

PARTIAL DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BINGO HALL AND PROPOSED ERECTION OF HOTEL, BROOKDALE PLACE, CHESTER (23/03823/FUL)

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY COMMENTS

Summary

- This is a landmark site at a gateway to the city centre. The present building is an eyesore and we welcome the principle of redevelopment, but this needs to be of the highest quality.
- A number of hotel schemes have been approved in Chester in the past few years but have failed to progress. If the proposed hotel were to be built and to fail, could the building be adapted for another purpose appropriate to the site?
- The detailing of the proposed building shows considerably more thought than do other recent canalside developments, but, when this is stripped away, the massing is revealed to be a large unrelieved cuboid that is out of place in this location.
- The massing and skyline of the proposed building should be broken up and the opportunity should be taken to address the canal more positively.
- There does not appear to be any information about the foundations of the existing or proposed buildings, so the survival of archaeological remains, and the potential impact of the development on them, cannot be judged. Trial excavation will almost certainly be necessary, followed by an archaeological programme as appropriate.

Details

1.0 The Site

- 1.1 This is a landmark site overlooking the canal at a gateway to the city centre, visible from a variety of directions, including from the City Walls. Any redevelopment has the potential to make a major impact on the area and therefore needs to be of the highest quality.

2.0 The Principle of Demolition and Redevelopment

- 2.1 It is now a commonplace that buildings should be adapted and reused whenever possible. However, the brick-built portion of the former Gaumont cinema, which it is proposed to demolish, has little to commend it externally, and whatever architectural features of note that it had internally have gone. We are therefore content to see it demolished. Nevertheless, a check should be made of the documentation of the building in case any recording is desirable. What is proposed for the fine ceiling and panelling in the Oak Restaurant?

3.0 Proposed Use of the Site for a Hotel

- 3.1 This may not be directly under CWaC's control, but it should be remembered that four recent hotel schemes have received planning permission but not progressed: Black Diamond Street, Frodsham Street, 8 Foregate Street and 105–111 Foregate Street. In addition, one older scheme, the Northgate Travelodge, failed and the building has been reused as student accommodation. If the proposed hotel were to be built and fail, how might the building be reused? *National Planning Policy Framework* para 135 may be relevant: 'Developments: [should] function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development'.

3.2 The application envisages minimal parking for guests, many of whom may accordingly arrive by train (the station is only 15 minutes' walk away). The route from the station along Brook Street needs to be improved, and especially the crossing of the Inner Ring Road. See our [comments](#) on the *Chester Gateway Strategic Regeneration Framework*, paras B.3.c and L.1.c. Even though the use of public transport should be encouraged whenever possible, will the envisaged parking be sufficient for disabled guests and their carers?

4.0 Building Design

4.1 Despite the invocation of medieval models for inspiration, the proposed building actually mimics Italianate industrial buildings, eg the Steam Mill and railway station, which is an appropriate choice for this part of Chester. The detailing and fenestration, especially the top storey with arched window openings, show much more thought than seen on other recent applications for canalside development. The proposed improvements to the surroundings are to be welcomed.

4.2 However, when the detailing is stripped away, the massing is revealed to be an unrelieved cuboid that by implication takes its scale from the core of the existing building. *Local Plan Part Two* policy CH6 states:

Existing tall buildings in Chester do not set a policy precedent for similar development on adjacent sites, unless they are contextually appropriate in that locality or townscape setting and sit comfortably within the topography of the area.

4.3 It is regrettable that the drawings of the development do not permit straightforward comparison with the existing buildings, and the contextual views have their foregrounds 'burnt out', resulting in it being more difficult to visualise the proposed building in its real setting. However, it would appear to be rather higher than the ridge of the cinema but much more prominent because of its sheer-sided form compared with the sloping gambrel roof and lower ancillary structures of the existing building. At c 45 m the north and south facades would also be rather longer than most others in Chester. The identical, repetitive bays emphasise this length, and the uniform decorative top storey, although attractive in itself, draws attention to the long, high skyline.

'The present buildings are pretty much an eyesore, but the proposed new building will dwarf everything in the vicinity.' CAS member

4.4 The hotel would occupy a site lying between the very varied 2–3 storey buildings of Frodsham Street, Union Terrace and Book Street and the 4-storey Bowling Green Court on the one hand and the 5–7 storey warehouse (-style) buildings lining the canal further east on the other. The *Heritage Appraisal* is at pains to argue that, because of the space around it (as a result of its being sandwiched the canal and the Inner Ring Road), the height of the building would not adversely affect any heritage assets. However, the repetition of this apologia, rather than advocacy of the proposed building's own merits, clearly shows disquiet in this regard. In fact, because the building would stand isolated, its height would be more noticeable and give it an unjustified prominence in the landscape. By reason of its height, scale and massing, the development would not merge into its neighbourhood nor contribute positively to it.

4.5 The massing of the proposed building should be broken up and the opportunity should be taken to address the canal more positively: both might be achieved, for example, by variations in the north and south façades and their fenestration. The skyline should be more varied, without exceeding seven storeys, and the topmost storey could be accommodated under a more 'recessive' grey-coloured mansard-style roof to soften its impact. The westernmost two bays might be one storey lower, better to merge with the surrounding townscape. If they do not already exist, moorings might be considered along the towpath to attract boat users.

5.0 Archaeology

5.1 The Archaeology Desk-Based Assessment records just three heritage assets of note in the development area, apart from the cinema itself: Roman pottery; Civil War outworks; and a nineteenth-century brickworks. It would seem that the area was very much on the urban fringe until the later nineteenth century. For the Roman period, signs of land-division and ploughing might be looked for; they have been found elsewhere in the area, on a north-east to south-west axis. The discovery of a probable Civil War ditch at Milton Street shows that the often-republished map of the outworks is either wrong or incomplete, so further discoveries may be made. At least a strip-and-record exercise for any post-Civil War buildings or features may be judged appropriate. However, we have no idea how the present building or the preceding nineteenth-century houses may have affected the survival of earlier remains. Nor does there seem to be a foundation design for the new building, although a geocellular storage tank is marked on the drainage plan, so the potential impact on surviving archaeology cannot be gauged. Almost certainly trial excavation will be required, followed by an archaeological programme as necessary.

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