

CHESTER RACECOURSE DEVELOPMENTS: ROODEE HOSPITALITY BUILDING AND SADDLERY WAY FACILITIES HUB AND LODGE (24/03622/FUL)

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY COMMENTS

Summary

- The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes these proposals as a considerable improvement on those put forward in 2018 and as an attempt to comply with the *National Design Guide*.
- The removal of the ‘tented village’ on the Roodee and the construction of a new single-storey hospitality building with green roof would enhance this strategic green space and maintain views across it. To avoid possible intrusion into archaeologically significant deposits, foundations for the proposed building should be kept as shallow as possible and their construction should be subject to archaeological monitoring.
- The layout, scale, form and materials of the proposed buildings on the Saddlery Way site broadly respect their context. However:
 - The Saddlery Way façade of the Lodge is uninspired by comparison with the Facilities Hub and would be improved by larger windows, more detailing, and the introduction of more colour.
 - The Maintenance Building adjacent to the terraced houses on Kitchen Street should have a higher-quality cladding, eg of timber.
- The Saddlery Way site occupies a large area immediately behind the eighteenth-century wharf and offers an opportunity to understand its evolution and function in detail. The envisaged foundation design of the proposed buildings is potentially highly destructive of archaeology and would justify area excavation.

Detailed consultation responses such as this require considerable time on the part of Society Officers and Members to research and compile. So that our views can be properly taken into account by members on Planning Committee, we respectfully ask the Planning Officer to include the specifics of our summary recommendations above in their report rather than generalise them.

Detail

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes this application. In contrast to the previous ones (18/02677/OUT, 18/02678/FUL, 18/02679/FUL), it respects the views across the Roodee, restores green space there, and proposes buildings in the Saddlery Way area that in their layout, scale, form and materials respect their setting, although some details are capable of improvement. Only construction at the Saddlery Way site, adjacent to the wharves of Chester’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century port, seems likely to have significant archaeological implications, justifying extensive excavation.

2.0 Roodee

2.1 The proposed hospitality building would be unobtrusive in being single storey and thus would not block views across the Roodee, as would have those proposed in 2018. The green roof of the building and the removal of the adjacent ‘tented village’ would enhance the appearance of this strategic green space.

- 2.2 It seems unlikely that any archaeologically significant structures would be encountered, but the accumulation of deposits is likely to contain valuable information regarding silting and possible land reclamation. We are unsure of the level at which significant deposits may be found: Roman tile was found at c 2.8m AOD during construction of an underpass at the north-east corner of the Roodee in 1991, but we understand that further information may be available from more recent evaluations. Foundations and other ground disturbance should be kept as shallow as possible, and excavation should be archaeologically monitored and recorded. Full advantage should be taken of geotechnical boreholes etc to record archaeological and palaeoenvironmental evidence.
- 2.3 The *Design and Access Statement* (page 7) also foresees, *inter alia*, eventual expansion or rebuilding of the present hotel and refurbishment of the County and Leverhulme Stands and of the Dee Enclosure. Re: the hotel, any future building should be far more sympathetic to its context than the present anonymous 'box'; none of these proposals should compromise open views across the Roodee; and opportunities should be taken to investigate and better present the Roman 'Quay Wall', as already discussed with members of the Chester Archaeological Society.

3.0 Saddlery Way site

- 3.1 The layout, scale, form and materials of this development broadly respect their context. In the context of the *National Design Guide* and the emerging CWaC Design Code, we welcome the restoration of the historic route of Crane Bank; the appropriate scale and the breaking-up of the massing; the varied forms and roofscapes that reflect the neighbourhood (although that has largely been reconstructed in the past 10-20 years) and the wider townscape; the detailing on the brickwork of the Facilities Hub; and the installation of solar panels on the roofs of the Maintenance Building and a parking bay.
- 3.2 Nevertheless, we consider that some improvements are possible that would make this a landmark development:
- 3.2.1 We are dubious about the use of grey brick. This works well in engineering contexts, eg railway cutting walls, but is 'unfriendly' when used on buildings intended for people; see, for example, the former Northgate Travelodge.
- 3.2.2 In contrast with the Facilities Hub, the Saddlery Way façade of the Lodge looks curiously dated and uninspired in its lack of detailing. It would be improved by larger windows and the introduction of more colour.
- 3.2.3 The residents of Kitchen Street deserve better than to have a metal shed as a neighbour (the Maintenance Building). A more sympathetic cladding should be used, eg timber (which would echo the timber cladding of the courtyard face of the Lodge).
- 3.3 Historically, this area lay immediately adjacent to the wharves of Chester's port. Hitherto, published archaeological examination has been confined to the wharves themselves to the west and to the workhouse and Cop to the south. A series of maps from 1745 onwards show a largely open area dominated by a long-lived 'winged' building parallel to Crane Bank, with eventual infilling along Crane Bank and development along New Crane Street, perhaps in the second half of the nineteenth

century. Many of the houses along New Crane Street will have been demolished when that street was dualled, but otherwise there seems to be the potential to understand in detail the evolution and function of much of the area and the buildings within it. A quick map overlay exercise suggests that the eastern half of the winged building and some of the buildings to its north lie within the footprint of the proposed Facilities Hub, while the Lodge would overlie part of a small structure to the south of the winged building and might clip an extension of the workhouse.

- 3.4 The channel of the River Dee moved westwards in the eighteenth century, but the evidence for this process is still limited, and every opportunity should be taken to learn more about it. It has been argued that the way that the wharf and yard behind it, first attested on Lavaux's map of 1745, about the original line of the Cop (first built 1706-10) may suggest that they precede it.
- 3.5 The Archaeological Assessment suggests that the Facilities Hub and Lodge could be founded on piles (93 and 59 respectively) up to 19m deep and tied together with ground beams; there would also be lift pits and stair bases. The depth below ground level and thickness of archaeological deposits in the area are unclear, as are envisaged construction levels, but such a dense network of even individually small intrusions could be highly destructive, leaving only small 'islands' of archaeology behind, difficult to interpret. Given that the remains are judged as of regional significance and not worthy of preservation *in situ*, a programme of area excavation within the footprints of the proposed buildings would be justified.

4.0 Publication

- 4.1 Previous excavations in the area, between 1999 and 2004, were published in the *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society* volume 82 for 2007/8. We understand that informative archaeological evaluations were carried out in connection with the previous racecourse development scheme. We should be happy to publish these, together with the results of any excavations carried out in connection with the present development scheme, in a future issue of the journal.

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For Chester Archaeological Society

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