

Chester Conservation Area Advisory Committee

Chester city centre & approaches characterisation study: draft report February 2011

Comments by Chester Archaeological Society

1.0 Summary

- The Society welcomes the preparation of this study report and many of the approaches that it takes. However, it would have been improved by also considering possible future land uses in particular areas and present/future traffic flows.
- The authors' grasp of the city's history is patchy, and a well informed summary of the historical development of the urban form of the city as a whole would have brought out numerous trends that could be drawn on to inspire and evaluate future developments, rather than just medieval burgage plots.
- In the section on the Central area, the lack of any real assessment of the Town Hall/market area, as it stands or as it might be redeveloped, is a serious omission in view of CwaC's attempts to progress the Northgate scheme.
- The 'Monastic Lands' have always been 'edge of centre' and the existence of the Inner Ring Road means that they will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.
- The junction of Bridge Street and Grosvenor Street is a particularly poor environment, which deserves improvement.
- The Roman Gardens are poorly displayed and fail to fulfil their potential as a visitor attraction.
- The east end of Foregate Street should be modified to provide greater visual continuity with the Bars and Boughton.
- The new Travelodge at the Northgate roundabout should be recognised as a key detractor: its height, monolithic appearance, uninspired finish and lack of respect for its position should serve as examples of the sort of development that should be avoided in the City at all costs in the future.
- The Kaleyards should be recognised as a historic open space and its appearance improved so that it falls in line with the Roman Gardens and other green spaces immediately outside the City Walls. It should also be linked visually with the Cathedral grounds, of which it once formed part.

2.0 Objectives

The stated objectives of the study are, *inter alia*, to 'record ... the character of the built and natural environment, as derived from its history and heritage' (*Study*, 1.1) and to 'inform [the Local Development Framework] by enabling a greater understanding of the existing character of each area and the capacity to which it can accommodate development and future change. ... Recommendations are made as to ... how character

can be enhanced and the form of new development that would be most appropriate in each potential opportunity site' (*Study*, 1.4).

Comment

Such a study has been a *desideratum* in the past, and CAS warmly welcomes its preparation now, especially in view of the scale of some of the development schemes currently under consideration.

3.0 Scope

'This Characterisation Study ... follows the recently published English Heritage guidance '*Understanding Place: Historic Area Assessments*' (*Study*, 1.1).

Comments

It is recognised that a report of this sort often has to follow externally imposed guidelines in order to be credible; as a matter of practicality, it must also always have clear limits. However, although the *Study* does consider existing land use briefly for each area, future/potential use is not considered in the sections 'Capacity to accommodate change' and 'Design principles for new development'. Although houses/apartments, shops and offices, for example, can often exist behind similar facades, to focus on design to the exclusion of function altogether (in an era when retailers want large, flat undivided spaces) is to risk important recommendations being overridden as impractical. Roads are also an important element in the built environment, and their level of use obviously affects the 'feel' of an area. Although roads and their use are the subject of occasional comments in the *Study*, a more comprehensive overview would have been useful, especially with respect to the potential for changing traffic patterns in the future; this obviously ties in with the pattern of use foreseen for particular areas.

4.0 Buildings of merit

Comment

We commend the identification of 'Buildings of merit' that supplement those listed nationally.

5.0 Townscape and landscape analysis

Comment

We commend the inclusion in the analysis of characteristics such as strong/weak frontages and key view/vistas.

6.0 Participation

'The study has been progressed with the co-operation of ... [the] Historic Record department of the Local Authority' (*Study*, 1.7).

Comment

It is not clear which service of CwaC is being referred to: is it the Cheshire Record Office, the Historic Environment Team or the Historic Environment Record? Despite the stated objectives, mastery of the city's history and archaeology by the Study's authors, and indeed general familiarity with the city, is a little unsure at times. For example, Chester Cathedral is referred to as a 'site first used as a place of worship in Roman

times' (p 32); again, 'around the year 907, the Saxons of Mercia under Aethelfleda, as part of their re-occupation of the old Roman fortress, erected a fortified base here (on the site of the Castle)' (p 108). On the basis of present knowledge, these statements are incorrect. The recent, sensationalist TV speculation that the amphitheatre may have been used by the probably mythical King Arthur has also been thought worthy of repetition (p 127). It is noteworthy that no historical or archaeological works are listed in the bibliography. It would have been worth getting the sections on historical development checked by (or even written by) one of CwaC's archaeologists. Fortunately these inaccuracies do not fatally undermine the general argument of the study. It is to be hoped that similar faults do not bedevil the more crucial architectural sections, which we do not have the competence to comment on. On a more general note, Eastgate, Watergate and Northgate Streets are sometimes simply referred to as Eastgate, Watergate and Northgate (after the Danish fashion surviving, for example, at York): this is irritating to the local reader and leads to occasional confusion.

7.0 Historical development

Many negative comments in the *Study* relate to the large ground-plans of modern buildings, which are said to be out of scale with the rest of the townscape and to ignore the 'grain' of the city (eg *Study*, pp 35, 42, 64). It is worth considering this judgement from a historical viewpoint.

The buildings within the Roman fortress consisted both of long, narrow barracks and much larger structures, eg the headquarters, baths etc, although both small and large structures fitted within a unified street grid and were to an extent part of a single plan. It is ironic that the scale of some of the larger Roman buildings would probably be considered inappropriate if it were proposed to erect them in the city today! After the end of the Roman period, the area within the fortress was not densely built up again until the middle of the nineteenth century. The fortress seems to have been surrounded by a 'clear zone' (possibly in origin defensive) measuring c 150 m wide on the north, east and south sides, containing only the parade ground north of the East Gate and the amphitheatre, and extending c 70 m on the west.

The area east-west from the parade ground to the Bars and north-south from just north of Foregate Street to the Grosvenor Park may have been occupied by 'strip buildings' - the Roman equivalent of medieval burgage plots. Another bath building lay north of Lower Watergate Street, beyond which was a cemetery; to the south of Lower Watergate Street, sweeping in an arc around to Souters' Lane, there may have developed an area of large town houses.

The detailed spatial arrangement of the Saxon *burh* is unknown, but we do know that in this period many of the minor Roman streets were lost and buildings were erected over the ruins of Roman structures and in former courtyards.

It was after the Norman Conquest that the city took on the form that survives in large measure today, with the creation of numerous narrow burgage plots. However, various anomalies are worth noting: at this time, if not before, the north-eastern quadrant of the former fortress and the Kaleyards were given over to the Benedictine abbey (now the Cathedral) and thereafter lay outside the scope of normal development; the construction of the Castle was an imposition on the existing landscape, involving the destruction of a number of houses; finally, intensive development was restricted, in broad terms, to the interior of the former Roman fortress, Foregate Street and Lower

Bridge Street. The area west of the former fortress was given over to large-scale buildings in the form of monastic houses, and even then only in part. Thus the medieval city was characterised only in part by 'fine-grained' development: some areas were home to much larger buildings, in the case of the Castle ruthlessly imposed on the existing pattern; and other areas seem to have remained large blocks of open ground, eg the Dean's Field and the areas north of Princess Street and west of St Martin's Field.

In the post-medieval period, the backs of burgage plots were gradually built up, as noted in the *Study*, and map evidence suggests that some plots were amalgamated: thus, the large-scale development of the backlands seen in the 1960s was not a wholly new phenomenon. Conversely, it was not until the nineteenth century that the area north of Princess Street was opened up by the newly created Hunter Street and the land subdivided.

By contrast, the dissolution of the monastic houses virtually provided a *tabula rasa*. The Benedictine nunnery was adapted for use as a town house until it was destroyed during the Civil War; the site then seems to have remained vacant until the militia barracks were built in the nineteenth century. The site of the Dominican friary survives today, albeit in a reduced form, in Greyfriars' House. On the other hand, the site of the Franciscan friary was ultimately redeveloped in two contrasting ways: in the closely spaced eighteenth-century town houses of Lower Watergate Street and Stanley Place, and in the far more extensive Linen Hall.

Finally the construction of Grosvenor Street in the early nineteenth century showed a total disregard for the ancient, rectilinear plan of the city.

Thus, a closer consideration shows that the form of the city has been labile and reflects its changing political and economic fortunes. This is not to provide a historical justification for the erasure of the city's character for the benefit of twenty-first century retailers (*cf* the warning in the *Study*, p 164): it is simply to argue that there are many complex patterns that one can draw on in order to fashion developments that meet present-day needs without being out of sympathy with the past. In some parts of the city, especially outside the City Walls, buildings with a larger footprint would not be a break with historical tradition: what is absolutely vital is the quality of design.

A further comment is that, from the historical viewpoint, the inclusion of the Linen Hall site in the Central Area and that of the nunnery in the Castle area seem very strange: both fall naturally under 'Monastic lands'. This is all the more true given that the inevitable effect of the dual-carriageway Inner Ring Road is two separate rather than join the buildings on either side of it.

8.0 A. Central area

Comments

The historical maps in fig 4.1.2 - in themselves an excellent idea - are reproduced to such a small scale that they cannot be read. (Those for other areas of the city are better).

Under Historical development, Urban form and Townscape character, the Town Hall Square, and indeed the whole of the area within the proposed Northgate development, are ignored or treated cursorily. The preservation of part of the form of a Roman

courtyard building in the Town Hall Square, and its developing use for markets and city government from the Middle Ages onwards, are surely worthy of note. Under 'Capacity to accommodate change' it is remarkable to find absolutely no mention of the Northgate scheme: the fact that it is under negotiation at the moment surely makes it more, not less, valuable to have an outside view.

We strongly support the comments about the visual importance of alleyways and on the often-poor built environment of the backlands (*Study*, p 42). Music Hall Passage, Leen Lane and the alley by the side of the former City Press building between Watergate Row and Old Hall Place come to mind.

In view of the negative comments about it (*Study*, p 64), it is surprising that the market is not judged to fall among the Key detractors (p 61).

Under 'Capacity to accommodate change', the only opportunity seen is in Commonhall Street. It is probably unrealistic to expect the replacement of the Grosvenor Shopping Centre in the foreseeable future, but is it fanciful to look forward to the disappearance of the Crowne Plaza hotel and Centurion House? The former sits on a 1960s two-storey car park and the second dates from the 1970s. Other examples of 1960s development, eg Mercia Square and St Martin's House have already been demolished.

Under 'Design principles for new development' we commend the recommendation that 'historic routes should be maintained through the site'. This particularly applies to those within the footprint of the Northgate scheme. We would also note that the construction of the Forum and market resulted in the truncation of Crook Street, a historic street which used to extend as far as Princess Street. It would be good if this northern section could be restored in any new development (*cf* a similar recommendation for Queen Street: *Study*, p 164).

9.0 B. Bridgegate

Comment

There is no list of 'Key detractor sites' for this area. They may be few but listing them would make the document easier to use.

The alley from Lower Bridge Street (by the former Toy Museum) to the NCP site on Albion Street is perhaps worthy of note, as is the very poor environment it passes through.

If the disused car showroom and garage at the corner of Lower Bridge Street and Duke Street were to be redeveloped, possibly photographs of the preceding properties would provide some inspiration.

10.0 C. Monastic lands

'... although historically part of the city within the walls, and in close proximity to the retail core today, the construction of the Inner ring Road has left the area with more of an edge-of-centre residential character' (*Study*, p 93).

Comment

This is to misunderstand the historical development of the area. It has *always* been 'edge-of-centre': that is why part of it was used by the Romans as a cemetery; why it

could be given away to the monastic orders in the Middle Ages; and why there is Georgian residential development. The Inner ring Road merely reinforces this long-standing characteristic.

'Key detractors'

Comment

Surely the key detractor in Lower Watergate Street is its role as an important feeder to the Inner Ring Road. Admittedly this factor falls outside the scope of the present study but it cannot be ignored, as it makes the street unattractive as a pedestrian, retail and business environment. (*Cf* the comments on heavy traffic to New Crane Street, which feeds in to Lower Watergate Street: *Study* p 173).

11.0 D. The Castle

Comment

Surely the junction of Grosvenor Street, Bridge Street, Pepper Street and Lower Bridge Street is a key detractor? Any busy dual carriageway is likely to be a harsh environment, but this is made worse by the poor quality of the buildings at the top of Grosvenor Street and on the junction of Pepper Street and Lower Bridge Street, as well as by the brutal way it cuts through the much narrower north-south axis. By contrast, the presence of grass and mature trees make the Grosvenor roundabout far more tolerable. Perhaps this junction could be 'greened' in some way, and a landscape feature erected marking the south gate of the Roman fortress.

12.0 E. St John's

Comment

Our only comment is that the Roman Gardens have considerable potential for improvement. The stones preserved there could be displayed far more imaginatively and intelligibly. In addition, the approach to the Gardens from the Groves, behind the restaurant, is obscure, unattractive and could be enhanced.

13.0 F. Foregate Street

Comment

Surely the two Marks and Spencer premises, and the former Cooperative stores (not mentioned in the *Study*) show that this part of Chester, at least, can comfortably accommodate buildings with relatively large footprints?

Can street alignments be modified at the east end of Foregate Street to provide greater visual continuity between Foregate Street, The Bars and Boughton?

14.0 K. The Old Port

No comments

15.0 L. Gorse Stacks

Key detractors

Comments

We would add the new Travelodge and adjacent office block to the list of Key Detractors. The size, shape (or lack of it) and finish of the former at a key gateway to the city centre are particularly insensitive and unwelcoming. Although in this area buildings with relatively large footprints are not inappropriate *per se* (*cf* the old Northgate railway station), these new building reinforce the general comments made above about the need for high-quality design.

Capacity to accommodate change

'This is [an area] in which development is likely to improve local a character'.

Comments

We agree that this is an area where local character urgently needs to be improved. However, in the light of the recent construction of the Travelodge, whether it is likely to be improved is extremely doubtful.

Design principles for new development

'The Kaleyards car park site should be kept clear for a sufficient area to allow a strong setting for the City Walls and Cathedral. The opportunity should be taken to improve the rear aspect of properties on Frodsham Street There is also an opportunity to display the base of the Roman Tower (actually medieval: PC) under the steps up to the Walls. The environment and pedestrian experience within this site needs to be improved'.

Comment

We strongly support these statements. The Kaleyards have been open ground for 2000 years, first as part of the parade ground outside the Roman fortress and later as the abbey gardens. Much of the outer face of the City Walls is surrounded by open ground, and it should be maintained here. However, the environment and public realm here is in general poor; an attempt should be made to 'green' it, along the lines of the Roman Gardens to the south. Perhaps landscape features could also be introduced to mark it out symbolically as part of the traditional Cathedral lands. There is currently an opportunity to do this with the proposals to remodel St Werburgh Street and redesign the Cathedral gardens.