

PROPOSED CHANGE OF USE/CONVERSION TO RESIDENTIAL, WATERGATE ROW NORTH, CHESTER (23/03821/FUL)

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY COMMENTS

Summary

In principle the Chester Archaeological Society welcomes the conversion of vacant upper storeys of city-centre buildings for residential use and does not necessarily object to the refacing of facades.

In this case, the proposed refacing of the Watergate Street facades of nos 14 and 16 is weak and that of no 14 in particular fails to respect the rhythm of the building. It should be reconsidered.

The proposed changes to the Goss Street wing are again weak, leaving a utilitarian feel, and should be modified with more detail and more generous fenestration to add character. The blank display windows on the single-storey extension should be opened up if possible.

Ideally the ramp up the side of Goss Street should be removed and the street itself resurfaced to restore character to this medieval street.

Details

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This proposal involves the conversion of the upper storeys of nos 14–20 Watergate Row North and their extensions into Goss Street to residential use. Externally it is proposed to re-face the Watergate Street facades of nos 14 and 16 at Row +1 and +2 levels and to make minor changes to the fenestration and appearance of the Goss Street wing and to add balconies.
- 1.2 In principle the Chester Archaeological Society welcomes the conversion of vacant upper storeys of city-centre buildings for residential use, so long as such adaptation does not damage heritage features; indeed, that is how the upper storeys of historic Row buildings were originally intended to be used (albeit in a more spacious way than is now envisaged). Nor can there be an objection in principle to recladding frontages, which has been often been done in past centuries.
- 1.3 We are not competent to judge how far the proposed internal arrangements are acceptable, and these comments are restricted to the external appearance of the buildings. However, from this point of view, the proposed changes are unsatisfactory and miss an opportunity to radically improve the quality of the backland area. In appraising this scheme, it may be helpful to bear in mind the proposals put forward in a previous application for these properties, 16/00580/FUL. These included, again, the refacing of the Watergate Street facades of nos 14 and 16, a crude reconstruction of nos 18–20 that nevertheless removed the obtrusive ramp and unattractive single-storey extension along Goss Street; these were to be replaced by over-development that even so had some stylistic merits. The present proposals are far more modest but some aspects of the earlier ones may be worth bearing in mind.

2.0 Appraisal and Recommendations

- 2.1 Nos 14 and 16 are in brutalist style, as are several other properties in Watergate Street, while nos 18-20 are a fairly close replica of their eighteenth-century predecessor. The side and rear face of nos 18-20 and the Goss Street wing are undistinguished and utilitarian. Most elements were built in the 1970s. No 10 Watergate Steet/12 Watergate Row, adjoining the development site to the east, was built in the late 1980s, again in eighteenth-century style.
- 2.2 The gabled facades that it is proposed to add to the Watergate Street frontages of 14 and 16 are unsatisfactory, weak and lacking in interest. In particular, that on no 14 only extends across two of the three bays as defined by the posts supporting the upper storeys, giving an unbalanced appearance that does not respect the rhythm and logic of the building. Both facades would lack the clear articulation and detailing of the neighbouring properties, eg a visible lintel across the top of the Row carrying the upper storeys, and clearly marked window sills, lintels and bars. Indeed, it could be argued that the present brutalist façade is stronger and has more character, and it is not clear that the changes to the internal arrangements necessitate the proposed refacing. A propos the previous scheme, 16/00580/FUL, the former Conservation Area Advisory Panel on balance favoured retention of the existing facades, although the proposed replacements had some merits that might be reconsidered. Either the facades should be left as they are or refaced in a more sensitive way
- 2.3 Despite the proposed changes, the Goss Street wing retains a utilitarian feel, particularly because of the small windows and weak framing but also because of the lack of detailing in the brickwork. Again, something might be learnt from the previous redevelopment scheme, which showed more generous fenestration and detailing. While balconies may be worthwhile where they overlook the wider part of Goss Street, those projecting over the narrow southern end do not seem to serve a useful purpose. It appears that the blanked-out display windows on the single-storey extension will remain. These are serious detractors and if possible should be opened up and the windows themselves made more interesting. Chester's lanes and backlands are intriguing but need to be made more attractive. We consider that an opportunity is being missed to give this wing of the building, and thus the street, greater character.
- 2.4 Goss Street is one of Chester's medieval streets that has largely lost its character as a result of post-war redevelopment. If the lane east of no 10 Watergate Street from the car park to the Row could be made more attractive and suitable for buggies and wheelchairs, the ramp up to the bridge at the side of nos 18–20 could be removed, as previously proposed, and the street restored to its previous width. Ideally, as suggested by the former Conservation Area Advisory Panel re 16/00580/FUL:

The opportunity should be taken to resurface Goss Street in setts and wheelers to emphasise its historical character. It is a street, not a 'pedestrian ginnel', comparable to King Street, Commonhall Street and Whitefriars, and merits similar treatment.

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