

## CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

### RESPONSE TO CWaC GROWTH & PROSPERITY 'NEW WAYS OF WORKING' CONSULTATION

#### Summary

- *The Society's response to this consultation focuses on two areas: Museums (specifically the Grosvenor Museum at Chester) and on Conservation and Design.*
- *The borough's heritage is something that the present generation holds in trust; it has a responsibility to preserve it for future generations. In the form of historic buildings and museum displays, this heritage has the potential to enrich residents' lives as much as any other aspect of culture (eg theatre). The economic benefits of heritage, especially in the case of Chester, should be seen as primarily indirect; it is what distinguishes the city from other shopping centres, as well as attracting visitors for its own sake.*
- *Despite recent investment, eg in the City Walls and Amphitheatre, Chester is failing to maximise the potential of its heritage for residents or visitors. The Grosvenor Museum now compares unfavourably with museums in neighbouring cities and other 'heritage destinations'. In terms of development, huge mistakes have been made and continue to be made that damage the city in many people's eyes and which we shall have to live with for decades to come. At the moment Chester fails to live up to the boast on the signboards that it is an 'international heritage city'.*
- *The Society suggests that CWaC should develop a clear vision for preserving and presenting the heritage of the city in accordance with the aspirations of the One City Plan, for the benefit of residents and as a key component in plans to increase its prosperity.*
- *This vision should include:*
  - *A new or greatly expanded museum, sustainably and adequately financed and with adequate specialist staff, to serve as a focal point for discovering and understanding the history of the city, its communities and its region;*
  - *A well protected historic environment to which both large- and small-scale redevelopment is sensitive, ensured by adequate local expertise.*

#### Detailed comments

##### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Chester's heritage is recognised in the *One City Plan* as central to its character, attractiveness and future prosperity. In all the word 'heritage' appears 27 times, and 'historic' 71 times.

Specifically, on page 7 we read:

It is somewhere that people want to live, visit, work and study because they know it is a city with a unique historic environment.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Chester Archaeological Society was founded in 1849, and from its inception it has campaigned for the proper care of archives, archaeology, and historic buildings and for sympathetic, high-quality new design. See <http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/about.html>.

On page 8:

...we must raise our national and international profile to compete effectively with other similar historic cities as an increasingly desirable and distinctive place for people to live, invest in, visit and study’.

However, on page 19:

Chester’s cultural and heritage infrastructure is in decline – with historic areas including the City Walls and Towers, Cathedral, and Castle in a state of poor repair and suffering from years of underinvestment. These assets are invaluable to Chester - symbolising its historic and cultural evolution and providing a substantial contribution to the city’s income and reputation. The importance of the visitor economy to Chester’s future cannot be understated. In 2007 tourism brought 8.4 million visitors to Chester who spent approximately £500 million in the city and as such, the assets underpinning Chester’s unique appeal should be maintained in the interest of all.

However, preservation alone risks ignoring the potential for creating truly world-class experiences within the city’s historic areas. At present visitors often leave disappointed and residents note the decline, with the reality of Chester failing to match people’s expectations. Also, the delivery of high-quality contemporary development has been slow, with vacant sites and low-quality environments in the city resulting in fragmentation and decline.

The economic importance of the city’s historic environment and of heritage tourism has recently been re-emphasised by the city’s MP in his note ‘Tourism’s vital role in Chester economy’ on 31 July 2014 (<http://www.chestertmp.com/2014/07/31/business-column-tourisms-vital-role-in-chester-economy>).

## 2.0 *Museums*

- 2.1 The Grosvenor Museum holds a wide range of collections: archaeology, numismatics, clocks, silver, paintings and prints, costume and natural history. These overwhelmingly relate to and illustrate the history of the city and its region, and some are of international importance. However, because of the limitations of space, only a small proportion are on display; and while the technical standards of display are good, it could be argued that the underlying concept – with separate displays for different types of object – is old-fashioned. Crucially, the building itself feels small, cramped and inappropriate. The last major capital investment took place about 1990 but was limited to strengthening the upper floors: it did not enlarge or change the layout of the buildings or radically alter the nature of the displays.
- 2.2 By contrast, Liverpool and Shrewsbury, for example, now have new museums, as have, further afield, Lincoln and Newcastle upon Tyne, while the Manchester Museum has recently been refurbished and the Museum of Science and Industry continues to expand. Consequently, while the Grosvenor Museum was at the leading edge of museum design in the early 1950s through innovative displays, it has now been left behind.
- 2.3 The Chester Archaeological Society has a proprietary interest in the Grosvenor Museum, having been jointly responsible for founding it in 1886, alongside the Natural Science Society. However, we consider that, to compete effectively, Chester now needs a new museum of potentially European stature, either through the currently

preferred option of infilling on the present site or elsewhere (eg on the site of Dee House or within the Northgate development).

- 2.4 In our view the concept behind a new museum should be to tell the story of Chester through the ages, from prehistory to the present day, as a Roman fortress, Saxon *burh* and county town, and putting it in appropriate geographical contexts, from international to regional. There could still be specialist displays of silver, paintings, natural history etc, but the key element in creating this 'timeline' would be archaeological, albeit with other materials drawn on as necessary. Overall, far more items would be on permanent display than at present. The displays should be carefully designed to link in with historic buildings and monuments in the city, eg the City Walls, Amphitheatre, Roman Gardens, St John's Church, Cathedral, Rows, etc, many of which have recently seen significant investment. Thus, the museum would be the focal point for discovering and understanding the history of the city and would hopefully become the main objective of a day trip to Chester, as is the case with other new museums.
- 2.5 The museum needs to exist for the benefit of residents as well as visitors, and an essential part of its role should also be to record and present the histories of the city's more recent, industrial age, communities and of the 'Chester villages'. It might be possible to transfer the local history function of Chester History and Heritage to the proposed new museum. Much of the family history research that is carried out there can now be done online, while detailed queries could be dealt with at the Record Office. St Michael's Church might then be used for temporary exhibitions, relieving pressure on space in the Grosvenor Museum.
- 2.6 A range of activities to enhance museum services are listed in the consultation (Question 6). Many of these are already carried out, at the Grosvenor Museum or elsewhere, and all are worth trying. However, by themselves, they will not solve the problem of a fundamentally outdated and inadequate museum. Crucially, for the general public, a visit to the museum needs to generate an air of excitement and an expectation of learning about new discoveries. In planning for the future the needs of the academic community should be taken into account as well as those of the general public: it is their new insights that advance our understanding of the city's history and allow displays to be refreshed.
- 2.7 Section 3 of the consultation hints that the borough's museums should be run by an independent charitable trust. Given the continuing downward pressure on public spending, diversity of funding should certainly be sought, although this may be more successful for capital than for revenue expenditure. Moreover, removal of museums from the 'merry-go-round' of local government management reorganisations and reviews may also be beneficial. However, trusts should not be regarded as a panacea: some have indeed been successful but others have failed (eg the Hadrian's Wall Trust <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-26712711>). Whatever arrangements are put in place, the long-term survival, integrity, care and accessibility of the collections need to be guaranteed, as does the ability of the managing body to accept appropriate new items (eg archaeological archives) and facilitate access to them; in effect we suspect that this would mean the organisation being underwritten financially by the local authority. Analogous concerns have been voiced by the Society of Antiquaries of London over the government's proposal to hand over English Heritage properties to a trust ([http://www.sal.org.uk/media/237283/eh\\_new\\_model\\_sal\\_response.pdf](http://www.sal.org.uk/media/237283/eh_new_model_sal_response.pdf)). In the shorter term we are already concerned about the ability of only two curatorial staff to care for and present the collections as they deserve.

2.8 The museums listed above in 2.2 have varying management arrangements, but, with the partial exception of Shrewsbury, they all offer free entrance. York Museums Trust admittedly charges for entry but offers an annual ticket giving access to a number of high-quality venues. Charging for entry to museums always carries the risk of discouraging short, casual visits by local residents (at York, entry is free on production of a residents' card), and, given the uncompetitive nature of its present 'offer', charging for access to the permanent displays in Grosvenor Museum could also reduce the number of tourists who visit it. However, in accordance with common practice elsewhere it might be viable to charge for admission to special exhibitions, such as we have suggested might be staged in St Michael's Church.

### 3.0 *Conservation and Design*

- 3.1 *The One City Plan*, quoted above, refers to the poor quality of some recent developments. The Northgate Travelodge and Delamere Street Health Centre, out of scale with neighbouring buildings and with slab-like profiles that dominate the city's skyline when viewed from the west and north-west, exemplify this problem; the former building is frequently cited by critics of the Council's planning policies. However, the city's appearance suffers not only from large-scale damage such as the developments just mentioned but also from the attrition caused by, for example, crude and inappropriate shop fronts and signs, not to mention simple lack of cleanliness and maintenance. (See the useful comparisons between Chester and some other cities in the paper by Michael Plane of the Chester Civic <http://www.chestercivictrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/A-Tale-of-Three-Cities.pdf>; a visit to Cheshire Oaks, with its well maintained and tastefully signed shops makes the same point for the observant).
- 3.2 Halting this damage, large and small, is essential if the aspirations of the *One City Plan* are to be realised. However, we understand that one conservation officer has taken redundancy and that the other is on maternity leave. If our understanding is correct, it raises the obvious question of who is covering these functions at the moment. We consider that it would be unrealistic to expect the need for advice to be met by officers in the English Heritage regional office in Manchester, as there are only three Historic Building Inspectors to cover the whole of the North-West. Moreover, like other public bodies, English Heritage has been shedding expert staff for over a decade and, regrettably, must be expected to continue to do so in the future. CWaC needs to have a capacity of its own, and as this is a quasi-regulatory function it is most properly provided by directly employed staff.
- 3.3 The suggestion that Total Environment staff should produce guidance to enable other parts of the council to make decisions about Total Environment matters may be superficially attractive but raises the classic risk that 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing'. It may indeed be helpful for other council officers to be better informed about Total Environment matters. However, we would expect that any guidance would inevitably be broad-brush, while in conservation and design matters attention to detail is particularly important. We therefore consider that final decisions/recommendations should remain with the appropriate specialist staff. Finally, not only do conservation officers need to be employed, but their advice also needs to be sought at an early stage and heeded. Too often CWaC gives the impression that it is willing to accept sub-standard design in order to facilitate development.

Dr P Carrington FSA

On behalf of Chester Archaeological Society [www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk](http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk)

25 August 2014