

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON REVIEW OF COMMONHALL STREET DEVELOPMENT BRIEF

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes the production of this document and the opportunity to comment on it. The Society's stance is generally supportive, especially of the aim of proactively seeking opportunities for public realm improvements.

2.0 Analysis

- 2.1 We agree with the analysis of the problems faced by the area, many of which stem from the construction of new service roads (Weaver Street North and Pierpoint Court) through backland areas that were previously only partially built up, and from the widening of the existing streets, in the 1950s and 1960s. While the former may have improved access to properties on Watergate Street and Bridge Street, it severely damaged the historical urban grain: in particular, Weaver Street North severed the southern ends of the plots running from Watergate Street and effectively created new blocks. Many of the resultant blocks and areas have never been built up or enclosed and have been used as car parks, and unsightly service areas behind the street-front properties remain exposed. The widening of much of Weaver Street and Commonhall Street has led to a loss of their historical character and has tended to isolate them visually from their original, narrower ends joining Watergate Street and Bridge Street.

3.0 Assessment of the Historic Environment

- 3.1 As the review recognises, despite post-war changes the area remains important for the historic environment. We welcome the recognition of White Friars and Weaver Street, along with Trinity Street on the opposite side of Watergate Street, as historic streets (late Saxon?) following the line of the inside of the Roman defences; the origins of Commonhall Street and Pierpoint Lane are less certain but they are certainly medieval and could be on Roman lines. In addition to the Roman granaries and barracks that are mentioned, senior officers' houses lay between Watergate Street and Weaver Street North and unidentified, well preserved major buildings between Pierpoint Court and Bridge Street. It seems likely that the gardens around the Friars and Bank House preserve some memory of the court and other open spaces around the medieval Carmelite friary. The area also contained St Ursula's Hospital and the Commonhall, but their precise positions are unknown. In sum the historic environment of the area is of the greatest importance but poorly understood (see [Archaeological Character Zone 10](#), Key Considerations).

4.0 Aims

- 4.1 The aims of the development brief should include the preservation and enhancement of the surviving historic plan form, buildings and significant open spaces, and the creation of a high-quality built environment of appropriate scale in the recently created blocks that are presently waste in order to restore a sense of enclosure and continuity to streets. It may be worth producing a detailed heritage assessment of the area. Buried archaeology should be protected wherever possible from the groundworks of any new developments but opportunities should be taken to improve understanding.

5.0 Objectives

- 5.1 We agree with the principles of the seven objectives set out on the consultation panels (<http://chester.westcheshiregrowth.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/01/Commonhall-Street-Consultation-Boards-PDF.pdf>). We see Objectives 4 (New Infill Development), 6 (Public Realm Improvements) and 7 (Commercial Waste Storage) as interlinked and suggest specifically:
- 5.1.1 There should be back-of-pavement development on the west side of Pierpoint Court and south side of Commonhall Street, ie surrounding the 'Chester Gate' block. The former would screen the unsightly rear extensions of buildings fronting White Friars.
- 5.1.2 Service yards should be walled or fenced wherever practical.
- 5.1.3 The car park on the west side of Chronicle House should be walled, in order to provide a clearer distinction between public and private space and to give a sense of enclosure to the eastern side of Weaver Street, as provided by the wall around the Friars.
- 5.1.4 Car parking on Weaver Street and ideally Commonhall Street should be enclosed by extensions to the pavement at each end and the remaining carriageways should be paved in setts that are carried through to their junctions with Watergate Street and Bridge Street respectively. This would reduce the apparent width of these streets to an approximation of what they were formerly and create some degree of hierarchy, restore visual continuity with their narrow ends, and emphasise their historical character (*cf* White Friars).
- 5.2 A number of issues are not addressed satisfactorily or at all:
- 5.2.1 Parking for residents and businesses is recognised as a problem. Insofar as existing occupants use currently vacant plots, where will they find parking when these are built on?
- 5.2.2 The bridge linking the Rows across Pierpoint Lane is unsightly (compare the much better one across Commonhall Street, with open railings that allows views though), as is the access ramp that runs up to the bridge and partially blocks the lane. The bridge should be replaced and ideally the ramp should be removed (as is proposed for the ramp that partially blocks Goss Street). However, to rely on the passage north of Old Hall Place for disabled/goods access to the Rows seems unreasonable. Are there any passages between nearby Row properties that could be opened up or created to replace the ramp?
- 5.2.3 As part of heritage interpretation, the setting of the Roman column base (apparently part of a senior officer's house) in the sunken yard near the passage to Watergate Row needs to be improved and attention drawn to it.

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