

# CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

## CHESTER WAYFINDING AUDIT

### Summary

- Chester's small size, the distinctiveness of its streets, its grid plan and the consequent intervisibility of its landmark buildings mean that it is easy to navigate, reducing the need for help in wayfinding.
- Like other street furniture, there are too many wayfinding signs in Chester. There are three 'generations' of such signs in the city (plus another of interpretative signs). In some cases, signs duplicate one another; in others, they point to features in plain sight. This degrades the quality of the public realm
- Mobile phones that can display detailed, digital maps are now ubiquitous, and there is great potential for the expansion of digital technology. Old-fashioned paper maps remain useful in exploring the city. However, there remains a role for physical signage.
- In the light of the above, there should be a thorough audit of existing wayfinding signs and a masterplan prepared, based on the recommendations in the *Chester Public Realm Design Guide* and linked to a digital strategy. Signage must make a positive contribution to the public realm, and old/non-compliant and redundant signs should be removed.

### Detail

#### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes this survey, because wayfinding is important in itself and because it shines a spotlight on other, bigger issues that also need to be resolved. Because of time constraints, our response is based on a very rapid and partial audit of existing wayfinding.
- 1.2 We focus on physical signage, although it is quite easy to navigate Chester guided only by a mobile phone or a paper map. However, following physical signage allows people to walk 'head up' rather than 'head down' and better appreciate the city's architectural heritage, and some doubtless prefer to explore the city in this way. Moreover, physical signage forms an important part of the public realm and typically lasts a few decades; it is therefore important that it is done well from the design point of view. However, it is clear that there is much that could usefully be done to make the information and images in the signage available digitally, either for people to use before visiting Chester or as a part of mobile phone apps that give people more information as they explore the city.

#### 2.0 Existing Signage

- 2.1 Chester is small and easily walkable for able people. The distinctiveness of its streets, its simple grid plan and the consequent intervisibility of many of its historic landmark buildings mean that it is easy to navigate. This contrasts with the irregular plan of some other cities and especially with the isotropic nature of some retail parks and shopping malls, which can appear the same whichever way one looks.

2.2 As a principle, wayfinding signs, like other street furniture, should be as few as necessary, of uniform style, sympathetic to the architecture of the city but nevertheless easily recognised. Self-evidently existing signage does not meet these criteria: there is far too much street furniture, eg cast iron and decaying timber bollards (because vehicles are prioritised over people) and disused masts, so signage is harder to spot and adds to the clutter. There are three styles/‘generations’ of wayfinding signs (plus another of interpretative signs) for pedestrians, and a totally different style for cyclists. Examples of old, black-painted cast iron finger posts survive and are often very faded, as are those for cyclists. There are plentiful examples of the Imagemakers-style ‘Welcome’ sign. These form part of a thought-through wayfinding philosophy, set out in the [Chester Public Realm Design Guide](#), section 6:

... the aim should not be to spoil Chester’s attractive streetscapes by over-signing. Chester is not a vast or complex city centre and so in general, the aim should be to keep the number of wayfinding elements to a minimum ...

...to prevent oversigning of wayfinding elements in the public realm through a primary emphasis on the use of map-based information, which encourages visitors to explore and develop their own mind map of Chester.

Directional fingerpost[s] ... should be used sparingly within the city centre core (i.e. within the walls). Wherever budget and space allow, a secondary orientation sign should be used as the preferred type city centre wayfinding signage.

Despite this guidance, in recent years numerous multiple-armed fingerposts have been erected instead of Orientation signs; these effectively constitute a third style or ‘generation’ and add to the clutter.

2.3 The recommendations of the *Design Guide* have not always been applied sensitively or followed through. Consequently, there are examples of unnecessary, duplicated or bizarre signage:

- There are three non-compliant signs to the Northgate only a few metres outside it, and another just inside stating that the steps on the east side give access to the City Walls, which is obvious.
- There is a large sign on the back of a road sign at the north end of Town Hall Square saying ‘Northgate Street’. If a reminder of the street name is needed, why is it not a conventional street-name plaque attached to an adjacent building?
- At the north end of the Town Hall there is an old fingerpost announcing ‘Town Hall’ and ‘TIC’, despite the latter only being about 20m away. Near the south end of the Town Hall a more modern fingerpost points to Storyhouse, which is in plain sight.
- At the Cross a fingerpost points to the Eastgate clock, which is again in plain sight.
- At the railway station there are a Welcome sign with integrated fingerpost and a freestanding fingerpost within a few metres of one another; the arms on the former indicate the two routes to the city centre – all that is necessary. There is another, redundant, map of the city just inside the station entrance.
- The old and new finger posts at the Bars are inevitably confusing given the location.

- A Visitor Attraction sign immediately adjacent to the neo-classical propylaea of Chester Castle has an incongruous image of Hugh Lupus in medieval armour and the unnecessary words 'Castle Gateway'. All that is necessary is the word 'Castle' and a plan,, emphasising the route through the forecourt to the rather obscure entrance to the Inner Bailey, which would be a more suitable location for medieval imagery.
- The Welcome sign at the top of Castle Drive has an image of the former cross on the Roodee facing the lower Castle car park, away from public view.
- The 'Bakers' Row' Orientation sign in Eastgate Street is a one-off, simplifies a complex historical reality and achieves nothing.

### 3.0 Recommendations

- 3.1 The wayfinding principles in the *Chester Public Realm Design Guide* section 6 should be reverted to and its specific proposals updated in the light of experience and to take account of digital possibilities. Even so, for a small, easily navigated city, the number of recommended signs is still quite large and should be reduced if possible.

It should be noted that many of the maps shown on the Welcome and Orientation signs are rotated (ie do not have north at the top). Is there any information on how easy people find these to read? Some at least find them confusing. There seems to be minimal visual differentiation of access points to the City Walls for mobility-impaired people; does this need to be improved, eg through use of a different colour? The maps should also show easy access points to the Rows, as in the [Chester City Centre Access Guide](#), but the routes, often via currently unattractive alleys, need to be improved (see the [Chester Characterisation Study](#), page 76); such an improvement would benefit everybody. At the moment the maps do not show some minor streets, eg King Street and those in the Commonhall Street area. When convenient these should be added, as these streets are worth exploring from a historical viewpoint and it could boost businesses situated there. The city churches should also be indicated, at least as icons, as they are major landmarks.

Orientation signs could be used more widely if a fourth directional arrow were to be added, most obviously at the Cross (see 3.15 below). Given that the city has four main streets, it is remarkable that this is not already the case. The medieval monk Lucian, in his book *de Laude Cestrie (In Praise of Chester)*, makes great allegorical play on the city's cross-shaped plan. Perhaps modern signage should echo this?

- 3.2 The Welcome signs at the Watergate, Castle Drive (despite the reverse image), the railway station and the Bus Interchange seem logical, with maps that allow people to explore as they wish, plus arrows to major destinations. However, an arrow showing the way to the Bus Interchange should have been included on the railway station sign and *vice versa*. The directional information on the Bus Interchange sign could profitably be repeated on Cow Lane bridge for the benefit of those en route to/from the railway station via Brook Street; Brookdale Place and the crossing of the Inner Ring Road are visually confusing.
- 3.3 A small, wall-mounted sign on Frodsham Street could direct people to Town Hall Square via the Kaleyards and Abbey Street.

- 3.4 The City Road–Bars junction is another confusing area for pedestrians. An Orientation sign should be installed, with arrows to the city centre and Grosvenor Park.
- 3.5 A Welcome sign should be installed outside the Northgate, with arrows to the city centre, and to the Bus Interchange and railway station via George Street. The existing blue plaque on the gate should be replaced by a City Wall panel. All other existing wayfinding signage should be removed.
- 3.6 The two sets of finger posts outside the Eastgate should be replaced by a single Orientation sign, with arrows to the Cross; the railway station via Foregate Street; the Bus Interchange and railway station via Frodsham Street; and the amphitheatre and river via St John Street. This area, once billed as Chester's 'Second Cross', is now a 'bollard farm' and a public realm disaster. It needs to be redesigned in a way that restores the historical continuity of Eastgate Street–Foregate Street, and signage needs to be incorporated into that redesign.
- 3.7 The fingerpost surrounded by bollards by the entrance Dee House is a classic example of clutter and should be removed. There is already a small (poor quality) sign to the river at the head of Souters Lane, which should be upgraded. Could not signs of similar size attached to the railings of the amphitheatre indicate the way from the end of St John Street to the museums and Castle and to St John's Church and the Grosvenor Park?
- 3.8 A sign at the Bridge Street–Lower Bridge Street–Grosvenor Street junction should have arrows to the amphitheatre; river; and museums, Castle and Roodee. It should be linked to a heritage installation indicating the south gate of the Roman fortress and the church of St Bridget.
- 3.9 An Orientation sign should be installed outside the Bridgegate with arrows to the city centre; Edgar's Field and Minerva's Shrine; the Groves; and the Roodee. There should be a City Wall panel inside the gate.
- 3.10 There should be an Orientation sign at the Watergate Street–St Martin's Way junction, with arrows to the Castle and museums; Roodee; and St Martin's Gate. This should be linked to a heritage installation indicating the west gate of the Roman fortress, eg the 'Floor Fortress' envisaged in the *Interpretation Masterplan*, page 78.
- 3.11 There could usefully be an Orientation/Visitor attraction sign near the Weaver Street–Nicholas Street junction, with a map showing the south-west angle of the Roman fortress, the now-demolished church of St Martin and the medieval religious houses in the area.
- 3.12 A City Wall panel on St Martin's Gate should draw attention to the Roman north-west angle tower.
- 3.13 The finger posts on Town Hall Square should be replaced by an Orientation sign near its southern end, clearly visible from the TIC, with arrows to the Cross; Eastgate via St Werburgh Street; and Bus Exchange and railway station via Upper Northgate Street. This could be linked with a heritage installation outlining the origins of the square in the large courtyard building at the heart of the Roman fortress and its long

history as a marketplace, or even the Cityscape Topographical Map envisaged in the *Interpretation Masterplan*, page 77.

- 3.14 The two sets of finger posts at the Cross should be replaced by a wall-mounted map with arrows to the Town Hall, Cathedral and Storyhouse; the Roodee; the river, museums and Castle; Bus Interchange and railway station.
- 3.15 If they do not already exist, small signs on the City Walls at each gate should show its position in the circuit and the streets they cross. In most cases access points to the streets from the walls (and *vice versa*) are clear, but that at the Newgate is a little obscure and would benefit from signing.
- 3.17 We are not convinced that the Rows need dedicated signage; they are prominently marked on the maps in the signage and once a visitor is in the central area of the city they are plain to see, as are the access points from street level. Alleys leading to the Rows should be discreetly signed, especially for the benefit of people with mobility problems or buggies, but these routes must first be made more attractive; see 3.1 above and 8.2 below. Traders on the Rows can advertise their businesses through hanging signs.
- 3.18 Traditional street name plates are complementary to wayfinding signs in helping people to find their way; see the *Chester Public Realm Design Guide*, pages 244–5.

#### **4.0 Circulation & Movement**

- 4.1 The wayfinding maps show the cycle route around the city centre; we have not examined the blue cycle signs. There are no dedicated cycle routes *into* the city centre, and this issue needs to be addressed before thinking more about signage. We have addressed this issue in detail in our [response](#) to the *Walk, Ride, Thrive* consultation.
- 4.2 A priority is to remove physical impediments to movement, especially to ‘tame’ the Inner Ring Road, which divides the city centre into three parts and has a throttling effect on the movement of pedestrians and cyclists. For example, the continuity of Bridge Street–Lower Bridge Street and Watergate Street–Lower Watergate Street needs to be reasserted; again see our response to the *Walk, Ride, Thrive* consultation. Brookdale Place, by Cow Lane bridge, and the crossing of the Inner Ring Road are visually confusing and obscure what used to be a clear route from the city centre to the railway station; they should be redesigned. Showing more of the minor city-centre streets on wayfinding maps may help the businesses there.

#### **5.0 Business & Economy**

- 5.1 There are so many visitor-oriented businesses in so small an area, and they change so rapidly, that one may doubt whether it is practical for wayfinding signs to support them. Internet searches for businesses and venues are already likely to show their location on maps. However, digital applications based on the present wayfinding could incorporate links to businesses in specific areas.
- 5.2 Continuity between existing wayfinding and the information available to visitors before coming to Chester seems to be almost completely lacking. A quick Google search for ‘Chester heritage trails’, ‘Chester City Walls’ and ‘Chester tourist maps’ did not immediately return any results that used the mapping, images or information

incorporated in the current signage. The search under 'Chester heritage trails' returned a map of the City Walls on the CWaC website dating from 2005. However, the base map used for the current wayfinding is used in the *Chester City Centre Access Guide*.

## **6.0 Property Development & Regeneration**

6.1 Good quality, sympathetic redevelopment enables people to find their way more easily, without a lot of signage. Sadly, it is easier to point to examples in Chester where the opposite is the case: for example, there used to be a pleasant route from Cow Lane bridge to Foregate Street via Queen Street; that route is now blocked by the Tesco loading bay and a detour has to be made. Up to 1963 anybody wanting to get from the Newgate to the Cathedral had only to walk up Newgate Street and St Werburgh Street; in fact, the start and end of the journey were intervisible. Now it involves a complicated route through the Grosvenor shopping centre. Sixty years later, despite numerous warnings, the same mistake is being made with the Northgate I development, with steps in the medieval Princess Street and an unnecessary multi-storey car park obscuring views of the Town Hall from St Martin's Way and hindering movement for mobility-impaired people. See also 4.2 above.

## **7.0 Heritage**

7.1 The current wayfinding helps visitors to understand the heritage of Chester, but this is obviously on a site-by-site basis. For an overview, a book, digital download or ideally a better museum are required. A booklet, *Explore the Walls*, was produced as part of the Portico project. Is it still available?

7.2 The current wayfinding displays accurate historical information. Some of our members and local heritage professionals have had a leading role in it. Some of it is inevitably out of date, eg re the amphitheatre, and should be corrected when possible.

## **8.0 Public Realm**

8.1 The current wayfinding does not contribute positively to the public realm in Chester. We have examples of signs that accord with the recommendations of the Chester Public Realm Design Guide but also others that predate the document and more recent ones that ignore it. The result is a mess.

8.2 It is important that signs can be improved and updated without excessive trouble or expense. We suggest that easy access points to the Rows, minor streets and city churches should be added; see 3.2 above.

8.3 Digital information on exploring Chester seems to totally ignore current wayfinding information; the *Chester City Centre Access Guide* is an honourable exception. A selection of this material, especially the maps, should at least be easily accessible to download and print out by people planning a visit to Chester and could be used in mobile phone apps that give people more information as they explore the city. The [Visit Chester and Cheshire](#) website should be the default site for finding this information.

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