

## **Blue Plaque Ceremony at Redbridge Park and Ride, 1st November 2019**

### **Speech by Peter Headicar**

Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words in celebration of the Park and Ride here at Redbridge. It has significance locally, nationally, and internationally and, by a nice twist, owes its existence in part to the campaigning work of the Oxford Civic Society in its early years.

The facility was not the first of its kind in the UK – not even the first in Oxford. It is however the first permanent bus-based Park and Ride in the country to have operated continuously since its opening in 1973. (Other examples were mostly seasonal or associated with special events.)

As we stand here now amidst well-equipped buildings surrounded by a large car park and served by a frequent dedicated bus service it is difficult to appreciate that at its inception Redbridge P&R was nothing like this. Like others at the time it was essentially a fledgling experiment using an un-made-up site with just 250 parking spaces and a few additional bus journeys inserted into the normal service along the Abingdon Road.

What was special about Park and Ride in Oxford – and fundamental to its subsequent success – was that it was conceived as part of a radical change in approach towards transport within the city, referred to at the time as the ‘Balanced Transport Policy’. Previous policies for additional car parking and road-building in the city centre, including the infamous Road across Christ Church Meadow, were abandoned in favour of controls of on- and off-street parking and the promotion of alternatives to the private car.

Such measures were novel and controversial. Again from this distance in time it is not easy to appreciate how resistant were motorists from outside the city to the idea that they might not be able to drive into the centre and park at will and even be expected instead to transfer to something as humble as an omnibus! Hence the introduction of dedicated bus services from the P&R car parks were – and continue to be – important in persuading such people that they are being offered something special.

Park and Ride would not have been introduced in Oxford when it was but for the short window of opportunity available to the City Council prior to local government reorganisation in 1974 before its highway and transport powers were transferred to the County. However over time in Oxfordshire and elsewhere the principle of ‘demand management’ towards

traffic in towns – using a combination of ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ to influence motorists’ travel behaviour – has come to assume the status of conventional wisdom.

The Balanced Transport Policy has been retained and enhanced during subsequent decades and the expansion of the Park and Ride car parks and their associated bus services has been central to this. (The operation now involves five sites and over 5,300 parking spaces.) The ‘achievement’ represented by the original opening of the Redbridge site deserves to be seen in this context. Park and Ride is now an established part of the Oxford scene both in terms of its physical development and what one might call its travel psychology – to be without it now is almost unimaginable.

Park and Ride may be a ‘done deal’ in terms of public acceptance but arguably it has still to fulfil its full potential. The City and County Councils have recently published proposals under the title ‘Connecting Oxford’ aimed at reducing traffic within the city and these would have the effect of increasing demand for P&R spaces by motorists from outside it. However responding by simply expanding or adding to the existing car park sites is not the only or best option.

Taking the longer term view of issues such as congestion and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions we can see that excessive car use is no longer a problem confined to cities like Oxford. One of the ways of combatting it is to provide opportunities for motorists from the wider region to transfer to public transport at an earlier point in their journeys. The proposed new P&R site on the A40 at Eynsham some four miles out of the city is a step in this direction and others are planned to follow.

The change in behaviour instigated by the Redbridge P&R almost fifty years ago has therefore not yet run its course. With sustainability high on the public agenda it is not too fanciful to imagine that, given the development of a network of interchange hubs within Central Oxfordshire coupled with suitable service promotion, park and ride should become more widespread as a travel norm