

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON PROPOSALS FOR FOLDING IRON GATES AT THE EASTGATE, CHESTER

'Chester has enough amazing heritage for us not to have to make things up about it!'

(Respondent to CAS request for views on the above proposals)

SUMMARY

Our primary concerns are that the proposed gates should not do any physical harm to the structure of the Eastgate or to any adjacent buried archaeology and that they should not detract from the appearance of the gateway and its setting. We also have concerns about their sustainability, given that the raison d'être of the gates is dependent on the current fashion for re-enactments aimed at tourists, and about pedestrian flow around the Eastgate. Furthermore, attaching post-medieval-style gates to a gateway that was specifically designed not to have gates and to have them opened and closed by Roman and Civil War re-enactors would be anachronistic and create a historical pastiche, detracting from the significance and character of the Eastgate. Suggestions are made of locations where historical re-enactments could be staged with greater authenticity.

DETAILS

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 At a presentation on 20 January 2015 private-sector proposals were put forward to install folding gates at the Eastgate, to be ceremonially and briefly closed and then re-opened by Roman and Civil War re-enactors; these proposals were reported in the [Chester Chronicle](#) for 21 January, the *Leader* for the same date, page 2 and the *Chester Standard* for 22 January, page 3. We understand that the proposals will at some stage be the subject of consultation, but the nature, timing and extent of this consultation are currently unknown to us. We offer these preliminary comments, based on the press reports mentioned above, in the hope of informing public debate on the subject.
- 1.2 The Eastgate is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and a Grade 1 Listed Building, lying within Chester's Area of Archaeological Importance and within the Chester City Conservation Area. The area under the arch is included in the scheduling. The present arch was built in 1768/9 to replace the medieval gateway, which incorporated parts of its Roman predecessor; remains of these earlier gates almost certainly survive under the present arch and street, possibly at a very high level (Alebon, Davey & Robinson 1976; LeQuesne 1999, 99–105). The clock turret over the centre of the arch was erected in 1899 and was designed by Chester's most famous architect, John Douglas, to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond jubilee in 1897; the supporting wrought iron structure was made by James Swindley of Handbridge (Boughton 1997, 53). The ensemble is one of the most photographed monuments in the city and perhaps in the country.
- 1.3 In accordance with [National Planning Policy Framework](#), section 12, Policy ENV 5 of the [CWAC Local Plan \(as modified\)](#) states that:
- Development should safeguard or enhance both designated and non-designated heritage assets and the character and setting of areas of acknowledged

significance. The degree of protection afforded to a heritage asset will reflect its position within the hierarchy of designations.

- Development will be required to respect and respond positively to designated heritage assets and their settings, avoiding loss or harm to their significance.
- Development which is likely to have a significant adverse impact on designated heritage assets and their settings which cannot be avoided or where the heritage asset cannot be preserved *in situ* it will not be permitted.
- Development in Chester should ensure the city's unique archaeological and historic character is protected or enhanced.

It is therefore essential that any proposals for the Eastgate should respect and respond positively to the character, significance and setting of the present arch and not harm it or the buried remains of its predecessors.

2.0 Conservation and aesthetics

- 2.1 Ideally any gates would not be attached directly to the stonework of the arch; if they were, any damage should be minimal and easily repairable if/when the gates were to be removed. Any posts or bolts etc that penetrate the ground should avoid damaging buried archaeology.
- 2.2 The construction of any gates would need to be of the highest quality, and their size (both extended and folded), general design and detailing would need to respect and complement the scale and shape of the arch and the clock structure above; they would also need to enhance the streetscape in general. These are matters of fine artistic judgement; the published sketches show a clear attempt at sympathetic design but far more details are necessary, and independent, expert advice should be sought and heeded. Nevertheless, it needs to be remembered that, no matter how well any gates were designed and constructed, they would only be fully visible for short periods when closed. By contrast the Eastgate clock and its ironwork can be appreciated at all hours of the day.

3.0 Sustainability

- 3.1 As mentioned above, the proposed gates would only be visible for short periods when closed, and this would be dependent on the cooperation of re-enactors. Who would be responsible for the organisation and payment of the re-enactors? What would happen if the associated ceremonies did not become a tourist attraction or the current fashion for re-enactment dwindled? As the gates are also supposedly intended to commemorate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012, failure and early removal might be viewed as disrespectful. To commemorate the Queen's reign a more visible and potentially more durable monument might be preferable, that might in time become as iconic as the Eastgate clock. Finally, who would be responsible for maintenance?

4.0 Potential hindrance to pedestrians

- 4.1 The Eastgate is the busiest of the gateways in the City Walls used by pedestrians accessing the city centre, especially on Saturdays, race days and during the Christmas period, with people routinely spilling off the pavement to use the central arch, even though the street is not fully pedestrianised. When the proposed gates

were closed people who did not want to watch the ceremony would have to use the narrow side arches, which is already difficult, especially for wheelchair users.

- 4.2 How far would the proposed gates project from the present stone arch when folded, both into the street and to each side of the arch? One can imagine their forming an annoying, if not dangerous, obstruction to pedestrians at busy times.

5.0 Historical character

- 5.1 We understand that it is envisaged that the gates would be closed at fixed times by Roman soldiers and then re-opened by Civil War soldiers, perhaps after proclaiming that ‘the Royal city was “open for trade” and “all within the walls will be of safe keeping”’.
- 5.2 During their long history Chester’s City Walls have evolved from defensive enceinte to fashionable promenade, in accordance with wider historical trends, and the varying character of the elements in its circuit attests these changing roles. The principal defensive medieval gateways, perhaps last closed during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, were replaced by the present wider arches between 1768 and 1810, with the aim of easing the flow of traffic while preserving the promenade along the Walls (Boughton 1997, 50–65; Carrington 1994, 102–3). It is important to bear in mind that these new gateways were never designed to be controlled or closed; indeed nowadays Eastgate Street and Foregate Street form a continuous shopping street along which residents who are familiar with the sights of the city may often progress while hardly noticing the presence of the gateway!
- 5.3 In the light of the above, the whole principle of installing gates at the Eastgate seems to be inappropriate and anachronistic, detracting from rather than respecting and enhancing the historical character and significance of the 18th-century arch; the detailed design of any gates is irrelevant to this argument. In fact, as a result of an attempt to respect the style of the 19th-century ironwork above, the overall effect would be reminiscent of post-medieval palace gates, and to have them manned by Roman and Civil War re-enactors would exacerbate the anachronism and go further down the road of creating a historical pastiche.
- 5.4 To put the situation at Chester into perspective, we may contrast the survival of the Roman Newport Arch at Lincoln and the medieval Bootham Bar, Walmgate Bar, Monk Bar and Micklegate Bar at York; all of these were defensive and designed to be closed; indeed portcullises survive at Bootham Bar and Monk Bar and wooden doors at Walmgate Bar. At these sites re-enactments such as those proposed at Chester’s Eastgate could be staged with a degree of historical authenticity

6.0 Modification of monuments, re-enactments and historical authenticity

- 6.1 For the avoidance of doubt, we are not opposed to additions to or ornamentation of the historic monuments of the city in principle, provided that these do not cause significant physical damage or detract from their significance and provided that they respect and enhance their visual and historical character.
- 6.2 Likewise we consider that re-enactment of historical activities can bring the past to life and help all of us to understand it better and to enjoy it (*cf* the [One City Plan](#), page

38). Given that remains of many periods survive in the city, there is scope for a wide variety of re-enactments. However, for people to properly understand the past in general, and that of Chester in particular, these re-enactments are best staged at appropriate locations; this is in line with the trends that may be observed in historical drama and fiction, where nowadays producers and authors go to considerable lengths to achieve accuracy. Re-enactors will ultimately make their own decisions, but we make a few suggestions below.

- 6.3 If one wanted to stage a ‘changing of the guard’ of Roman soldiers, surely a more appropriate location would be at the Cross, given that St Peter’s Church stands on the site of the Roman legionary headquarters building. (Admittedly there is still a discrepancy between the date of the building and the event being staged but at least it is not being deliberately created). Again, the most appropriate locations for Civil War re-enactments would seem to be in the Roman Gardens, adjacent to the breach in the City Walls made by Parliamentary cannon sited in St John’s churchyard, and at Abbey Green, where there is evidence that the City Wall was reinforced by an earth bank to withstand bombardment (Ward 1987, especially 18–19 and 28–30).
- 6.4 There are, of course, gateways in the City Walls that can still be closed: the Kaleyad Gate and the Wolfgate. The former, originally giving access from the precinct of St Werburgh’s Abbey to the monks’ extramural kitchen garden, was probably rebuilt in its present form in the later 17th century. The latter was last rebuilt in 1768; the iron gates in it are modern and serve to close off the remains of the Roman South-East Angle Tower. In 1573, after the abduction of an alderman’s daughter, the city authorities ordered that the gate be shut at night. ([Lewis & Thacker](#) eds 2005, 213–25). Perhaps more could be made of these opportunities.
- 6.5 We consider that our position is similar to that expressed in the Myerscough report on the exploitation of Chester’s heritage, commissioned about twenty years ago for the then City Council but to large extent never implemented, which recommended that the city should go ‘up-market’ in its approach.

7.0 References to printed works

- | | |
|---|---|
| Alebon, P H, Davey, P J
& Robinson, D J 1976 | The Eastgate Chester 1972. <i>Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society</i> new ser 59 , 37–49 |
| Boughton, P 1997 | <i>Picturesque Chester: the city in art</i> . Chichester: Phillimore |
| Carrington, P 1994 | <i>Chester</i> . London: Batsford |
| LeQuesne, C 1999 | <i>Excavations at Chester, the Roman and later defences part 1: investigations 1978–1990</i> . Chester: Chester City Council. (Chester Archaeology Excavation & Survey Report 11) |
| Ward, S W 1987 | <i>Excavations at Chester, the Civil War siegeworks 1642–6</i> . Chester: Chester City Council. (Grosvenor Museum Archaeological Excavation & Survey Report 4) |

Dr P Carrington FSA
For Chester Archaeological Society

28 January 2015