NORTHGATE HOUSE, 13–21 CORNMARKET & 11-19 MARKET STREET, OXFORD

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY

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on behalf of Jesus College, Oxford
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 David Stevenson, Property Director at Jesus College, Oxford, has commissioned James Edgar to prepare an illustrated history of the former Marks and Spencer, building, now known as Northgate House, Cornmarket, Oxford.

2 ARCHEOLOGY

2.1 The Ashmolean Museum, acting on behalf of the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, excavated the site at Nos 13-21 Cornmarket & 11-19 Market Street during the summer of 1959. The work was undertaken in advance of the rebuilding and enlargement of the Marks and Spencer Store in 1960-61.

2.2 The former properties at Nos. 13-17 Cornmarket and Nos. 15-19 Market Street (houses and shops, all thought to be of early and mid 19th-century date) had been demolished and the cellars had been filled with demolition rubble. Excavation took place in the yards behind the former houses.

2.3 In the 12th century the site of Nos. 13-16 had belonged in the 12th century to Oseney Abbey, and probably had been priory property since the date of its foundation in 1129. The plots that were Nos. 18-19, had been in the ownership of Eynsham Abbey and the plots of Nos 20-21 were held by Gloucester Abbey. All three plots were probably part of the land given to the monastic house by William fitz Nigel, constable of Chester. He held the manor of Pyrton, to the south-east of Oxford, and the manor No. 21 remained associated with the manor until the late medieval period. Prior to fitz Nigel’s tenure, the manor had formed part of the property of Saxon bishops.

2.4 From its beginnings as a Saxon settlement, by the 11th century Oxford had grown into one of the larger towns in England and was an important commercial centre. The formation of large urban land-holdings was an important part of the process of commercial development. The Conquest brought about the re-distribution of property to the Norman lords and was marked by the foundation and endowment of religious houses. The new landlords undertook some redevelopment but more often their role was to stimulate it through the grant of favourable leases. One possible example of this activity was the formation of

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product of the element of the Market Street (formerly Chyeney Street), and possibly other lanes, by the priories of Osency and St. Frideswide, perhaps in collaboration town merchants of the town, in the 1120s. These new ways would have provide more street frontages that could be leased to townsfolk. 27 different plots were created across the site; all would have been let and sub-let, probably as homes above commercial premises. The earliest view (Agas's map of 1578) of the site, however, shows a number of frontage plots as undeveloped. Seventeenth century maps and views (Hollar, 1643 and Loggan 1675) indicate that the street frontages were built-up but there were open yards and gardens to the rear. These rear spaces were filled with structures over the next 150 years.
2.5 Among the medieval merchants occupying one of the properties was Bartholomew Bishop, or ‘Bartholomew the Taverner’, who leased or bought a number of plots between 1370 and 1410; his son Nicholas Bishop inherited some of the plots. Taverns were a common use, particularly where there was a market nearby. The White Hart (Nos 18-21) was a 16th century, or earlier, structure, which, when it was demolished in 1899, was thought to have been an inn or tavern for 400 years.

2.6 Other uses included manufacturing. For example, in the 17th century one of the tenants was a glazier, William Cole: much mid 17th-century pottery and glass, was found in one of the yards. Cole had become a freeman of the town in 1633 and held various offices from 1652 until his death in 1683. He was succeeded in the property and in the business by his son Charles. In the 19th century a confectioner, Richard Horn, leased a plot around No. 15 from 1814 until 1845; his bakehouse and kitchen were found to have been directly overlying an earlier large stone-built cess-pit. Trades such as ironmongers and cutlers congregated in the area from the 14th century; the well-known Knife Shop at No. 14 closed in 1959.

2.7 From the photographic evidence (below), it can be concluded that, with the exception of the White Hart, most of the frontage properties had probably been taken down and rebuilt before the mid-19th century.

2.8 No. 13 Cornmarket, with Nos. 15-19 Market Street, was rebuilt soon after 1847: it was a stucco-fronted, four-storey stucco terrace in the late-Georgian/regency style. No. 17 (Millwards) had a steep gable to the upper storey and was probably rebuilt in the late 19th
century. Nos 18 (four storeys, rendered, with Italianate detailing) & 19 (five storeys, rendered) had mid-19th century fronts.
The White Hart was rebuilt, to the design of Stephen Salter (architect of the Lloyd’s Bank, Carfax), in 1901 for John Buol, who advertised his new premises as “the very finest dining hotel and restaurant in the city”. It had a coffee and tea saloon and a dining room.
where dancing could take place and another dining room on the second floor. There was another Buol restaurant at 15 Broad Street.


2.9 The White Hart Hotel and the adjoining properties at Nos. 18 & 19 Cornmarket, with 10-14 Market Street, were demolished in 1939-40 and a new, Portland stone-faced structure was erected for Marks & Spencers Ltd. In 1960 planning permission was granted to rebuild the whole block that comprised Nos 13 to 20 Cornmarket and Nos 11-19 Market Street and the Crown & Thistle public house, for a new, larger Marks & Spencer store, Northgate House, which was completed in 1963. It was designed for Marks & Spencer Ltd Lewis & Hickey Architects. Marks & Spencer remained in Cornmarket until 1976 when the site was taken over by the Co-operative. When the Co-op in Cornmarket closed the ground floor was divided up into separate shops.

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1 The practice of Lewis and Hickey was established in 1894 by W A Lewis. Later the firm became W A Lewis and Partners and, probably after WWII, Lewis and Hickey. Patrick Hickey had joined the firm by 1933. After public flotation, between 1926 and the outbreak of WWII, Marks and Spencer Ltd rebuilt or opened 218 new shops and an equal number of existing premises were extended. W A Lewis and Partners/Lewis and Hickey undertook the design of a number of the stores, including, with Robert Lutyens as consultant, The Pantheon Store, Oxford Street, London. Sherwood & Pevsner, in the Oxfordshire volume of the Buildings of England (1974) describe the Cornmarket structure as ‘featureless’.
Demolition of The White Hart, 1939-1940 ((© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre: D262817a)

Marks and Spencer, Nos 18-21 Cornmarket, 1939, dem. 1959. ((© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre: D 252166a)
Marks & Spencer Ltd, 1930s’ design. (Jesus College Archives)

13-21 Cornmarket, 1966 (© Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire History Centre: D253836a)