

**CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY****COMMENTS ON NORTHGATE SUMMARY MASTERPLAN REPORT 2015\*****SUMMARY**

The 2015 revised scheme (H2) includes some improvements but in most ways constitutes a significant step backwards from the 2013 Concept Scheme that this Society welcomed. It represents an inward-looking, visually dominating development; it is destructive of buried archaeology and the historic street plan, wholly insensitive to the scale, built character and skyline of the city, and integrates poorly into it, in disregard of at least twelve clear Council policies and guidance statements. It poses the greatest threat to the historical character of the city centre since the abortive 'High Cross' scheme of the 1980s.

Nevertheless we believe that a scheme is perfectly feasible that would work well for the present while preserving, blending into and enhancing the past and creating local distinctiveness. In terms of heritage we would in particular look for:

- The retention of Trinity Street, one of Chester's most significant minor historic streets, which mirrors the line of the lost Roman western defences ([6.1.2](#), [6.1.6](#), [8.1](#)).
- The restoration of the northern part of Crook Street, the 'spine' of this part of the city from the Middle Ages onwards ([6.1.3](#); [8.1](#)).
- Avoidance of all unnecessary changes to historic streets that have maintained their alignments for centuries ([6.1.7](#)).
- Restricting the Princess Street car park to the existing basemented areas ([8.3](#))

The above changes are fundamental to preserving and enhancing the historical character of the area and would minimise the damage to potentially significant buried archaeology that would otherwise be caused ([5.1](#)).

- Careful siting of parking on the hotel and market sites to avoid damage to well preserved, significant archaeology ([5.2](#)).
- The retention of existing ground levels instead of the construction of a level floorplate across the site that would impede access to/from all directions except the Town Hall Square through the need for steps and would damage the city's skyline ([6.2.1–2](#), [8.1](#)).
- Restricting the total height and bulk of new buildings, especially on St Martin's Way, to create a contextual roofscape for the local landmarks of the Town Hall and Guildhall and to enhance the city's skyline ([7.2.3](#)).
- A broad scheme of heritage enhancement and interpretation: a) linking the Strongroom to other remains of the Roman Headquarters building to the south; and b) focussing on the ancient streets of the area, to help people to appreciate and explore more of Chester's historical character ([6.1.8](#), [8.8](#)).
- Using the opportunity to secure grants to enable the Historic Environment Team to complete reports on earlier major excavations in the area, to give meaning to the information likely to come from new excavations arising from the development ([8.9](#)).

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\* The respondent is grateful to the project team for a one-to-one meeting at which the latest proposals were explained, in addition to the public consultation sessions.

## DETAILS

### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 These comments refer to the document [Chester Northgate Summary Masterplan Report](#)<sup>†</sup> endorsed by CWaC Cabinet on 2 September 2015, specifically to the preferred option H2, which includes the site of the Crowne Plaza Hotel.
- 1.2 The Northgate development, if it goes ahead, will be the largest in the centre of Chester since the 1960s, encompassing one-twelfth of the walled city and one-fifth of its busiest area; it will be highly visible and will have a major impact on the city's character. The comparable developments of the 1960s (the present Forum, built for the then County Borough Council, and the Grosvenor Centre) were highly praised at the time of their construction but are now criticised for their 'transitory' architectural style, for being out of scale, and for having destroyed large areas of the historic grain of the city plus well preserved archaeology of international significance, and one would now 'hope ... [for] replacements ... that are genuinely innovative in their design whilst preserving and enhancing the city's character'. ([Sustainable Growth of Cathedral Cities and Historic Towns](#), pages 63 and 122). The 2013 Northgate Concept Scheme won this Society's support because it avoided the faults of these earlier developments: destruction of the surviving archaeology would be minimal; the scale and style of surrounding buildings seemed to be respected; much of the historic street pattern was restored, and the development integrated well into the rest of the city. The 2015 revised scheme (H2) includes a few welcome changes but on the whole represents a major backward step and repeats the mistakes of the 1960s: more significant archaeology is likely to be destroyed, the proposed buildings are generic in style and wholly out of scale with the city, and, far from being restored, more of the historic street plan is obliterated, resulting in poor integration. The very clear and precise Council policies that would prevent these failings are totally ignored.
- 1.3 The [Masterplan](#) (page 12) justifies the revisions by referring to 'an opportunity to simplify the retail loop' and stating that 'the market has changed' since 2013. During public consultation sessions it was stated that the changes were needed in order to 'de-risk' the development to gain the support of international investors.<sup>‡</sup> This ignores the fact that the development is located not on a greenfield site but in the middle of one of England's major historic cities, with the constraints and opportunities that should imply. Moreover, the market will doubtless change again before construction is scheduled to start (2018 except for the library site). It would be incomprehensible if what is left of the historic environment and the general townscape in the area, which has evolved over two thousand years, were now, within a single lifetime, to be sacrificed to another Council-led scheme in an attempt to imitate retail parks or on the altar of short-term market changes, and especially at the precise time that the Council

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<sup>†</sup> The full report no longer seems to be available online.

<sup>‡</sup> The report [Sustainable Growth of Cathedral Cities and Historic Towns](#), page 64, with reference specifically to Chester, states the issue baldly: '... in a buoyant economic climate, planning authorities feel themselves able to take a much more robust approach in their negotiations with developers either in terms of the scale of proposals or the overall quality of design. When markets are depressed it is much harder to achieve this as there is a fear that if pushed too hard, developers will simply walk away from a scheme.'

is developing a heritage strategy for the city.<sup>§</sup> Chester cannot out-compete out-of-town shopping centres by offering 'ideal' retail spaces or easily replicable leisure facilities (eg cinema), no matter how much of its heritage it sacrifices, and will never be competitive in free car parking; rather, it needs to attract longer-staying visitors/customers by 'playing the heritage card' as hard as it can, not just in the form of specific monuments such as the City Walls, amphitheatre etc, but through far less tangible qualities of historical character and local distinctiveness that contrast with the globalised blandness of the retail parks. Moreover, to accept this scheme as it stands would raise serious concerns about the credibility of the Council's planning policies and the consequent vulnerability of the rest of the city's historic environment.

## 2.0 Historical Character of the Area

2.1 The [Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study](#) has little to say about this area, writing the whole of it off as 'negative' with the exception of buildings on its periphery (eg pages 66, 57). The Chester Archaeological Database '[Character Zone 7: Princess Street](#)' is more informative. It summarises the area as being defined by its medieval north–south streets that formerly gave access to small townhouses and cottages and later to several chapels, Victorian courts and industrial buildings – all swept away, except for the streets themselves, by the 1960s redevelopment. The below-ground archaeology consists of Roman barracks at the north and south ends of the area with workshops in the middle. Saxon reuse of the Roman defences was found under the Trinity Street car park. Despite the 1960s redevelopment, there is the potential for archaeology of at least national importance to survive under streets and other open areas.

## 3.0 Summary Description of the Revised Scheme

3.1 The revised scheme essentially envisages the demolition of the present Crowne Plaza hotel building and the creation of a 'shopping level' on a level floorplate extending from the Town Hall Square to St Martins Way and from Hunter Street across Princess Street to Hamilton Place. At a nominal 28.5 m AOD the 'shopping level' would be virtually at the same height as Town Hall Square but would terminate c 6 m above the level of St Martins Way. Exploiting the fall in ground level, especially west of Crook Street, two levels of the Princess Street car park would be extended beneath the 'shopping level' as far as the western side of Trinity Street, and in the case of the upper level southwards as well. All but the southern end of Trinity Street would consequently be obliterated and a new north–south street constructed further east. The Trinity Street car park itself would be converted into a service bay. The hotel would be moved north of Princess Street, with a bus drop-off beneath its St Martins Way frontage and further parking beneath it and the market on the former Bowling Green site. The elevated floorplate of the 'shopping level' would require steps at the western end of Princess Street and near the surviving southern end of Trinity Street. The whole development would be encircled by a service road in the form of a loop from St Martins Way and consisting of 'Back Watergate Street' (our expression), Goss Street, Market Street and Hunter Street.

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<sup>§</sup> It is both timely and ironic that, at the time of the public consultation on this development, the Grosvenor Museum should stage an exhibition of paintings by Chester artist Christopher Faircloth exploring the loss of local distinctiveness in Britain's cities. The Deputy Leader of CWaC is reported to have commented: '...Chris Faircloth's paintings are an important reminder that the places we love could so easily lose their special character and end up looking just like everywhere else.' (*The Chester Standard* 24 November 2015, '[Loss of local identity to be explored in Chester art display](#)').

#### 4.0 Implications of Incorporating the Crowne Plaza Site

4.1 The Crowne Plaza hotel building is referred to in the [Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study](#) page 61, as a ‘key detractor’ ‘highly visible because of its size and bulk [with] a very thin and crude veneer of “Chester Black and White”. Its design pays no heed to the grain of the city’, and in the [Chester District Local Plan](#) section C para 3.33 (under its former name of the Moathouse Hotel): ‘Some redevelopment schemes in the past have adversely affected the character, and particularly the skyline, of the city, e.g. Commerce House, Moathouse Hotel and Hamilton House. These are not to be used to set the precedent for future development...’. We are therefore in principle pleased that, because that building and the rest of the present Forum complex are so interlinked, it has been recognised that it is better to redevelop the two sites at the same time. However, the opportunity has to be taken to erect something far more suitable to the location.

4.2 The unsightly ‘ragged edges’ to the western and southern sides of the development presented by the entrance to an underground service area at the junction of Princess Street and Trinity Street and by a number of surface service yards were a shortcoming of the 2013 Concept Scheme. The revised scheme seems to avoid this and to do better at meeting the requirements of [Chester District Local Plan Retained Policy](#) ENV 10 on the subject. The proposal to use the Trinity Street car park as a service bay for the central part of the development seems economical and elegant, although this limits the height of development above it if the city’s skyline is to be protected (see [6.2.2](#) and [7.2.3](#) below). However, there is a price in that the street-level frontage to the Inner Ring Road will remain sterile, contrary to the aspiration of [Chester District Local Plan Retained Policy](#) ENV 12, although this is a feature of the revised scheme as it stands. The encircling service road also seems acceptable. However, it is important that in its southern sector it is visually subordinate to the historical north–south routes and that the western end of Hunter Street is not sterile.

#### 5.0 Impact on Below-Ground Archaeology

5.1 The extension of parking level B2 at 22.5 m AOD across Trinity Street could threaten significant archaeology – much of the western end of the main *fabrica* or workshops of the Roman fortress, plus the adjacent *intervallum* road. According to the *Chester Northgate Masterplan Presentation* (2012) pages 77–8 this may be encountered, at c 23.6 m (ie c 1 m above the proposed car park level). The rest of this workshop lay within the footprint of the present Forum complex; samples of it were excavated in the 1960s but most was destroyed without record. How well the Roman building survives under Trinity Street has not been established. Earlier surfaces of Trinity Street itself (possibly going back to the Saxon period: see [6.1.2](#) below) would also be destroyed, if they survive.

5.2 Significant archaeology – this time in the form of the well preserved remains of Roman barracks – is present on the former Bowling Green site north of Princess Street at c 26 m AOD, ie at the proposed floor level of the market and hotel car parks. We are unclear as to the exact location of the parking under the market, but damage may be expected from the insertion of services and machine churn as well as from foundations/floor slabs. Whether any archaeology was left in place after the construction of the present bus exchange and the excavations that preceded it also needs to be checked. Clearly dedicated parking is needed for market traders and the hotel, and ideally public parking as well, but the proposed levels and configuration need to be clarified and possibly re-thought.

5.3 Great care will need to be taken over the design of foundations for buildings and the new section of service road south of Hamilton Place, where complex and important archaeology – Roman, Saxon and medieval – may be expected at c 26 m AOD. Again only sample excavation was carried out here in the 1960s and 1970s and there is uncertainty about the degree of survival, but at the least ‘islands’ of well preserved archaeology must be expected. A detailed desk-based assessment of existing information is required, followed by trial excavation if necessary.

5.4 The Chester Archaeological Database ‘[Character Zone 7: Princess Street](#)’ states:

A higher level of preservation may be expected to the north of Princess Street where modern redevelopment has been limited ... Open areas such as car parks and roads to the south [of Princess Street] are likely to have the strongest preservation potential and should be treated with the greatest sensitivity.

This whole area of the city is one of the ‘Primary Zones’ of the [Chester Archaeological Plan](#), and the presumption is that remains here should be preserved *in situ* (page 15, fig 7 and 16, para 33). Preservation wherever possible is all the more important given that so many of the earlier excavations have not yet been published, and thus the understanding that should precede further excavation does not exist.

## **6.0 Above-Ground Loss of Historical Character**

### **6.1 Historic Street Pattern**

6.1.1 Streets are archaeological monuments in their own right, regardless of the quality of the buildings that happen to line them at any particular time, and even when new surfaces are laid and earlier ones partly destroyed by the insertion or renewal of services, their alignments are still precious evidence for the history of the city; they are the ‘fabric’ on which the ‘tapestry’ of Chester has been woven. The survival of so much of its historic street plan is of national importance; it is fundamental to Chester’s character and should be preserved, restored where appropriate and enhanced. The origins of Eastgate Street, Watergate Street, Bridge Street and part of Northgate Street in the major streets of the Roman fortress are well known. However, many other streets are also of ancient origin and reflect important stages in Chester’s evolution, even though this is currently less appreciated.

6.1.2 One of these streets is Trinity Street, most of which would be obliterated by the proposed westward extension of the Princess Street car park. Trinity Street is one of the most significant minor historic routes of the city. Along with St Martins Way it ‘sandwiches’ the line of the lost Roman western defences. Similar pairings are found further south with Weaver Street/Nicholas Street and Whitefriars/Cuppin Street, the latter sandwiching part of the lost southern defences. At all these locations the Roman defences are still marked by the sharp fall in level between the pairs of streets. These streets were clearly established when the defences were still a significant landscape feature, perhaps in the late Saxon period, when we know that those at Linenhall Street were refurbished, but certainly by the early Middle Ages (Ward *et al* 1994, 9, 122). The proposed disregard for a historic street mirrors the insensitivity shown when the Grosvenor Shopping Centre truncated Newgate Street, which pre-dated the Norman Conquest, and when the current Forum development obliterated the northern half of Crook Street. It would represent a major loss to the integrity of a highly significant group of streets.

6.1.3 The restoration of the lost northern half of Crook Street was a feature of the 2013 Concept Scheme that commended itself to us in townscape terms, although, as it

could not follow the precise route of the earlier street, it would inevitably lack a degree of historical authenticity. The southern part of Crook Street is Roman in origin (as are probably Goss Street and Hamilton Place) and was reused in the Saxon period. The northern part of the street was probably laid out in the Middle Ages to connect with Princess Street, another medieval creation, and formed the 'spine' around which the area developed (Ward *et al* 1994, 21, 28, 40, 64, 122); its alignment suggests that it threaded its way between the remains of a series of Roman buildings.

- 6.1.4 For Trinity Street and the northern half of Crook Street the scheme would substitute a wholly new street mid-way between the two, linking directly with the surviving southern ends of neither. Although it may inherit the name of one of the historical streets this is misleading: the street would be on a new line, and it needs to be emphasised that it would have absolutely no historical authenticity or significance.
- 6.1.5 It is proposed to create a new entrance to the Northgate area at the southern end of the site, involving the rebuilding of nos 14-20 Watergate Street. We have no objection to the reconstruction of these poorly designed buildings (although the western end, in mock-Georgian style, is acceptable), but feel that the construction of broad 'monumental' steps up to Row level (after the manner of the entrance to St Michael's Row) would lead to the sidelining of the historical southern end of Goss Street. Goss Street is already linked to the Rows by an alley at the side of Amber Lounge.
- 6.1.6 Trinity Street, Crook Street, Goss Street, Hamilton Place and Princess Street are thus part of the long-term plan form of the city (again see the Chester Archaeological Database [Character Zone 7: Princess Street](#) and the *Chester Northgate Masterplan Presentation* (2012) page 16), and we believe that it is valid to distinguish between streets such as these and short-lived ones such as the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Market Street, whose reinstatement would be no compensation for the loss of earlier streets.
- 6.1.7 Even when it is proposed to preserve historic streets, their alignments are changed significantly. Given that these alignments have survived for centuries if not millennia, we would oppose any unnecessary changes and where practical should like to see the opportunity taken to restore their pre-1960 widths, before large, free-standing buildings began to break down traditional patterns.
- 6.1.8 As a result of this disregard for the historic street plan one can imagine the surviving southern ends of Trinity Street and Goss Street becoming further disused and neglected. One may compare the [Chester Characterisation Study A: Central Area](#) comments on Newgate Street (page 65): 'Fragmented street remnant amongst Grosvenor Centre. Still some buildings of merit but in a very poor setting'. These streets do not deserve this fate. Rather than being destroyed or sidelined, they should be valued, maintained (and in the case of Crook Street restored) and enhanced for their specific evidential heritage value and as contributing to the general historical character of the city. On a practical level one of the results of severing or degrading these historical streets through the area would be to tend to isolate the new development from the western end of Watergate Street (which in the 2013 scheme it was supposed to revitalise). Rather, new north-south routes through the development should align with the historical streets, aiding permeability and integration.

- 6.1.9 Given that 'Parson's Lane' is a former name for Princess Street, which still exists, it should not be used for the new street south-west of the Town Hall. This could be called 'Lion Yard', which occupied almost exactly the same position and has already been suggested for the sector of the street immediately south of the Town Hall.
- 6.1.10 It cannot be argued that existing gradients constitute an access problem that would be improved by changes to the present streets. Indeed, the construction of steps at the western end of Princess Street and near the south end of Trinity Street as a result of the construction of a level floorplate would make accessibility worse except from the Town Hall Square, and close inspection of the plans shows that there are ramps at a gradient of 1:20 within parts of the development. In fact, existing gradients within the development area are generally easy. Trinity Street is virtually level, as could be the restored part of Crook Street (at c 27.5 m AOD), and the gradient on 'Parson's Lane' between the Town Hall and the restored part of Crook Street would be slight. The fall on Princess Street between Crook Street and Trinity Street is admittedly steeper but could be mitigated by lifts and/or ramps in the premises between these streets. The proposed insertion of steps would certainly not be an improvement and should also be avoided as a measure of future-proofing to permit vehicular traffic should that be thought desirable.
- 6.1.11 The arguments above are clearly and specifically supported by [Chester District Local Plan Retained Policies](#)\*\* ENV 5, 37 and especially 39:

**ENV 5**

Development which would result in the loss of streets, lanes and courts, or an alteration to their widths or alignments will be permitted only where it enhances or preserves the historic integrity of the urban grain or plan form of the settlement.

*Reason/Explanation*

All new development is expected to contribute positively to the urban grain or plan form of settlements. Historic patterns and routes should be respected and enhanced where appropriate. The public realm should be rich in the opportunities it offers, with clear and well designed routes that are open to the public at all times.

**ENV 37**

Development in conservation areas or affecting the setting of such an area will only be permitted where it will preserve or enhance its character or appearance.

... hav[ing] regard to the effect of the following criteria and the impact of any development on the immediate surroundings of the site, the broader townscape or its landscape setting:

*(inter alia)*

- the retention of ancient and historic thoroughfares

**ENV 39**

Development proposals which would result in the loss of any historic routes in the city centre will not be permitted.

Development schemes which would result in the reinstatement of any historic routes in the city centre will be permitted as and when they arise.

*Reason/Explanation*

The plan form of Chester has remained mostly intact since Roman times and there should be no further loss of any routes, however small. The tight historic grain of the city centre is key in defining its character and should be retained and strengthened wherever possible.

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\*\* It should be noted that these policies were reaffirmed in January 2015.

The [Chester Characterisation Study A: Central Area](#), page 104 also states:

The Market area offers potential for a more comprehensive redevelopment. This needs to be mindful of the following considerations (*inter alia*):

- re-instating the historic grain of the area by providing north–south routes through the development blocks. Where possible these should align with historic routes such as the extension of Crook Street to Princess Street.

Page 76 states:

One of the delights of Chester is the alleyways which pass between the main frontages ... Some of these routes have been lost to larger development and some lead ...to uninviting backlands, which makes the city both less permeable and less readable.

## 6.2 *Effect on Site Topography*

6.2.1 The construction of a level floorplate raising the whole of the western part of the site approximately six metres ignores the Places Matter! recommendation *à propos* the 2013 scheme that ‘people should be able to experience the city’s natural levels’. The earlier scheme at least made some attempt to respond to the present contours by using a split-level street plan. The revised scheme makes no concessions at all to the existing topography, and in the consequent need for steps would tend to isolate the development from the surrounding area (see [6.1.10](#) above) in the manner of the steps from the south end of the Grosvenor shopping centre to the remains of Newgate Street.

6.2.2 The suppression of the present contours would also damage the skyline of the city that is a product of this sloping topography (see, for example, the views reproduced in Boughton 1997, 13–14). This is contrary to *Chester District Plan Retained Policies* ENV 8, especially Key Inward View 18: Roodee, City Walls & skyline from footbridge & railway viaduct, ENV 38 and ENV 40.

### [Chester District Plan Retained Policies](#)

#### ENV 8

New development in Chester city which would obscure important views or lessen the visual impact of historic buildings, landmarks or landscape features through excessive height, mass or bulk or through the development of key open spaces which provide views through, frame views or provide a setting for them will be refused.

#### *Reason/Explanation*

*Inter alia* ...

The roofscape is an important factor in defining the skyline of the historic city due to the topography of the settlement. The roofscape reflects the historic fabric and provides a wealth of interest and should be a key element in the design of any new development.

Similarly:

### [Chester District Plan Retained Policies](#)

#### ENV 38

Planning permission will not be granted for new developments that will obstruct important views within, or views in or out of, conservation areas.

#### ENV 40

Development proposals that would adversely affect the historic skyline of the city centre will not be permitted.

#### *Reason/Explanation*

The skyline of Chester provides the first impression of the historic city for visitors. The most important elements of the historic skyline consist of the Cathedral Tower, the

Town Hall Tower, church spires and the general roofscape which provides their context. It has remained relatively unscathed and should be protected to provide an indicator of the quality historic fabric of the city.

## 7.0 Impact of New Buildings

7.1 The area of the development is immediately adjoined by two Listed Buildings that are also classed as 'landmarks' in the Council's retained policies – the Town Hall (Listed Grade II\*) and the Guildhall (formerly Holy Trinity Church (Listed Grade II)). Other listed buildings that would be seen in conjunction with the development and provide a context for it are those that surround Town Hall Square, nos 5–7 St Martins Way, the west side of Nicholas Street and Kings Buildings. It may therefore be worthwhile to quote at length from the main relevant policies and advice that should be heeded:

### [Adopted Local Plan \(Part One\) Strategic Policies](#)

#### ENV 5 Historic Environment

##### *inter alia*

Development in Chester should ensure the city's unique archaeological and historic character is protected or enhanced.

#### ENV 6 High quality design and sustainable construction

The Local Plan will promote sustainable, high quality design and construction.

Development should, where appropriate:

- Respect local character and achieve a sense of place through appropriate layout and design
- Provide high quality public realm
- Be sympathetic to heritage, environmental and landscape assets

### [Chester District Plan Retained Policies](#) Section C Urban Design

3.33 Some redevelopment schemes in the past have adversely affected the character, and particularly the skyline, of the city, e.g. Commerce House, Moathouse Hotel (ie the Crowne Plaza) and Hamilton House. These are not to be used to set the precedent for future development. The Council will identify poor buildings and development schemes and other areas which it feels are ready for redevelopment.

#### ENV 8

New development in Chester city which would obscure important views or lessen the visual impact of historic buildings, landmarks or landscape features through excessive height, mass or bulk or through the development of key open spaces which provide views through, frame views or provide a setting for them will be refused.

##### *Reason/Explanation*

New development should contribute positively to views and not obscure, or provide an inappropriate setting for key buildings or landscape features.

Landmark buildings and features provide orientation within Chester and are important at both a strategic and local level. They are relatively limited in number and tend to occupy strategic locations such as corners, road junctions, termination of vistas and summits. Existing landmarks should be protected and enhanced. New development should not detract nor compete with existing landmarks in terms of height, bulk or level of detail and views of them should not be disrupted.

The roofscape is an important factor in defining the skyline of the historic city due to the topography of the settlement. The roofscape reflects the historic fabric and provides a wealth of interest and should be a key element in the design of any new development.

The landmark buildings identified in the Key Views Diagram are as follows:

*(inter alia)*

F. The Guildhall (II)

T. The Town Hall (II\*)

3.50 Particular attention should be given to the overall balance of elements in the façades and the treatment of the roofs. The building itself should have integrity reflecting its use and the internal subdivisions. The Council will discourage superfluous ornament on buildings.

ENV 12

Development and redevelopment of sites along the inner ring road that would provide a strong and active frontage will be permitted. In determining planning applications the Council will have regard to the degree to which the scheme preserves or enhances the character or appearance of the area.

[Chester District Local Plan Retained Policies](#)

ENV 37

Development in conservation areas or affecting the setting of such an area will only be permitted where it will preserve or enhance its character or appearance.

... hav[ing] regard to the effect of the following criteria and the impact of any development on the immediate surroundings of the site, the broader townscape or its landscape setting:

- the height, scale and orientation of the proposed development
- the bulk, massing and density of the proposed development and its layout in relation to any building line and the surrounding plan form
- the proposed points of access, both pedestrian and vehicular to the development and their relationship to the surrounding plan form
- the quality and type of materials to be used in the construction of the development and any boundary treatments and landscaping
- the design and detailing of the proposed development
- the retention of ancient and historic thoroughfares
- the retention and maintenance of historic street furniture, surfaces and boundary treatments
- the traffic generation implications and parking requirements of the proposed development

ENV 38

Planning permission will not be granted for new developments that will obstruct important views within, or views in or out of, conservation areas.

ENV 40

Development proposals that would adversely affect the historic skyline of the city centre will not be permitted.

*Reason/Explanation*

The skyline of Chester provides the first impression of the historic city for visitors. The most important elements of the historic skyline consist of the Cathedral Tower, the Town Hall Tower, church spires and the general roofscape which provides their context. It has remained relatively unscathed and should be protected to provide an indicator of the quality historic fabric of the city.

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All new development within the Chester City Conservation Area will be required to show a very high quality of design reflected in all its component parts which will contribute positively to the townscape of an historic city of international importance.

[Chester Characterisation Study A: Central Area](#), page 104:

The Market area offers potential for a more comprehensive redevelopment. This needs to be mindful of the following considerations:

- providing a strong and attractive frontage to St Martin's Way.
- respecting and enhancing views to the Town Hall from St Martin's Way.
- respecting the setting of listed buildings, notably the Town Hall, the Cathedral, the Guildhall and rear of buildings on Watergate Street, the Coach and Horses (on Northgate Street), the Odeon and the adjacent Georgian townhouses on the western side of St Martin's Way.
- preserving and respecting the identified buildings of townscape merit on Hunter Street, Northgate Street and the rear of Watergate Street.
- re-instating the historic grain of the area by providing north–south routes through the development blocks. Where possible these should align with historic routes such as the extension of Crook Street to Princess Street.
- Elevational design, materials, colours and heights should respond to the historic townscape and urban form of the city.

It is worth noting that the very recent [Draft HMO and Student Accommodation SPD Nov 2015](#) section 3 reiterates many of these principles:

D: The layout, appearance, scale, height and massing of new development must respect its setting and not unacceptably harm the character of the surrounding area.

- ... regard must be had to safeguarding the historic environment of the city centre, including its historic skyline.
- The cumulative impacts of the scale, height and massing of new developments will also be taken into account where relevant.

Finally, the [Sustainable Growth of Cathedral Cities and Historic Towns](#) page 53 states:

The importance of good design in historic places has been advocated in *Power of Place: The future of the historic environment* (English Heritage, 2000) and in the *Building in Context Toolkit* (CABE and English Heritage, 2001 now updated via a new website - <http://www.building-in-context.org/>). *Power of Place* highlighted that people place a high value on the historic environment and see it in its totality, rather than as a series of individual sites and buildings. It recommended the promotion of good design that enhances its context to create a rich historic environment for the future.

- 7.2 The Society's understanding of the requirements of these policies is that:
- 7.2.1 'Stock' generic solutions are unlikely to be good enough and fashionable designs may not survive reappraisal in the future.
- 7.2.2 To establish a roofscape in this area, the heights of buildings will need to respond to the existing contours, ie they will rise from west to east. Roofs will need to be very carefully designed, ie conventional flat roofs and crude monopitches will not be acceptable.
- 7.2.3 To respect and enhance the 'the general roofscape which provides their context' (ie of the Cathedral Tower, the Town Hall Tower and church spires (in this case of the Guildhall)) and to avoid competing with landmark buildings in height, new buildings should not exceed c 38 m AOD along the Inner Ring Road (ie below the ridge level of the Guildhall) and c 45 m in the east (ie eaves level of the Town Hall).

- 7.2.4 The style of buildings will need to vary across the development to respond to the surrounding existing properties. Larger new buildings will need to have their facades articulated in a way that both reflects their function and also responds to the scale of existing properties.
- 7.2.5 There should be an active street-level frontage to the Inner Ring Road where possible.
- 7.3 In general others will be better equipped to comment on the merits of the proposed new buildings as detailed designs emerge, although we would counsel against the suggestion of what appears to be a circular concrete veranda around the new Market Square. While such a structure may be appropriate in a sunny climate, it is likely to result in a damp and dismal ambience in rainy Britain (*cf* the street level of the 1970 Mercia Square development off Frodsham Street). For the trusses of the market hall, far worse models could be found than those of the city's old market hall; see for example Cheshire Image Bank image [CH 3470](#).
- 7.4 However, it is already quite clear that the proposed redevelopment of the St Martins Way frontage, with monolithic blocks for the hotel and anchor store having long, straight rooflines at c 45 m, does not meet the requirements set out in the Council policies quoted above. An impression of these buildings can be seen in the [Chester Northgate Summary Masterplan Report](#) page 26 and also in the contextual elevations for the student accommodation proposed on the adjacent Hunter Street car park site (planning application 15/04014/FUL).
- The location of the bus drop-off beneath the hotel on St Martins Way results in another sterile street-level façade and makes the frontage of the building unacceptably high.
  - Both the anchor store and hotel explicitly take the height of the existing hotel as a precedent. While they may be appropriate in a bigger city, they are wholly out of scale in Chester.
  - Although the Town Hall and Cathedral towers would still be visible, as a result of the removal of existing contours and the height of the new buildings they would not be surrounded by a 'contextual roofscape'.
  - The height and bulk of the new buildings would visually diminish nearby historic buildings, especially the Guildhall, which is a local landmark.
  - Wrapping the store uniformly in interlocking circles supposedly reminiscent of the arched bracing used in Chester's timber buildings does not respond to local character and results in bland facades that emphasise the height and bulk of the building. A glance at the [ACME website](#) shows very similar motifs again resulting in bland facades in their projects in Melbourne and Pforzheim.
  - Far from creating a 'strong and attractive' frontage to St Martins Way, the buildings give a defensive, 'fortress-like' impression.
- 7.5 One may contrast the student accommodation to be erected on the pre-existing platform of the Linenhall Stables site (13/03210/FUL). Whatever faults this building may have, it makes some concessions to the landscape and local character: its maximum height is c 38 m AOD, ie below the ridgeline of the Guildhall, the roofline

steps down from east to west to mirror the prevailing contours, and the St Martin's Way frontage is divided into bays with brickwork in alternating colours.

- 7.6 Finally, we are sceptical of the commercial value of making the proposed anchor store visible from the Inner Ring Road. The line of that road has always marked the very limit of retail activity on the west side of Chester. Since the sixteenth century occupation beyond it has been residential/professional/institutional and continues to be so today. Footfall is correspondingly normally relatively light, and additionally the weight of traffic discourages pedestrians. The construction of student housing opposite on the Linenhall site will presumably increase footfall somewhat but we should be surprised if this translated into perceptible extra business for a department store. Visibility from, and proximity to, existing shopping streets, especially Town Hall Square, is in our opinion far more important.

## **8.0 Suggested Mitigation and Enhancement**

- 8.1 The retention of Trinity Street, the restoration of the northern half of Crook Street and the reinstatement of the southern end of Goss Street as an access point, together with the retention of present ground- and street levels, enhancing north-south permeability, integration into the rest of the city and the maintenance of historical character.
- 8.2 Using the present Trinity Street car park as the principal service bay, linked to the central area of the development by underground passages carefully located to minimise damage to buried archaeology, to minimise unsightly surface service areas.
- 8.3 Restricting the two levels of the Princess Street car park to the east side of Trinity Street but extending them to include existing basemented areas closer to the Town Hall Square. Access would be directly from St Martins Way, as already envisaged, and possibly under Hamilton Place (where the archaeology appears to be already severely damaged in places) from the service road, using the existing basements of Hamilton House or Merchant House.
- 8.4 Possibly re-envisioning the development to restore Crook Street to its historical role as the 'spine' of the area and thus the principal 'mall', with shops rotated to face onto it where appropriate. The potential location of the north end of Crook Street, immediately opposite the market, should make this idea commercially attractive.
- 8.5 Locating the anchor store on the west side of Crook Street at the T junction with 'Parson's Lane', where it would be seen from Town Hall Square, and using the break-of-slope to permit a range of shops at basement level facing onto Trinity Street.
- 8.6 Possibly using the present hotel site for housing over the service bay; this could include parking for residents and possibly the public. Nicholas Street/St Martin's Way were historically residential and are becoming increasingly so again (see 7.6 above).
- 8.7 Designing new buildings in accordance with the criteria set out in section 6.3 above. It should be noted that the resultant rising roof levels would permit top-storey views from most of the site across the western part of the city to the Welsh hills.

- 8.8 A broad scheme of enhancement and interpretation to help people to appreciate and explore more of the totality<sup>††</sup> of Chester's authentic historical character, including:
- 8.8.1 Redisplaying the Roman Strongroom and interpreting it in relation to the column bases of the Headquarters building in the basement of 23 Northgate Street, which should be restored to public view, and St Peter's church and churchyard, which have occupied the south-eastern corner of the terrace on which the Headquarters building stood since Saxon times. (One has to ask what would be included in the proposed 'Roman Experience Centre'. If there is money for such a venture, we consider it would be better put towards the construction of a new city museum exploring Chester's history in all its fascinating complexity; see our suggested [heritage strategy for Chester](#)).
- 8.8.2 Resurfacing Crook Street and Trinity Street in high-quality materials (eg setts), also Weaver Street, and promoting the Whitefriars–Trinity Street route as a heritage trail around part of the Roman fortress. This would tie in with the regeneration of the Commonhall Street area. Interpretation should focus not just on evidential value – 'this was the line of the Roman fortress defences' – but on potential aesthetic/emotional value – 'through the passage of time the stone walls are now "romantic ruins": just bumps in the ground flanked by parallel roads but nevertheless still separating areas of the city that have different patterns of occupation'.
- 8.8.3 As part of 8.8.2, marking the line of the now-vanished Roman western and southern defences where they would have crossed Hunter Street and Princess Street, as well as that of the Roman west gate at the end of Watergate Street and the south gate at the end of Bridge Street. Note the symbolically significant location of the medieval churches of Holy Trinity and St Michael (and the now-vanished St Bridget, which stood opposite) at the sites of these gates.
- 8.8.4 Moving the obelisk commemorating Matthew Henry to Trinity Street. (Matthew Henry was a distinguished local late seventeenth-century non-conformist clergyman. His chapel, situated on the east side of Trinity Street, was one of the notable losses of the 1960s clearance of the area (see Cheshire Image Bank image [ch 3552](#)). An obelisk was erected in his honour in 1860 in St Bridget's churchyard but as a result of the construction of the Inner Ring Road is now isolated in the middle of the Grosvenor roundabout, where it is largely unseen).
- 8.8.5 Installing at least one interpretation panel at a central point in the Northgate development explaining the past of the area: Roman buildings, especially the unique 'Elliptical Building', the origins of its streets, the nineteenth-century slum 'courts', the Assay Office and Matthew Henry's chapel.
- 8.9 The changes suggested above should minimise the amount of archaeological disturbance. However, whatever the final form of the development, it will probably require small-scale archaeological excavation at a variety of sites. In themselves these are unlikely to produce meaningful 'stories' but they will add to the information gained from previous, much more extensive excavations carried out from the 1960s

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<sup>††</sup> 'Power of Place highlighted that people place a high value on the historic environment and see it in its totality, rather than as a series of individual sites and buildings'. (Quoted in [Sustainable Growth of Cathedral Cities and Historic Towns](#) page 53)

onwards. The latter have never been properly published, although reports on many aspects of them have been prepared over the years by members of the Historic Environment Team. The development offers the opportunity to bring these long-delayed publications to fruition, and grants should be obtained to allow the team to complete the outstanding reports and to incorporate the new information. These publications would deepen historical understanding of the area and would have the potential to increase public enjoyment.

## References

- Boughton, P J 1997 *Picturesque Chester: the city in art*. Chichester: Phillimore
- Ward, S W W et al 1994 *Excavations at Chester, Saxon occupation within the Roman fortress: sites excavated 1971–1981*. Chester City Council. (Chester Archaeology Excav Surv Rep 7)

Dr P Carrington FSA  
*For Chester Archaeological Society*  
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