

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON PUBLIC REALM & HIGHWAYS WORKS AT ST WERBURGH'S STREET, ST WERBURGH'S MOUNT & BELL TOWER WALK

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society was founded in 1849. Among its objects is 'the preservation of archaeological sites, ancient monuments, historic buildings and other antiquities located/discovered in or connected with Chester, Cheshire and North Wales', and from its inception it has campaigned not only for the proper care of archives, archaeology, and historic buildings but for sympathetic, high-quality modern design.

2.0 Comments

2.1 In principle the Society welcomes the proposed works. The boundary around the SW side of the cathedral, dividing it from St Werburgh Street, seems to be a relatively modern development: previously St Werburgh Street only existed in the N-S section from Eastgate Street. Historically the area S and W of the S transept was open ground extending to St Oswald's chapel (the old music hall). Thus the proposed square could be said to recreate an earlier historical environment and to unify elements that the modern St Werburgh Street has divided. A similar result might be achieved simply by removing the railings dividing the Cathedral grounds from the street (as found in many other cathedral closes), but given the business of St Werburgh Street as a through route, this might simply result in unacceptable degradation of the grassed areas.

2.2 However, we have serious reservations about a number of aspects of the scheme.

2.2.1 The proposal to maintain the level of the site as it approaches the cathedral would obscure the bottom of the cathedral building and hide much of the elaborate base moulding to both the wall and the buttresses. Is it not possible for the paving of the square to follow the existing profile?

2.2.2 The final level of any surfacing will need to be carefully calculated, in accordance with advice from the Historic Environment Team, as significant archaeology has been shown to lie not far beneath the surface. Incidentally, the settlement of one of the columns of the street-level arcade opposite the S door of the Cathedral is reflected in settlement across the width of the street. If resurfacing goes ahead, it would be interesting to establish the cause of this as a matter of archaeological research.

2.2.3 Given that the intention of the scheme is to create a unified public space, any means to delimit a through route for traffic should be as unobtrusive as possible.

2.2.4 The Design and Access Statement for the scheme places great weight on linkages. However, the only linkages it mentions are from the Town Hall Square and Eastgate Street. Far more intriguing are those via Music Hall Passage, Godstall Lane and Leen Lane. The entrances to Music Hall Passage and Leen Lane are currently in particularly poor condition. The surfacing should extend into these lanes and thus invite their use.

- 2.2.5 Although we have no great objection to the re-routing of Bell Tower Walk, in general the eastern half of the scheme leaves a lot to be desired. The sandstone gate piers and wrought iron gates to the Regimental Garden are of high aesthetic quality and should be relocated appropriately. The curve of the grassed area of the Memorial Garden does not respect the geometry of the Cathedral building (surely it should meet the SE corner of the S transept?). There appears to be a curved band of distinctively coloured surfacing passing through the Bell Tower: this makes no functional or aesthetic sense. The whole of this part of the scheme should be carefully rethought.
- 2.2.6 At the moment, Chester suffers from a wide variety of surfacing materials (asphalt, granite setts, York stone, brick pavements) in a relatively small area. In implementing this scheme thought need to be given to simplicity and consistency.
- 2.3 Many of the buildings facing the Cathedral across St Werburgh Street are beginning to show lack of regular maintenance, while both Leen Lane and parts of Music Hall Passage are very untidy. As part of the public realm works, CwaC should try to persuade property owners and occupiers to do their part to create a more attractive environment.