

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

CONTRIBUTION TO THE FORMATION OF A HERITAGE STRATEGY FOR CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER BOROUGH

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This is the fifth CAS response to a consultation on a heritage strategy. Previous attempts by CWaC to formulate such a strategy have failed to consider basic questions such as the nature of heritage and the full range of its possible uses. There is presumably a professional literature on the subject, which a strategy ought to refer to. In the lack of access to that, we offer the following as a contribution to the debate.

2.0 Aim of a heritage strategy

2.1 A heritage strategy should define what we mean by heritage, how we evaluate it, what roles we see for it, how we manage it, and how we communicate it. It should summarise the character and significance of the of the heritage of the borough as a whole and of individual communities, how it will be protected, enhanced and made more accessible; show how our understanding will be advanced and shared; underpin the treatment of heritage in other Council policies; and set out its potential in shaping the future.

3.0 What is heritage, what are its values and uses, and how do we manage it?

3.1 Heritage is what we inherit and what we bequeath to others. It is by definition intergenerational and potentially expands with the passage of time; new heritage is constantly being created or discovered. It is a subset of legacy, to which we attach values beyond the functional. These are usually but not always positive and may sometimes be disputed, and the next generation's views may be different from ours. Recognised heritage assets such as archaeological sites are routinely destroyed for present-day purposes, some of which turn out to be ephemeral. Judgements about heritage, especially about what to preserve, should therefore be as well-informed as possible, take a long-term view and be based on explicit criteria.

3.2 Heritage can be tangible or intangible. Tangible heritage may be landscape, structural, artefactual, environmental and documentary. Intangible heritage may, for example, consist of lifeways, drama, and attitudes. Both are the raw material from which history is written. Tangible heritage in the form of archaeological sites may paradoxically acquire greater value from excavations that result in their (partial) physical destruction.

3.3 Members of the public should be involved as early as practical in the formulation of a strategy. Too many 'consultations' take place when schemes are far advanced and decisions cannot be reversed. Care should be taken to try to engage with, among others, disabled people, the retired/elderly, recent arrivals and religious groups.

3.4 Built heritage and archaeology are professional fields governed, for instance, by the *National Planning Policy Framework*, Scheduling and Listing, and evolving professional good practice, eg the standards of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists; museums and record offices are governed by comparable rules, based on hard-won experience. Our knowledge of the past, like other sciences, is based on careful, dispassionate analysis and constant reflection on accepted ideas. Public participation should have expert, professional support.

3.5 It is also worth quoting the recent ICOM definition of a museum:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.
<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.
Accessed 01-09-2022

3.6 Heritage can be evaluated according to Historic England's *Conservation Principles*:

- Evidential (archaeological, architectural)
- Associative/Historical
- Aesthetic
- Communal

All underpinned and strengthened by understanding

3.7 To these can be added the general principles of DCMS for protection by designation (Listing and Scheduling):

- Age/Rarity
- Documentation
- Group value
- Fragility/vulnerability
- Diversity (variety of features)
- Potential for research
- Character of Conservation Area

3.8 Heritage can be managed according to a version of the 'Archaeological cycle': 'Protect, Investigate, Appreciate/Celebrate'

To these stages can be added:

- Recognise – new heritage can be discovered, as in archaeological sites through aerial photography, or overlooked documents in a library, or through legacy acquiring a value beyond the functional.
- Capitalise on – Heritage and our understanding of it can help us to manage our world better; thus another possible heritage value is Potential. As noted above, this value is already used in archaeology *re* the ability of sites and objects to provide information about the past (Evidential value), but it could also be used in wider-ranging, more utilitarian ways. This has been summarised by the Society of Antiquaries of London thus:

Understanding the past is key to understanding our place in the world. Its practical implications are wide-ranging, delivering heritage-led regeneration and tourism, the public health benefits of informed planning and placemaking, critically informing public policy on social justice and cohesion, and contributing through long-term understanding to modelling and developing responses to climate change. (Statement regarding the threatened closure of University Departments May 20th, 2021. <https://www.sal.org.uk/2021/05/statement-regarding-the-threatened-closure-of-university-departments/>)

Cf a tweet from Raphael Kahlenberg (@RGKahlenberg), University of Durham, July 22, 2022:

To tackle climate change, we have to think in timescales of several decades to several centuries, or even a millennium. Archaeology is the only field studying cultural practices alongside environmental changes over long periods. We can certainly contribute to today's challenges. <https://twitter.com/RGKahlenberg/status/1550576669974560772>

3.9 Reflecting on the past should lead us to recognise how it shapes our physical, social, intellectual and emotional worlds. A tweet from Manchester Museum on 21 October includes the statement:

Nations & peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings. <https://mobile.twitter.com/McrMuseum/status/1318956971886862339> 21 October 2020

3.10 Human lives are interconnected, and no aspect of the past or place can be understood in isolation from others.

3.11 A revised 'heritage cycle' may therefore look as follows:

- Recognise (something as heritage)
- Protect/Manage
- Understand (why it is so regarded), leading to the need to recognise Potential and Investigate
- Help people to appreciate, enjoy, participate as appropriate and reflect
- Capitalise on

4.0 Analysis of the local situation

4.1 CWAC has numerous evidence base documents relevant to heritage: the Historic Environment Record, Chester Urban Archaeology Database, Historic Town Surveys, *Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study*, Conservation Area Appraisal Reports, *Cheshire Historic Landscape Characterisation Final Report*, excavation reports, plus Victoria County History volumes and local histories. Many of these documents also contain recommendations on management.

4.2 The CWaC *Local Plan*, especially *Part Two*, contains policies to protect archaeology, built heritage, conservation areas, parks and gardens. Implementation of policies on archaeology has generally been good, but those on design (to protect and enhance the setting of built heritage) and conservation areas far less so, and government planning inspectors pose a constant threat. Designation (Scheduling, Listing) provides some protection against ill-informed judgements about heritage assets of more than local importance. Should CWaC be designated an Enterprise Zone or similar, with simplified planning and environmental rules, existing protection for heritage could well be reduced. We addressed this sort of issue in our [response](#) to the government White Paper *Planning for the Future*, section 4.4.

4.3 The revised *Chester One City Plan 2022–2045 Vision* page 6 characterises Chester as a 'world heritage city with global appeal', but otherwise has little to say about

heritage. In fact, the city's heritage has great potential to aid the fulfilment of many of the aims of the plan. Therefore pigeonholing heritage under 'Visiting Chester' in terms of governance is problematical.

- 4.4 High-profile archaeological excavations offering public participation or even access are rare across the borough, as is up-to-date information on discoveries (in one case it was even embargoed by a developer) (exception: the Grosvenor Park student training excavation organised by University of Chester and Grosvenor Museum).
- 4.5 The borough's museum service has lost much of its professional expertise and is now heavily reliant on input from the University of Chester. The Grosvenor Museum has seen no major capital investment for thirty years, contrast the Record Office, for which new offices are planned, incorporating public display spaces as well as research areas but which are totally unconnected to the museum. The *Interpretation Masterplan*, page 32, states: 'Chester clearly lacks a signature all-weather heritage attraction, and would arguably benefit from a single indoor focus for the telling of its story'.
- 4.6 The last major heritage interpretation project in Chester – the EU-funded Portico Project on the City Walls – dates back ten years and drew on the expertise of the staff of the former City Council's archaeological service.
- 4.7 Major celebrations of Chester's heritage are likewise reliant on the expertise of volunteers, as have been attempts to promote historical venues such as the Castle.
- 4.8 There is no professional heritage lead in the borough.
- 4.9 The University of Chester's Dept of History and Archaeology is strengthening its local connections in terms of outreach. There are a number of local, county and regional historical, archaeological and civic societies that cover the borough, some of which liaise through the CWaC Heritage Forum and Cheshire Local History Association and some of which produce journals. Nevertheless, there is no strongly projected sense of historical identity or direction.
- 4.10 There is no attempt to capitalise on the borough's heritage, as set out in 3.8 above.

5.0 What we want to see

5.1 A strategy that:

- **Sets out the principles** on which it based, as in 3.0 above, and its aims.
- **Integrates** different types of heritage (archaeological landscapes and sites, buildings, spaces, objects, documents, traditions, biocultural).
- Summarises the **character** of the heritage of the of the borough's communities and landscapes; we attempted to do this for Chester [in our 2015 document](#), section 3.0.
- Summarises the **significance** of the heritage of the borough's communities and landscapes in terms of explicit values; again, we attempted to do this for Chester in terms of evidential, associative and aesthetic values [in our 2015 document](#), section 4.1.
- Encourages relevant historical and archaeological **research**.

- Sets out how heritage will be **protected, investigated, enhanced** and made more **accessible**; see the issues identified for Chester [in our 2015 document](#), sections 7.1–7.4.
 - **Celebrates** the heritage of the borough’s communities, urban and rural, sets out how their **stories will be told**, recognises that history and archaeology are **dynamic** social sciences, and encourages **reflection**
 - Recognises the importance of discoveries made during commercial archaeological excavations, seeks to increase timely **information** about them and increases the chances for public **participation**.
 - Encourages, guides and supports sustainable **community** heritage projects.
 - Sets out the **potential** of the borough’s heritage that can be **capitalised** on *re* placemaking, climate change, communities, lifestyles etc.
 - Shapes and justifies the treatment of **heritage in other Council policies**, especially the Local Plan.
 - Is **implemented**, led by a senior officer with appropriate knowledge, vision and authority.
 - Is recognised to be necessarily **long-term** (eg 20 years) and does not carry less weight as time goes by.
- 5.2 Although one can envisage a document that sets out broad principles covering the whole borough, its major settlements have very different historical trajectories, and any detailed studies and specific actions relating to them will therefore be different. One can easily divide the borough into: Dee Estuary, including Wirral as far as Meols and also extending to north-east Wales; Mersey shore; Sandstone Ridge; and Weaver Valley (both of these extending into Cheshire East). Even so, no communities are totally isolated, and a borough-wide strategy gives the opportunity to highlight the links between them, perhaps focusing on the major rivers (Dee, Mersey, Weaver), canals and railways.
- 5.3 For Chester we should like to see:
- Protection and enhancement of the city’s historic fabric and form in accordance with Local Plan Part 2 policies CH1, 5 and 6, for example:
 - Protection and enhancement of the historic street plan of the city (especially the minor streets) against erosion through development.
 - Protection of the City Walls and other major monuments from damage through lack of understanding.
 - Better quality new development that enhances Conservation Areas rather than, as too often, does slight harm to them.
 - Better care of the public realm and removal of unnecessary street furniture and signage.
 - In accordance with Chester’s historic characteristic of adapting and refronting buildings, the repurposing and modification of existing buildings rather than their demolition and replacement. This approach might ‘rescue’, for example, aesthetically the unsatisfactory 20th-century buildings lining Pepper Street and the former Quick’s Garage on Lower Bridge Street.

- Stabilisation of Dee House, an 18th-century mayor's house on the site of part of the Roman amphitheatre.
- Stabilisation of the revetment wall of St Olave's Church, so that the church can be brought back into use.
- Enhancement of the Roman 'Quay Wall', of the Roman column base in a sunken yard behind Watergate Street and other monuments in private hands in cooperation with the occupiers.
- Enhancement of the city's lanes, especially those giving access to the Rows, for people with mobility difficulties.
- Restoration of architectural coherence to Chester railway station, brutally 'modernised' in 1960.
- Publication of major unpublished excavations in Chester c 1963–1990.
- An expanded and improved Chester museum that displays the history of the lower Dee valley through the ages in its regional, national and international settings, using all relevant sources of information. It should aim both to be of interest to visitors from abroad and to provide a setting for the work of local historical groups.

It has the potential to:

- Highlight the enduring characteristics, differences and links between the regions of the British Isles.
- Explore Chester's changing roles and multiple identities as an administrative, commercial and social 'central place' and port in the Irish Sea Region over the centuries.
- Highlight the latest discoveries (eg from excavations, PAS finds) and advances in knowledge.
- Establish links with other relevant museums across the British Isles and stage mutually beneficial travelling exhibitions (eg British Museum, Cardiff, Dublin, Hadrian's Wall).
- Encourage the exploration of related places and landscapes, near and far, eg Neston and Parkgate, Ellesmere Port, Heronbridge, Dee Valley motte and bailey castles, hillforts of the Sandstone Ridge, Roman forts and medieval castles of north Wales.
- Capitalisation on the potential of the city's heritage to contribute to achieving the aims of the revised *One City Plan*, including:
 - the opportunity of using the small-scale inherited plan form of the city to reduce motor traffic and thus make it more accessible to pedestrians and cyclists, allow its built heritage to be better appreciated, and 'green' the city, eg reduction of motor traffic on the Inner Ring Road and the 14th-century Old Dee Bridge.
 - Adapting the under-used Castle, with views over the river, town and surrounding countryside, as the site for a new museum worthy of a 'world heritage city'.
 - Making more of suburban sites such as Heronbridge (Roman settlement and early medieval earthwork), Hockenhull Platts (18th-century packhorse

bridge), and the Wrexham Road medieval moated site to add interest to local rural walks.

6.0 Relevant CAS documents

[Two Thousand Years of an English Frontier City- Protecting, Understanding and Helping People to Appreciate Chester's Heritage](#) (November 2015)

[Comments on Chester Heritage and Visual Arts Strategy \(July 2016\)](#)

[Comments on Chester Heritage and Visual Arts Strategy \(January 2017\)](#)

CWaC Heritage Strategy Approach October 2020: Chester Archaeological Society Initial Comments.

Also relevant are:

[Comments on CWaC 'Play Your Part' Consultation](#), October 2019

[CWaC 'Walk, Ride, Thrive' Consultation: Chester Archaeological Society Response](#) (June 2020)

[Cheshire West High Street, Town and City Centre Commission: Chester Archaeological Society Response](#) (July 2020)

[UK Government White Paper Consultation 'Planning for the Future': Chester Archaeological Society Response. 'Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?' \(Who will Inspect the Inspectors?\)](#) (October 2020)

[Cheshire West and Chester Climate Emergency Response Plan: Chester Archaeological Society Response](#) (December 2020)

[Chester One City Plan Revision: Chester Archaeological Society Response](#) (March 2021)

[Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan Review: Chester Archaeological Society Response](#) (August 2021)

[Chester Wayfinding Audit](#) (September 2021)

[Mersey Forest Draft Land Action Plan for Cheshire West and Chester Council: Chester Archaeological Society Response](#) (December 2021)

All of these explore some of the issues set out above in more detail.

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