

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON NORTHGATE PHASE 1 DRAFT PROPOSALS APRIL 2019

Summary

The abandonment for commercial reasons of the grandiose 2015 Northgate proposals has led to the adoption of a more piecemeal approach. The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes some of the changes that are emerging. However, there remain fundamental elements of the scheme that damage the city's unique character and do not comply with clearly worded Council policies and advice on urban design and conservation areas. These relate to the retention of historic streets on their traditional alignments, the height of buildings and respect for topography, skyline and landmarks. We remain concerned that determination to bring this long-delayed scheme to fruition could result in objections and policies being ignored if they stand in the way of the present design. We do not wish to see a development that, like the existing Forum complex, might initially be welcomed but whose faults would soon be regretted and would be very difficult to rectify in the future. We therefore urge the Council as a minimum to adopt the improvements listed below.

Key Recommendations

Phase 1

- Protect nationally important buried archaeology, especially the well preserved Roman barracks under the 'pocket park' at the western end of the site and bring the results of the previous nationally important excavations in the Princess Street–Hunter Street area to full publication.
- Situate the floor level of the proposed market/cinema as low as possible without damage to archaeology.
- Respect Princess Street as one of the historical streets of the city: thus replace proposed steps by an even gradient, with a retaining wall or terrace at the western end of the proposed market if necessary, to maintain views; so far as practical restore its historical width and alignment to restore the street hierarchy, and give distinctive surfacing, eg setts, to indicate its character.
- Introduce a large set-back on the St Martin's Way frontage of the proposed car park at about 36–38m AOD (as also found on the Crowne Plaza hotel); break up the proposed green walls into smaller panels to reduce the apparent bulk of the building.
- Reflect upon the proposed design of the market and cinema to ensure that they will preserve and enhance the city's character and stand the test of time

Phase 2

- Retain Trinity Street and other historic streets (Goss Street, Hamilton Place), reinstate the northern end of Crook Street; so far as practical restore their historical widths and alignments to restore a hierarchy of streets,, and give distinctive surfacing, eg setts, to indicate their character.

General

- Ensure roof levels of max 38m AOD along St Martin's Way, rising to max 45m AOD adjacent to the Town Hall to respect topography and roofscape.

Detail

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes another opportunity to comment on this scheme, especially at pre-application stage. However, our ability to do so is inevitably limited by the lack of detailed information at this stage and by the fact that the proposals relate only to Phase 1 (Princess Street–Hunter Street), even though in fundamental ways Phases 1 and 2 are inseparable. The present proposals are still based on the 2013 and 2015 schemes, which were deeply flawed in terms of compliance with Council policies and advice in their impact on buried archaeology and especially on the historic townscape. Because of the failure of the previous schemes and the increasing visible dereliction of the area we recognise that there will be mounting public pressure to ‘get something done’. There is therefore a considerable risk that legitimate concerns will be ignored and a poor-quality scheme implemented that will be regretted later.

2.0 Background

2.1 The Northgate site lies in the middle of the city centre conservation area. If the development goes ahead it will be the largest scheme in the centre of Chester since the 1960s, encompassing one-fourteenth of the walled city and one-seventh of its busiest area; it will be highly visible and will have a major impact on the city’s architectural character. For this reason, and because as a Council-backed scheme it ought to be exemplary, it needs to be of the highest quality.

2.2 The centre of Chester is situated on a hill in a bend of the River Dee, with consequent slopes to the west and south; these slopes permit views in and out of the city centre and result in a tiered effect in building facades and roofscape that form an important part of its distinctive visual character. On the western side of the city the greatest fall between the Northgate Street–Bridge Street ‘spine’ and the inner ring road lies in the Northgate area. The area is domed, with flatter land towards Northgate Street/Town Hall Square, and this topography is reflected in the fact that, until the 1960s, all the largest buildings were situated on the east side (Odeon, Town Hall, Market, Taylor’s Garage); further west smaller buildings stepped down the slope. As elsewhere in the city centre, the ‘skeleton’ of the area is formed by streets and open areas of Roman, Saxon and medieval origin (Town Hall Square, Princess Street, Hamilton Place, Goss Street, Crook Street, Trinity Street). The degree of survival and intelligibility of Chester’s multi-period street plan is one of the city’s major historical characteristics and is of national importance.

2.3 After pre-war slum clearance the area south of Princess Street was earmarked for large-scale council-led redevelopment. The present buildings were constructed and brought into use progressively through 1960s. The Crowne Plaza hotel and bus station (north of Princess Street) were added in the 1980s and changes were made to the Forum complex in the 1990s. Replacement of the Forum has now been discussed for almost twenty years, suggesting that it has not been considered a success, and the bus station has already been moved to Gorse Stacks. Until the present iteration, schemes for replacement envisaged much more retail space but the market for that has collapsed and the latest version envisages more housing, alongside a public market and cinema. This is reminiscent of the pattern of settlement found up to the 1930s

2.4 The 1960s Forum development destroyed the historical character of the site: it obliterated the natural topography by imposing a level floorplate across the slope, while the underground car parks were massively destructive of well preserved archaeological remains, in some cases of international importance. The medieval northern half of Crook Street was removed and the street hierarchy obliterated, with all the historical streets in the area being widened and straightened. However, the potentially insensitive skyline was to some extent mitigated by the fall in roof levels from the Forum offices to the market, the piazza outside the Gateway Theatre, and the Trinity Street car park. This effect was destroyed by the construction of the out-of-scale hotel and accompanying bridge over Trinity Street. The 2015 scheme would have obliterated Trinity Street and destroyed any underlying archaeology, extended a level floorplate across the whole of the development area (including streets), added further out-of-scale buildings on the St Martins Way frontage and flattened much of the roofline.

3.0 Comments

3.1 Our comments focus on the heritage aspects of scheme – evidential and aesthetic – and repeat points already argued at greater length in our comments on previous iterations.

3.2 From the Council policies and advice quoted in section 4.0 below we draw the following summary conclusions:

- Buried archaeology needs to be preserved *in situ* as far as possible.
- Historical streets, their alignments and widths, should be protected and restored where practical.
- The height, scale and mass of new buildings should be appropriate to their location, have active frontages, take account of topography and respect landmarks.

3.3 Therefore:

3.3.1 The foundations and below-ground services of any buildings in the Princess Street–Hunter Street area need to avoid buried archaeology, especially the fragile, well preserved remains of Roman barracks under the ‘pocket park’. We also urge that the opportunity should be taken to bring to full publication the results of the 1979–81 Princess Street–Hunter Street excavations while the latter are still in living memory. These excavations brought to light a major Roman building, the understanding of which could shed light on the role of the Chester fortress in Britain. The north end of the building was excavated in advance of the Storyhouse development and published in the *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society* vol 88 for 2018.

3.3.2 The proposed steps should be removed from Princess Street and its contours left unchanged out of respect for its status as one of the medieval streets of the city and to preserve views and topographical character. If necessary there could be a retaining wall or terrace at the south-west corner of the market. The floorplate of the market should be situated as low as possible without damaging archaeology to minimise any such terracing.

3.3.3 We welcome the retention of Trinity Street and the removal of the bridge to the Crowne Plaza hotel in Phase 2. Design of Phase 2 should incorporate the reinstatement of the northern part of Crook Street, the restoration of historical

alignments and widths so far as possible to recreate a street hierarchy, and appropriate surfacing, eg setts; this should also go for Princess Street.

- 3.3.4 In accordance with the topography of the site, to maintain the tiered appearance that is a character of the western and southern sides of the city centre and to respect landmarks, the maximum height of buildings on the St Martin's Way frontage should not exceed that of the ridge of the Guildhall (c 38m AOD, while to the east it should not exceed the height of the eaves of the Town Hall (c 45 m AOD). Neither the height of the Crowne Plaza hotel nor that of the student accommodation north of Hunter Street should be taken as precedents. Regarding the hotel, see the comments in the Chester Characterisation Study quoted below, section 4.2. Planning Committee rejected the Hunter Street scheme (15/04014/FUL) on the grounds that it was out of scale, although the scheme was allowed by the Government Inspector on appeal. With regards to respect for topography, the comments of Historic England and the CWaC Conservation Officer on the proposed replacement for Quicks Garage on an analogous site in Lower Bridge Street should be noted (18/04893/FUL).
- 3.3.5 We do not wish to get involved in detailed comment on architectural design. However, it is necessary to draw attention to the comments in the Historic England report *Sustainable Growth of Cathedral Cities and Historic Towns* (2014) page 63, 5.18:

Within the city centre there are some large mid-late 20th century redevelopment schemes notably the Grosvenor Centre and the area around the Market Hall as well as numerous examples of contemporary 'infill' developments on smaller sites. In terms of aesthetics and appearance several of these have always had a completely different character to the grain and scale of the old city yet at the time of their construction they were praised as fine examples of modern design well suited to their context. Now, a mere forty or so years later, their scale, materials and appearance are viewed in a very different light and the (not unrealistic) hope is that their proposed replacements will follow the lead set by more recent schemes that are genuinely innovative in their design whilst preserving and enhancing the city's character.

Can it be convincingly argued that the proposed superimposed cuboids of the proposed market building and cinema are 'genuinely innovative in their design', 'preserv[e] and enhance[e] the city's character' and, unlike the 1960s Forum, will stand the test of time?

- 3.3.6 The least problematical place for a car park is alongside St Martin's Way (*cf* the Trinity Street car park, built in the 1960s and now forming an undercroft to the Crowne Plaza hotel). However, as the design stands it is unacceptable in height, scale and massing. At the minimum there needs to be a substantial setback on the St Martin's Way frontage at a height of c 36–8 m (*cf* the adjacent hotel). The use of green walls is imaginative, but the suggested bold pattern only serves to emphasise the bulk of the building. The walls might look better if they were broken up into separate panels. We are supportive of the introduction of an active frontage at street level.
- 3.3.7 Phase 2 needs to plan for the eventual replacement of the 'key detractor' of the Crown Plaza hotel, even though that may be a decade or more ahead. Thought

should be given as to how the land would be used, and especially if the car parking on the site would be retained. We have previously suggested that the Linenhall car park site might be suitable for a hotel.

- 3.3.8 Finally, given that the *Chester Characterisation Study* has identified the area as unsuitable for large-scale developments, has the possibility of moving the market back to its old position alongside the Town Hall been considered, leaving just the cinema on the old bus exchange site?

4.0 Policies and Advice

- 4.1 The following policies in the *CWaC Local Plan Part 2* are relevant to this development:

CH1

2. protecting historic routes and grain in the city centre, and reinstatement achieved where possible;
3. recognising archaeology as critical environmental capital;
5. creating strong and active frontages, appropriate in scale and height to the wider townscape, along the inner ring road and canal corridors;

CH5

Development proposals within the city centre and its approaches will be supported where:

1. it can be demonstrated that they have been sensitively designed, to have regard to their location and the character of the surrounding area, including the height of surrounding buildings; roof treatment; backs of properties; location of ventilation equipment and plant; fire escapes and service areas;
2. it can be demonstrated that Chester's key views, landmarks, gateways and historic skyline will not be adversely affected in line with Local Plan (Part Two) policy CH 6;
3. they show careful attention to spaces between buildings, scale, height, mass and architectural detail, respecting the building lines, building hierarchy and urban grain;
4. they use high quality and durable materials appropriate to the building and its setting;
6. they will not result in the loss of any historic routes. Where possible, historic routes should maintain their existing widths and alignments unless historic evidence suggests otherwise. Proposals which would result in the reinstatement of any historic routes will be supported.

CH6

Existing tall buildings in Chester do not set a policy precedent for similar development on adjacent sites, unless they are contextually appropriate in that locality or townscape setting and sit comfortably within the topography of the area.

- 2.42 Existing landmarks should be protected and enhanced [F= Guildhall, S = Town Hall]. New development should contribute positively to views and not obscure, or provide an inappropriate setting for key buildings or landscape features. Nor should they compete with existing landmarks in terms of height, bulk or level of detail.

Key views

18. Panoramic city skyline from Grosvenor Bridge

19. Roodee, City Walls and skyline from footbridge and railway viaduct

- 2.43 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.
- 2.44 Taller buildings should be contextually appropriate in that locality or townscape setting, and sit comfortably within the topography of the area.
- 2.47 Consideration will be given to the removal of tall buildings that do not make a positive contribution and to their replacement by buildings that are lower in scale, height and higher quality design. This is especially the case where buildings adversely impact on key views into the city or key gateways, or on the setting of conservation areas or listed buildings.

DM 46

In line with Local Plan (Part One) policy ENV 5, development within or affecting the setting of conservation areas, as identified on the policies map, will be expected to achieve a high quality of design, making a positive relationship between the proposed and existing context by taking account of:

1. topography, landscape setting and natural features;
2. existing townscapes, local landmarks, views and skylines;
3. the architecture of surrounding buildings;
6. the established layout and spatial character of building plots, the existing alignments and widths of historic routes and street hierarchy (where physically and historically evident);
8. the scale, height, bulk and massing of adjacent townscape;
9. architectural, historical and archaeological features and their settings;

DM47

Development within or affecting the setting of listed buildings will be expected to achieve a high quality of design, making a positive relationship between the proposed and existing context by taking account of:

6. topography, landscape setting and natural features;
7. existing townscapes, local landmarks, views and skylines;
8. the architecture of surrounding buildings;
11. established layout and spatial character;
12. the scale, height, bulk and massing of adjacent townscape;
13. architectural, historical and archaeological features and their settings; and
14. the need to retain historic boundary and surface treatments

DM 50

17.21 Archaeological remains are a valuable but fragile part of our heritage, and once destroyed they can never be replaced. Such remains include not just finds but also traces of buildings, layers of soil and entire landscapes. Maintaining this resource is an important part of the Council's commitment to conservation.

- 4.2 The following comments in the *Chester City centre and Approaches Characterisation Study* are also relevant:

Fig 3.4 characterises the whole of the Northgate area as 'negative'.

Page 61: 'The Crowne Plaza Hotel and car park, which is highly visible because of its size and bulk. The hotel was built on top of an existing car park structure and has a very thin and crude veneer of "Chester Black and White". Its design pays no heed to the grain of the city.

Page 68 'A8. Market: Negative. City centre edge, indoor market, shopping mall, theatre and open bus station. 1960s buildings with some interesting artwork. Large scale uses out of scale with the townscape within the Walls'.

- 4.3 The Historic England report *Sustainable Growth of Cathedral Cities and Historic Towns* (2014) page 63, 5.18 with respect to Chester comments on the:

'potentially 'transitory' nature of architectural styles and taste. Within the city centre there are some large mid-late 20th century redevelopment schemes notably the Grosvenor Centre and the area around the Market Hall as well as numerous examples of contemporary 'infill' developments on smaller sites. In terms of aesthetics and appearance several of these have always had a completely different character to the grain and scale of the old city yet at the time of their construction they were praised as fine examples of modern design well suited to their context. Now, a mere forty or so years later, their scale, materials and appearance are viewed in a very different light and the (not unrealistic) hope is that their proposed replacements will follow the lead set by more recent schemes that are genuinely innovative in their design whilst preserving and enhancing the city's character'.

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