

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED LEASE OF DEE HOUSE*

Summary

- 1.0 *The Society welcomes CWaC's efforts to get this Grade II Listed Building repaired and bring it back into use, thus assuring its future. Dee House is a key element in an important and complex historical landscape that also includes the Roman amphitheatre and St John's Church and has evolved in a highly specific way over two thousand years. It also forms an important part of the townscape aesthetically. Nevertheless, in bringing Dee House back into use, we believe that future excavation and interpretation of the amphitheatre should not be compromised.*
- 2.0 *Because of its aesthetic importance, and also to allow views between St John's Church and the City Walls, Dee House should be kept free of modern accretions. It goes without saying that in bringing the building back into use there should be no damage to the Roman amphitheatre or other significant archaeology that lies beneath the building or its grounds. The proposed lease includes the grounds overlying part of the south-eastern quadrant of the amphitheatre, where replica walls have been built over the sites of the originals to convey the elliptical form of the structure. It is important that public access to this area is maintained and that the interpretation of the amphitheatre there remains consistent with that of the rest of the site.*
- 3.0 *An omission from constraints on the reuse of Dee House is a research agenda for the amphitheatre, which might have highlighted questions that could only be answered by further excavation within or in the grounds of the building.*
- 4.0 *We are deeply concerned by the proposed 150-year length of the lease, which is far beyond the probable lifespan of any private or public institution. Whatever conditions are imposed on the lessee at the outset, it is inevitable that they will become less appropriate with the passage of time, and it is essential that the length of the lease is reduced to a more normal figure (eg 25 years) or some other break is introduced to allow for the revision of conditions.*
- 5.0 *Finally, the feasibility of relocating the cramped and outmoded Grosvenor Museum here should be considered, including the acquisition of Trident House as well as Dee House. This would improve the permeability of the area and the interpretation of the amphitheatre.*

Detail

1.0 History and Importance of the Site and Area

- 1.1 Present understanding of the character and significance of the area is summarised in the *Desk-Based Assessment: Dee House Chester* by D Garner (Chester: L – P Archaeology, 2015). This is a very important part of the city and perhaps has the potential to exemplify more clearly than anywhere else the major stages in the history of Chester as a whole from Roman to Georgian times.

* We are grateful to Caroline Thomas of Chester Renaissance and Mark Leah, CWaC Development Control Archaeologist, for giving up their time to explain the proposals to members of the Society and to Caroline Thomas for obtaining answers to subsequent questions.

- 1.1.1 The Roman amphitheatre itself seems to have been in use from the late first century to the late third and went through two main building phases. The scale and architectural complexity of the second phase marks it out as the most elaborate example so far found in Roman Britain.
- 1.1.2 It is possible that the masonry inserted into the east entrance of the amphitheatre was a shrine dedicated to some late Roman Christian martyrs and was the earliest manifestation of St John's Church, founded by tradition in AD 689. In Saxon times St John's enjoyed royal patronage. After the Norman Conquest it was briefly elevated to cathedral status and then reverted to being a college of canons. Throughout the Middle Ages it had a large precinct that included the site of the amphitheatre.
- 1.1.3 Following the suppression of St John's college in 1547 some of the former ecclesiastical buildings were taken over as residences by the local gentry (as also on the western side of the city), away from the cramped conditions often found within the City Walls. It is possible that like other properties outside the Walls, these buildings were demolished during the Civil War siege of Chester to deny cover to the attackers. Nevertheless, cannon were mounted in St John's churchyard and succeeded in making a breach in the City Walls where the Roman Gardens are now situated. The present Dee House was built in 1730, over the south-west quadrant of the amphitheatre, probably for Sir Roger Comberbach, mayor and alderman of Chester, and in the middle of the nineteenth century was acquired by the Roman Catholic church as a convent and school.
- 1.2 Dee House also has an aesthetic value, especially in closing the view at the end of St John Street.
- 1.3 In 2010 replica walls of the amphitheatre were laid out in the grounds of Dee House to give visitors an impression of the elliptical form of the structure and a bronze model of it was installed.
- 1.4 In bringing Dee House back into use, nothing should be done that compromises the future excavation or interpretation of the amphitheatre.

2.0 Constraints on the Refurbishment of Dee House

- 2.1 We support the constraints expressed in the letter of 4 January 2010 from Henry Owen-John of (the then) English Heritage to Rita Waters, then of Chester Renaissance (reproduced in Garner, *op cit*, appendix 1), especially the need for any refurbishment of Dee House to preserve significant archaeology *in situ* and to open up views across the front of the building between St John's Church and the City Walls; the former is no more than we would expect in respect of a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and the latter would make the episode of the Civil War bombardment of the Walls from St John's more comprehensible. In this light we could not understand the proposal to carry out trial excavations in front of Dee House to establish the depth of significant archaeology, as that suggests the possibility of building there.
- 2.2 However, we are unhappy with the suggestion (Owen-John para 5) that service access to Dee House could be provided at the east end of the site. Such a road would inevitably be constructed across the buried remains of the amphitheatre (shades of Chester Corporation's plan to realign Little St John Street to run across the site of the amphitheatre in the 1930s!) and might well destroy the interpretation in that

area. A service road at the western end of the site on the site of the present north–south building range might be preferable as it should lie outside the perimeter of the amphitheatre.

- 2.3 It is important that public access is maintained to the eastern end of the Dee House grounds, where replica walls have been laid out to try to convey the elliptical form of the amphitheatre. If these features were to be altered by a lessee, it is vital that any replacements should be as historically accurate as possible and should be compatible with and enhance the interpretation of the rest of the amphitheatre.

3.0 The Need for a Research Agenda for the Amphitheatre

- 3.1 A noteworthy omission from the desk-based assessment is a list of research questions for the amphitheatre that might impact on the refurbishment of Dee House. We would expect such a list to be an implicit, if not explicit, part of the forthcoming report on the 2004–6 excavations. Garner, *op cit*, para 10.14 dismisses the prospect of general excavation of the southern half of the amphitheatre, quoting the English Heritage reference to the ‘over-riding need to protect and retain *in situ* the nationally important archaeological remains’ (Owen-John, page 2). This statement may in fact have been intended to impose constraints on the redevelopment of Dee House, but we understand that Historic England have recently stated orally that they are not in favour of further excavation for any reason. However, Garner, *op cit*, para 10.15 does seem to contemplate the possibility of further excavation: ‘A change to private ownership could be seen as a negative outcome of development in the longer term if further excavation and display of the Amphitheatre was to be reconsidered in the future’, and paras 8.9 and 12.9.3 highlight one obvious question, the existence of a western entrance, which one would expect to lie in the Dee House car park. It is simply not plausible to argue that further research excavation of the amphitheatre in the grounds of Dee House, followed by display or reconstruction if appropriate, will never be thought desirable within the duration of the lease (even if it not desirable at the moment), and the conditions of any lease ought to allow for this possibility.

4.0 Length of Lease

- 4.1 The need for a 150-year lease of Dee House has been justified to us by the need to provide an incentive for continued investment after the initial refurbishment (which developers typically expect to have paid off in about 25 years). However, it is not credible that the same developers (or perhaps CWaC itself) will still be in existence in 150 years. We therefore consider that the motive behind a 150-year lease is more likely to be the maintenance of the resale value of the lease. For comparison we should be interested to know what length of lease it is contemplated offering in the Northgate development and what financial loss CWaC would suffer from offering a shorter lease.
- 4.2 It has also been stated that leasehold would give CWaC greater control than a freehold sale. However, one may doubt whether conditions imposed now would be appropriate in, for example, 25 years, let alone over 100 years. One cannot avoid the suspicion that a long lease is being offered rather than a freehold sale in order to avoid the toxic headlines that the latter might entail (*cf* the sale of the Trident House site in the late 1990s).

- 4.3 In sum, we consider that the length of the lease should be reduced, perhaps to about 25 years, or some other break introduced in order to allow for the conditions to be revised as seemed appropriate.

5.0 Possibility of Use of Dee House as a Museum

- 5.1 Over the past 30 years there have been several suggestions for using Dee House as a museum/interpretation centre. The inadequacy of the present Grosvenor Museum buildings is widely recognised, and as part of the present exercise the feasibility of relocating it to the Dee House/amphitheatre area should be examined. However, if one accepts the desirability of retaining its interior, then Dee House by itself would not be suitable as an archaeological museum and would not offer any advantages in terms of space. We are not in favour of the use of Dee House as an interpretation centre (ie a 'museum lite'), which could easily drain resources from a new 'real' museum, lack impact and – on the basis of other previous interpretation centres – soon fail. However, if Trident House could be acquired, then that and Dee House together could possibly offer the sort of accommodation needed for a comprehensive museum worthy of the city. The boundary fence between Dee House and Trident House could be removed, making the area more permeable; the existing marking out of the south-eastern quadrant in the Trident House car park could be incorporated in the interpretation of the rest of the amphitheatre and made accessible in a way that it is not at the moment; and the southern entrance of the amphitheatre, which also lies in the Trident House car park, could be excavated and displayed at some time in the future if that were thought justifiable.

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For Chester Archaeological Society

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