

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON CHESTER RACECOURSE DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS (APPLICATIONS 18/02677/OUT, 18/02678/FUL, 18/02679/FUL)

SUMMARY

These proposals covers an extensive area between the Water Gate, the railway viaduct, New Crane Street and the Roodee, with an extension north of the viaduct. This response deliberately confines itself to the impact of the proposals on Chester's heritage and does not consider traffic, noise or other important matters of amenity and safety. The area is potentially an important one for discovering more archaeologically about important but poorly understood aspects of the city's past and for the ready appreciation of the significance of its geographical location. Therefore:

- *A robust archaeological programme is warranted, with a special focus on remains earlier than the later 18th century;*
- *Any new buildings need to be located so as preserve the important views from the City Walls across the Roodee;*
- *The scale of proposed buildings needs to be reconsidered to ensure that they do not compete with buildings within the Walls; at least one storey needs to be removed from the Grandstand, and the 'New Lane' building needs to be redesigned.*

DETAILS

1.0 Archaeology

1.1 The Master Plan area formed an 'antechamber' to Chester's post-medieval port and, apart from the construction of the railway viaduct, was broadly stable in plan from the later 18th century until large-scale demolition and road realignment in the 1960s swept away virtually most elements of the established pattern. Prior to the westward shift of the channel of the Dee at the start of the 18th century, the south-eastern end of the area is presumed to have been part of the site of the city's medieval and early post-medieval port, although no physical evidence of this has yet been recognised. The supposed Roman jetty found on the gasworks site in the 19th century may have traversed the area, but this remains conjecture.

1.2 Research aims

- The Romans are likely to have chosen the site of Chester, at the head of an estuary, for a legionary fortress because of its potential transport links, and learning more about its maritime infrastructure would contribute to national perspectives on connectivity in Roman Britain.
- The city was the largest port on the west coast of England after Bristol through the Middle Ages until the rise of Liverpool in the later 17th century, and again learning more about its maritime infrastructure would contribute to national perspectives; this includes the buildings shown immediately outside the Water Gate on early maps and the large building near the crane and the timber yard at the north-western end of the area shown on de Lavaux's map of 1745.
- A study of the housing that spread across most of the area in the second half of the 18th century would contribute to knowledge of an important aspect of the history of the Industrial period.
- Well dated palaeoenvironmental evidence for earlier courses of the river is a desideratum, as is that for silting episodes and the process of post-medieval land reclamation.

These aims are set out in detail in the [Archaeological Research Framework for Chester](#), *passim* and in Archaeological Character Zones [53](#) and [54](#).

- 1.3 Because of the small number of previous excavations in the area, it is uncertain what survives (or even precisely what existed before the middle of the 18th century), in what condition and at what depth. Structural remains predating the later 18th century may have been damaged or destroyed by cellars associated with the subsequent housing, although it is also possible that these were just dug through reclamation deposits. Again, the impact of later 20th-century demolition, roads, services and buildings on the foundations of 18th- and 19th-century structures is unknown.
- 1.4 In the light of paragraphs 1.2–3 above the proposals justify a robust but flexible archaeological response. The strategy to be pursued will necessarily depend on the progress of the planning applications, the precise location of approved works, and the proposed foundation design(s) and services for new buildings (and may in turn affect these) but may include:
- Pre- and post-determination evaluation;
 - Use of existing and future borehole data;
 - Hand excavation of small areas, including at the bottom of cellars;
 - Area stripping and recording.

The advice of the APAS Archaeological Development Control Manager should be sought and heeded, if this has not already been the case.

2.0 Design

- 2.1 As mentioned above, extensive demolition and road realignment in the 1960s swept away virtually all of the historic built environment within the area. There are no buildings of merit in the Master Plan area, and the extensive car parks are a major detractor. The key elements in the landscape adjoining the area are the City Walls and Water Gate, Watergate Square, the railway viaduct, and the Roodee. Of these the [Chester Characterisation Study Section J – The Roodee](#) states:

The Roodee character area is critical to the heritage of Chester as a whole. Its character is defined by its open form within the loop of the River Dee and the continuation of its historic use as a racecourse. Its green setting, *long vistas*, and *relationship with the City Walls and Watergate are also crucial*. [Our italics]The railway viaduct also has a strong visual presence.

Aside from the aesthetic angle, the intervisibility of these features makes clear the geographical logic behind Chester's foundation as a centre of power and communication and its continued existence as a 'crossroads of Britain'; it is essential to the ready understanding of essential aspects of the city's history.

- 2.2 Ironically it is the open car parks that are the key detractors of the area that have opened up wider views from the City Walls near the Water Gate across the Roodee to the river and beyond. There is a strong concern that the proposed line of buildings along New Crane Street and their linking bridges may close off these views, making them accessible only to people who enter the racecourse site. The placement of buildings needs to take this into account, and a satisfactory solution needs to be demonstrated through accurate CGIs.

- 2.3 It is difficult to judge the height and scale of the proposed buildings relative to the City Walls and especially the buildings along Nuns Road, Walls Road and Lower Watergate Street. The City Walls and skyline from the footbridge and railway viaduct are listed as a key view in the publication draft of the CWaC *Local Plan Part 2*, 24 no 19 and 259. More accurate contextual elevations and CGIs extending within the City Walls are required. However, almost certainly at least one storey needs to be removed from the Grandstand so that it does not compete with buildings on higher ground within the City Walls, thus preserving the tiered effect that is a distinctive feature of the southern and western sides of the city.
- 2.4 The proposed Events Building and Grandstand offer some interesting shapes, although the quality of materials and detailing will be crucial to the final impression. However, from New Crane Street the 'New Lane' building appears to be a massive, insensitive and anonymous cuboid based on a horizontal floorplate that denies the curvature and sloping topography characteristic of the area immediately outside the Water Gate. The proposed multi-story car park north of the railway viaduct will need careful treatment to fit comfortably in a residential area, especially adjacent to the cottages on Kitchen Street.

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For Chester Archaeological Society

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