

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON PLANNING APPLICATION FOR LOWER BRIDGE STREET (QUICK'S GARAGE) (18/04893/FUL)

Summary

The Society welcomes the principle of the demolition of this poor-quality 1960s building and its replacement by housing with an element of retail. Archaeological information about the site is minimal and, given that considerable reduction of ground levels is envisaged, pre-determination evaluation is essential, followed by a programme of archaeological work as necessary. Although it has some merits, the envisaged building suffers from the same fundamental flaws as its predecessor and needs to be redesigned to reflect the complex topography of this highly conspicuous site

Detailed Comments

1.0 Archaeology

- 1.1 The site lies in Chester's Area of Archaeological Importance and one of the Primary Character Zones of the *Chester Archaeological Plan*, and the treatment of archaeological remains should be given appropriate weight. The proposed development envisages considerable reduction in ground levels in both north–south and east–west directions. Currently there is a lack of detailed information on previous occupation of the site and the survival of remains; thus it is difficult to assess what archaeological impact the development might have. In general Roman occupation east of Lower Bridge Street and north of Duke Street seems to have been slight but could include both cremation burials and interments. Whether there was any Early Medieval occupation or activity is wholly unknown, but St Olave's Church is a pre-Conquest dedication and tenth-century cellared buildings were found at on the opposite side of Lower Bridge Street (nos 26–42) at some distance from the street frontage; similar buildings could well have existed on the current site. In the fourteenth century the part of the site next to St Olave's was occupied by the house of the royal official Richard the Engineer; this was a prestigious area adjacent to the Castle. Otherwise little is known of the medieval and post-medieval buildings, although some at least had the characteristics of true 'Rows', and it is clear that there were considerable changes in the nineteenth century (Brown, *The Rows of Chester*, 3, 15; Boughton, *Picturesque Chester*, 106, ill 169). There does not seem to have been any archaeological excavation or other recording before the construction of the garage in the early 1960s, although a medieval window was photographed adjacent to the south retaining wall of St Olave's church and may still survive.
- 1.2 Ground level reduction for the construction of the garage may have destroyed many remains of earlier occupation, but better survival is possible towards the south and east sides of the site. Given the present lack of information, there needs to be a programme of pre-determination trial excavation, cut through the concrete slab floors, to establish the date, character and significance of surviving archaeology. The example of Storyhouse has shown that understandable remains can survive on sites where destruction has been assumed to be total. Redesign of the development may be necessary to keep losses to an acceptable level, and construction should be preceded by an appropriate archaeological programme. Interpretation of the results should be accompanied by thorough documentary, cartographic, pictorial and photographic research.

2.0 Visual impact

- 2.1 The present building is identified in *the Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study* as a key detractor (page 82). More specifically it states: ‘There are a few larger footprint modern buildings that appear out of scale in this context: the office block on Lower Bridge Street/Duke Street ...’ (pages 72-3). It also observes: ‘If the Lower Bridge Street/Duke Street 1960s office site was redeveloped then there is some opportunity for more contemporary architecture of distinct style. This must respect the corner of these two streets, follow a back-of-pavement building line and provide a vertical proportion and subdivision of elevations to provide a richness of interest to match the rest of Lower Bridge Street. The falling topography offers an opportunity for greater height providing that this does not detract from surrounding listed buildings’ (page 85). Finally, ‘The style of building throughout the Lower Bridge Street area is generally that of separately designed and distinct buildings that collectively form an adjoining terrace.’ (page 75).
- 2.2 The proposed design makes a number of concessions to its setting: the use of brown brick with corbels and string courses, the use of recessed bays to break up the façade, and retaining the overhang of the present building as a reminder of the colonnades seen in earlier buildings. These characteristics should be carried forward.
- 2.3 However, in terms of height, scale, massing and other aspects of design the proposed scheme perpetuates the faults of the present building highlighted in the *Characterisation Study* – indeed it is worse: it imposes a level floorplate that pays no regard to the steeply sloping topography; the uniform floor- and roof levels, emphasised by the corbel and string courses, indicate that, despite the division into bays, this is in fact a single, out-of-scale building; the excessive height detracts from neighbouring buildings, especially St Olave’s Church, and is particularly obtrusive when seen from the Old Dee Bridge and the foot of Lower Bridge Street (as is evident in the *Design and Access Statement*, pages 63–4); and the height of the first floor at the south-western corner is out of keeping with the domestic scale of the street. The large window openings again do not reflect the character of the street and are reminiscent of those in the apartment block under construction on City Road adjacent to the canal. In short, this is merely a ‘tweaked’ version of a standard apartment design that pays little regard to its critical setting. In terms of materials the effect is drab and monochromatic compared with neighbouring buildings.
- 2.4 The *Design and Access Statement* page 39 shows that other configurations were considered, involving distinct blocks of varying height and floor level (especially option C); these better reflect the character of the street and the recommendations of the *Characterisation Study*. The present configuration should be rejected and one of these options pursued. However, overall height should be restricted four storeys, including a penthouse level which should be set back. Competence in proportions and detailing will make the difference between success and failure.

Note: The *Planning Statement* accompanying the application refers to a heritage statement. Unfortunately this does not seem to have been posted on the CWaC website with the other documents at the time that these comments were drafted and it has not been possible to take account of it.

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For Chester Archaeological Society
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