning documents for the basement and third floor are not provided in this report. But according to the Design and Access Statement, both provide space for storage. The third floor has continued to provide space for offices while the basement contains dressing rooms (likely underneath the theatre), W.C.s, showers, and changing rooms.

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