

**CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY****COMMENTS ON NORTHGATE DEVELOPMENT (16/02282/OUT) – PART 2****SUMMARY**

*The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes the thorough desk-based assessment (DBA) by Oxford Archaeology North, which restates the high significance of the archaeology of the area and of Chester as a whole. The Society also supports the initial response (23-06-16) of the Archaeology Development Control Officer, some of whose arguments are repeated here. The DBA treats the surviving ancient streets as an integral part of the historic environment, by implication supporting our case for their preservation. A qualitative as well as quantitative approach to archaeology should be considered. Threats to well preserved and/or significant remains need to be clarified and development plans modified to ensure their preservation in situ or the remains investigated to extract the maximum practical information. Excavation and analysis should be carried out by staff with a thorough knowledge of local archaeology. Data from investigations should be analysed in relation to earlier discoveries and the results fully published in print. The Roman strongroom needs to be displayed to maximum advantage.*

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Prepare map to show heights of significant archaeology in the area, together with the nature of the remains, and highlight areas under particular threat, in order to allow designs to be modified. ([Section 3.0](#))
- Ensure that all groundworks proposals are accompanied by adequate archaeological information and, if preservation *in situ* is practical, that it is demonstrated in detail how this will be achieved. ([Para 4.1](#))
- If preservation of significant remains is impractical, ensure that a written scheme of investigation is agreed before determination. Excavation should be on a scale that will yield useful results. ([Para 4.2](#))
- Maintain streets on their existing/recent alignments and reuse existing service trenches wherever possible to minimise archaeological damage. Maintain a watching brief on all such trenches. ([Para 4.4](#))
- Ensure that whichever archaeological consultants/contractors are appointed, fieldwork and post-excavation analysis are carried out by personnel thoroughly familiar with the archaeology of Chester in general, with previous investigations in the development area, and who have the knowledge and resources to interpret the results in their wider context. ([Para 4.5](#))
- ‘Grey literature’ reports on investigations carried out in advance of and during the project should be deposited with the Cheshire Archaeological Planning Advisory Service and summaries added to the Chester Archaeological Database. However, where appropriate these results should also be combined with the draft definitive reports on the often much larger excavations carried out in the area in the 1960s and 1970s. The revised reports, setting the discoveries in their wider contexts (regional, national, international) should be published in print to maximise their contribution to wider archaeological and historical studies. There should also be high-profile archaeological information during construction. ([Sections 5.0](#) and [6.0](#))
- The remains of the Roman strongroom should be displayed to maximum advantage and brought into relationship with the column bases in the basement of 23 Northgate Street (owners/occupiers permitting). ([Section 7.0](#))

## DETAIL

### 1.0 An Holistic Approach to Chester's Significant Historic Environment

- 1.1 We welcome the very thorough desk-based assessment (DBA) of the area prepared by Oxford Archaeology North ([16/02282/OUT Technical Appendix 7.2](#)), which takes a multi-period and broad-minded approach. At a time when Chester's historic environment has perhaps its lowest profile for decades, it is refreshing to see a restatement of its significance and potential (eg 'international' for some of its Roman remains, 'major regional' for early medieval: para 2.2.2). It is also refreshing to see a holistic approach that encompasses (if only summarily) not only buried archaeology but also streetscape and documentary evidence.

### 2.0 Historic Streets Again

- 2.1 We have previously argued at length for the retention of historic streets in the area in accordance with Council policy, against the easy assertion of the scheme's promoters that the area is a *tabula rasa*. In support we would now quote para 3.6.6 of the DBA:

*The development site within the medieval town:* the majority of the modern streets and lanes within, or immediately adjacent to, the development site ... were in existence by the early twelfth century, if not well before. This includes the major thoroughfares of Northgate Street and Watergate Street, both with Roman origins, which form the eastern and southern boundaries of the study area; Parsons Lane (modern Princess Street; Crook Lane (now Hamilton Place; Trinity Lane (Trinity Street); Gerard's Lane (Crook Street); Goss Lane (Goss Street); and Crofts Lane/Linen Hall Street (beneath modern St Martin's Way).

Para 4.2.6 states:

... it can also be argued that the early medieval and later medieval settlement remains are integrated elements of the townscape within each period. As such, the placement of these remains within the wider context of those scientific archaeological investigations undertaken within Chester as a whole makes them very significant indeed.

We would argue that the integrating mechanism is, once again, the surviving historic street pattern.

### 3.0 Understanding the Threat to Archaeology

- 3.1 It is clear from numerous excavations that significant archaeology survives at a high level across much of the proposed development area. The DBA presents and discusses this information in the text and locates the interventions in fig 14. However, the manner of presentation makes the information difficult to comprehend. What is needed is a document that shows these levels in graphic form – in effect a 'contour map', supplemented by sections. On this could be overlain plans of the proposed development. This would make the areas of conflict highlighted in fig 19 of the DBA more intelligible.
- 3.2 We wholly support the efforts to reduce the loss of archaeology to 3% or less overall, which is currently considered good practice. However, we wonder whether a qualitative as well as quantitative approach might be useful. Thus the map suggested above in para 3.1 could show known and extrapolated remains, together with their condition (the latter approximating to the zones used in the DBA). These remains would mainly be Roman but would also include some early and later medieval structures. This approach would aid understanding of precisely what remains were under threat, how well they are believed to survive, and lead to clearer judgements as

to how much effort should be made to preserve them *in situ*. However, as stated in the DBA (para 4.1.2):

... it needs to be borne in mind that it seems very likely that many features of archaeological importance, currently wholly unknown and unquantifiable, survive as buried remains beneath the modern ground surface ...

#### 4.0 Mitigating Damage

- 4.1 As development proposals become more detailed, gaps in knowledge of the archaeology to be encountered will doubtless become clearer and should be filled by further evaluation as necessary. Remains should be preserved *in situ* wherever practical, and detailed groundworks statements should be required for each element of the development before determination, showing how this will be achieved. The 'cushion' between top of significant archaeology and new build should be sufficient to allow for machine churn. The impact of the bases of any tower cranes should also be allowed for.
- 4.2 Where preservation *in situ* is not practical, a written scheme of investigation should be agreed with the Development Control Archaeologist. The scale of excavation should take into account the likely extent of the remains, the intelligibility of what would survive after excavation, and the quality of any previous excavation. These factors may make it desirable to excavate more than is strictly required by the extent of proposed destruction. For example, any excavation needed of the north ends of the Roman First Cohort barracks in the Hamilton Place area should ensure that the opportunity is taken to understand properly the arrangement and function of these buildings, given that they do not follow the pattern of other barracks and that previous discoveries in the area have been very 'bitty'.
- 4.3 Fig 19 of the DBA shows two continuing areas of conflict between well preserved archaeology and car parking under the proposed market and hotel, despite raising floor- and street levels to c 29m, with the consequence of unacceptably high roof lines. One is tempted to suggest moving some of this parking to a multi-storey building on part of the present Crowne Plaza hotel site or even moving the hotel to the Linenhall stables site on the opposite side of St Martins Way. We have already identified the hotel as a large-scale use of the sort that the *Chester Characterisation Study* states is unsuitable for the Northgate area. The Linenhall stables site, by contrast is ideally suited, being large and flat, with car parking below street level. Planning permission for student housing was granted in 2013 but almost three years later there is no sign of construction being started. Such a move would open the way to the western end of the Princess Street-Hunter Street block being used for smaller-scale, more contextually sensitive development.
- 4.4 Streets should be retained on their existing alignments and existing service trenches along them should be reused wherever possible to minimise disturbance. Leaving Trinity Street on its present alignment would at a stroke remove the threat posed to the underlying archaeology by extending the underground car parking. A watching brief should be maintained whenever existing service trenches are re-excavated or new ones dug, as invaluable information can be gleaned from their sections. (An excellent example is the Roman *mansio* or official guest house, much of the plan of which was recovered from inspecting the sections of foundation trenches for new housing in Castle Street in 1976).

4.5 Recovering archaeological information is about people as well as procedures. Whichever consultants/contactors are appointed to carry out the programmes of investigation, it is essential that key personnel are familiar with the archaeology and history of Chester as a whole, of this area in particular, and with previous investigations. This familiarity is particularly important in getting the maximum amount of information out of watching briefs. The same team should deal with all phases of the development and be involved in both fieldwork and post-excavation analysis.

## **5.0 Dissemination of the Results**

5.1 Fieldwork will almost certainly produce data on remains of varying types, periods and significance. As a minimum, 'grey literature' reports should be deposited with the Cheshire Archaeological Planning Advisory Service and summaries added to the Chester Urban Archaeology Database. Some results may justify publication as stand-alone articles, for instance in the *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society*.

5.2 However, the results of much of the necessary fieldwork, and of evaluations already carried out, will only be fully intelligible in the light of the earlier, much larger, excavations carried out in the area, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. (We have already made this point regarding the remains discovered during the excavation on the site of the new theatre: see our response to the [CWAAC Archaeology Service Users Consultation](#) (2014), para 3.1.3). Contrary to the impression given in the DBA, para 3.2.1, the quality of data recorded during these excavations is generally very good, and draft reports have already been written on many aspects of them. The opportunity should be taken to complete this analysis and publish the synthesised results in full as a matter of urgency, while those with first-hand knowledge of the earlier work are still alive and able to offer support. This would help to restore Chester's position in the study of major British and European historic centres. We consider that there is a moral obligation on CWAAC to complete this work, given that it is the successor to the authorities that initiated the earlier investigations (Chester County Borough Council and Chester City Council).

## **6.0 Publicity**

6.1 During construction work members of the public should be informed about the history of the area and of archaeological discoveries. As a minimum there should be large information panels and a project blog, as was done during the joint Chester City Council/English Heritage excavations on the amphitheatre in 2004–6. Ideally there should also be viewing platforms. New discoveries should be publicised promptly, in an easily accessible way, and meaningfully. By contrast, the information panels about the theatre excavation, although colourful, gave no meaningful information, while the much more informative updates on archaeological discoveries on the Gorse Stacks bus interchange site were buried so deeply on the CWAAC website that they could only be found with the greatest difficulty.

## **7.0 Monument Enhancement**

7.1 Chester's minor historic monuments are neglected and are falling out of public consciousness. If the city is to attract more long-staying (and returning) visitors, this trend needs to be reversed. The Roman strongroom in Hamilton Place that lay underground at the back of the Headquarters Building should be displayed far more

prominently and intelligibly, and its relationship clarified to the massive bases and columns in the basement of 23 Northgate Street that supported the main hall of the Headquarters. Ideally the latter should be put on display again, as they were in the 1980s.

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*For Chester Archaeological Society*

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