

## CHESTER NORTHGATE DEVELOPMENT PHASE II MASTERPLAN

### CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY COMMENTS

#### Summary

- On the basis of the available information, the Chester Archaeological Society generally welcomes these proposals but considers that they are capable of improvement to enhance local distinctiveness. They offer the opportunity to recreate a residential area that is visibly based on its past, makes a positive contribution to the character of the city centre as a whole and has the potential to endure in a changing world (1.2).
- The area was redeveloped from the 1960s to the 1990s, obliterating its historical character. The present buildings were fashionable when first erected but were soon judged to be of poor design and/or inappropriate to their location (2.1, 2.3).
- Before redevelopment the area had a densely built-up backland character with mixed uses, structured around narrow streets that date at least to the medieval period and were influenced by the layout of the Roman fortress (4.1).
- If they are to be reused, have the concrete substructure of the Forum been assessed for durability? Which levels are being used? (5.1.1).
- The proposed use of the site, largely for housing, is essentially a return to the pre-World War 2 situation and will hopefully support the retail sector in the city centre (5.2.1)
- Surviving archaeology is most likely to be found south of Hamilton Place. It should be preserved *in situ* wherever possible (5.3.2).
- The opportunity should be taken to publish in full the many important archaeological discoveries made in the area over the past sixty years, which in particular have the potential to improve understanding of the layout of the Roman fortress and its role in the British province. (5.3.4).
- We welcome the reinstatement of the medieval northern part of Crook Street and of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Market Street. We presume that Princess Street is retained as an accessible sloping street, but this needs to be confirmed (5.4.1).
- There needs to be a clearer hierarchy of streets, other public spaces, and courtyards, with Hamilton Place, Goss Street, Crook Street, Trinity Street and Princess Street given visual primacy and retaining their narrow widths to restore historical character to the area and ensure legibility/ease of wayfinding. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century lanes such as Lower Yard, Lion Yard and Herbert's Court could be reinstated as access routes or courtyards for the proposed development blocks (5.4.2).
- The site forms a significant proportion of the city centre conservation area and the opportunity should be taken to improve it. Elevational design, materials, colours and heights of new buildings should respond to the historical townscape of the city, as required by local and national planning guidance. Inspiration may be found in other backland areas of Chester (5.5.1–.3)
- Thought needs to be given as to how best to display the Strongroom of the Roman Headquarters Building (5.5.5)
- The proposed 'cultural building' could be the home to a new museum showcasing the range of the collections presently in the Grosvenor Museum, but only if enough floorspace and money could be guaranteed (5.6.1)

## Detail

### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This response is based on the information on the <https://chesternorthgate2.co.uk/> website, accessed on 20-05-26. The visuals on the website comprise several bird's-eye views of the proposed development as a whole and one plan, plus 3-D outlines of some proposed buildings, but no elevations or sections, and the textual information is very general. Detailed, soundly based comment is therefore difficult at the moment. Important matters that need to be clarified are indicated below in **bold**.
- 1.2 Despite these limitations, the Chester Archaeological Society generally welcomes the proposals but considers that they should be improved to meet the requirements of local and national policies and guidance and to enhance local distinctiveness. There is the opportunity to recreate a residential area that is visibly based on its past, makes a positive contribution to the character of the city centre and has the potential to endure in a changing world. The planning process would benefit from the preparation of an informed, detailed and sympathetic design code, as prepared by Create Streets for [Lichfield](#), even though this document has a slightly different purpose. (Create Streets are already involved in preparing a design code for CWaC as a whole).

### 2.0 Present Condition and Evaluation of the Site

- 2.1 The site occupies a backland area between Chester Town Hall and Northgate Street properties to the east, Watergate Street properties to the south, Trinity Street to the west and Princess Street to the north. Most of the area is occupied by the former market and Forum shopping centre and offices, with partly subterranean car parks, built in the 1960s and modified in the 1990s. South of Hamilton Place lie Goldsmith House (1970s), Merchant House (1990s) and Hamilton House (1960s). A bridge links the Crowne Plaza hotel, sited between Trinity Street and Linenhall Street (Inner Ring Road), and the Forum development.
- 2.2 The construction of the Forum/market and its car parks led to the near-total removal of well-preserved and in one case apparently unique archaeology, mitigated to some extent by partial controlled excavation and the preservation *in situ* of part of the strongroom of the Roman Headquarters Building; Merchant House is also deeply basemented. The archaeological losses caused by Goldsmith House and Hamilton House are uncertain. Nevertheless, it seems likely that extensive areas of archaeology survive south of Hamilton Place, with some on the north side. Noteworthy losses of standing buildings in the 1960s were the assay office on the west side of Goss Street and Matthew Henry's chapel on the east side of Trinity Street, also the obliteration of the northern, medieval, part of Crook Street; Hamilton Place was also extended from its junction with Crook Street to Trinity Street at this time.
- 2.3 The *Chester Characterisation Study A: Central Area* evaluates the present buildings in this area as follows:
- A8. Market: Negative**  
City centre edge, indoor market, shopping mall, theatre and open bus station. 1960s buildings with some interesting artwork. Large scale uses out of scale with the townscape within the Walls. (Page 101)

*Key detractors*

Nicholas Street: The Crowne Plaza Hotel and car park, which is highly visible because of its size and bulk..... Its design pays no heed to the grain of the city. The development also includes a pedestrian underpass to Hamilton Place which presents a very poor and unwelcoming environment.

Hamilton Place: The western end of this street suffers from the rear elevation of the aforementioned Crowne Plaza Hotel and car park, in addition to Hamilton House office block and the frontage to the Forum Studio Theatre. The former is a standard office block of its time that fails to match the grain or townscape of the city.

Market Area: The 1960s indoor market hall ... [is] ... out of character with the prevailing urban form and townscape and present[s] a poor appearance. ... This area is within the setting of several listed buildings and buildings of townscape merit.  
(Page 97)

**3.0 Summary of the Masterplan**

3.1 The masterplan seems to involve the total demolition of the Forum and market and of Hamilton House. Merchant House is retained **but the fate of Goldsmith House is unclear**. The plan appears to reinstate the northern part of Crook Street, approximately on its historical alignment, also the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Market Street behind the Town Hall. However, this is ahistorically extended to join up with Goss Street to the south.

3.2 The proposed buildings are in what may be characterised as warehouse-style blocks up to six storeys high, presumably apartments, with green courtyards and green spaces alongside the streets. The first impression from the indicative plan is of large blocks loosely sited, without any strong 'grain' or hierarchy of spaces.

**4.0 Historical Character of the Area**

4.1 This is usefully summarised in Archaeological Character Zones 5 and 7 of the *Chester Archaeological Plan*. The northern side of the Roman Headquarters Building lay roughly along Hamilton Place; a large courtyard building lay to its north, with the site of its eastern half now being occupied by Town Hall Square; the apparently unique Elliptical Building lay to the west of the courtyard building, with workshops beyond; and the First Cohort barracks to the south of Hamilton Place. Buildings of the Saxon period have been found at Goss Street, Crook Street and Hamilton Place (Goldsmith House). Hamilton Place as far as the junction with Crook Street, the southern part of Crook Street, and Trinity Street seem likely to be late Saxon in origin, roughly following Roman predecessors: Hamilton Place perhaps perpetuating the road between the First Cohort Barracks to the south and the major buildings to the north, Crook Street the lane to the east of a barrack, and Trinity Street the perimeter road (*via sagularis*) inside the fortress defences, also preserved in Whitefriars and Weaver Street. Goss Street, the northern part of Crook Street and Princess Street go back at least to the medieval period, Crook Street perhaps snaking between the remains of the Roman Elliptical Building and the workshops to its west, and Princess Street running from the Abbey Gateway and being the site of the house of the vicar of St Oswald's. Activity in the Middle Ages was predominately domestic on plots fronting onto Princess Street, Northgate Street, Linenhall Street and perhaps to a lesser extent Crook Street and Trinity Street. The assay office building on Goss Street was built in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the introduction of a number of industrial buildings, including a brewery and an iron foundry, as well as several non-conformist chapels and schools and the addition of a number of small housing courts,

especially off Crook Street, which can perhaps be regarded as the 'spine' of the area. In the later 19<sup>th</sup> century the character of the area changed again to a more commercial focus with the introduction of the indoor market.

- 4.2 At the time of the World War 1, the area was one of the poorest in Chester. Slum clearance began in 1939 (leading to the discovery of the Elliptical Building). An extensive civic centre was foreseen in Greenwood's post-war *Plan for Redevelopment*, pages 60–62. The present, more modest, Forum and market, Hamilton House and the car park under the Crowne Plaza hotel were the product of the then city council's Central Redevelopment Area scheme of the 1960s.

## 5.0 Comments on the Proposals

### 5.1 *Structural Constraints*

- 5.1.1 **We assume that the new development will be constructed on the substructures of the Forum. Is this correct or are they to be demolished/backfilled?** It would be a poor advertisement for Chester as a 'world heritage city' if underground spaces created at the price of world-class archaeology were to be abandoned after only sixty years. Have the substructures been assessed for their likely lifespan? **Which of the many levels are being used** (This will have a major impact on the appearance of the development)?

### 5.2 *Function*

- 5.2.1 The proposal to redevelop the largely area for housing is essentially a return to the pre-World War 2 situation (although much of that was very poor quality) and will hopefully support the retail sector in the city centre. Views on the type of housing are beyond our remit and expertise.
- 5.2.2 Will any of the former Forum parking be available to residents and how will they gain access to it? Encouraging residents to cycle will only succeed if the whole of the city centre is made more cyclist-friendly. Easy access to frequent bus services will be required, eg to the bus interchange, railway station, Chester Business Park and Sealand Road employment and retail parks; see most recently our [digest](#) of comments on travel and transport for the Chester Movement Strategy.
- 5.2.3 The proposed reinstated 'Market Street' behind the Town Hall seems an obvious location for small-scale retail and outdoor markets.

### 5.3 *Archaeology*

- 5.3.1 Excavations in the 1960s focused on remains of the Roman period and revealed the northern side of the Headquarters Building, the courtyard building to its north, the Elliptical Building and workshops, and fragments of the First Cohort barracks. Later excavations in the 1970s added to this information and also revealed Saxon and later occupation. The Saxon discoveries have been published, but of the Roman buildings only the Elliptical Building has been published in full (admittedly without finds) – on private initiative; there is only a summary report of the large courtyard building, based on further discoveries in 1980; and only notes in national journals on the discoveries relating to the workshops and barracks.
- 5.3.2 As mentioned above (para 2.2), it seems that surviving archaeology is most likely to be found south of Hamilton Place, with some on the north side. Merchant House is deeply basemented but it should not be assumed that all archaeology has been removed. The archaeological losses caused by Goldsmith House and Hamilton

House are uncertain. The foundations of new buildings should be designed to preserve remains *in situ* wherever possible, in accordance with the *Chester Archaeological Plan*, but any opportunities should be taken to learn more about the First Cohort barracks and workshops and other periods of archaeology: eg, a fine prehistoric axe was found to the north, at Hunter Street, in 1914, and Saxon buildings and very rich early post-medieval rubbish pits were found in Crook Street in 1973/4. A desk-based assessment therefore needs to be commissioned to assemble existing information. Once the footprints of proposed buildings and other associated groundworks have been established, there should be consultation with the Archaeology Planning Advisory Service before a planning application is submitted to agree acceptable foundation design; this will probably require trial excavation.

- 5.3.3 It should also be remembered that Hamilton Place, Goss Street, Crook Street, Trinity Street and Princess Street are of high antiquity and of archaeological interest, even though their alignments will have altered slightly over the centuries, and any excavations in them, eg for services, should be archaeologically monitored.
- 5.3.4 The opportunity afforded by this development should be taken to publish in full the major discoveries made in this area over the past sixty years: especially the remains of the Roman Headquarters Building; the unusual large courtyard building behind it, which may influence our understanding of the role of the Chester legionary fortress in the British province; the workshops to the west, on which we currently only have brief notes in national journals; the layout of the First Cohort barracks, which seems to have differed from one fortress to another; and if at all possible the poorly understood 'compound' under the former bus exchange.

#### 5.4 *Proposed Street Plan*

- 5.4.1 We welcome the proposed reinstatement of the northern, medieval, part of Crook Street, as recommended in the *Chester Characterisation Study A: Central Area*, page 104 and the *CWaC Local Plan Part Two*, policy CH5, 6, also that of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Market Street, which would open up views of the back of the Town Hall. **We assume that Princess Street is retained as an accessible, sloping, street rather than being converted to less-accessible steps, as has been done by the side of the new market, but this needs to be confirmed.** The loss or realignment of historical routes would be contrary to the explicit statement in policy CH5, 6. We also welcome the introduction of planting in the area, although in accordance with Chester's character trees may be more appropriate in yards and courtyards rather than along the streets. The green space at the western end of Hamilton Place should be maximised.
- 5.4.2 However, we are concerned that there is no clear hierarchy of streets, other public spaces, and private lanes and courtyards. The main streets – Hamilton Place, Goss Street, Crook Street (including its reinstated northern section), Trinity Street and Princess Street - should be given visual primacy as they are essential to the historical character and legibility of the area; they should retain their narrow widths and the bollards closing off the lower parts of Goss Street and Crook Street, near their junction with Watergate Street should be removed, restoring the continuity of these streets. Spaces such as Lower Yard, Lion Yard and Herbert's Court shown on the 1875 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map may not pre-date the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but we strongly suggest that approximations to the first two are reinstated on their original sites as access routes to development blocks and that Herbert's Court be reinstated

in expanded form as a courtyard within a block; all of these would reinforce the historical character of the area.

- 5.4.3 We note that a new building seems to be proposed on the site of the Goss Street car park; this would restore shape to a street that has lost it and could close the view to those entering the street from Watergate Street. A similar building closing the end of Market Street adjacent to the southern side of the Town Hall would be welcome.

## 5.5 *Proposed Buildings*

- 5.5.1 The Northgate Phase II site occupies a significant proportion of the city centre conservation area, and the opportunity should be taken to improve it through sympathetic development, the more especially as other recent major developments are recognised as having caused harm to it (eg the Fountains Health Centre, the Hunter Street student housing and the Northgate Phase I MSCP). The *Chester Characterisation Study A: Central Area*, page 104 'Design Principles for New Development' states re the Market area:

Elevational design, materials, colours and heights should respond to the historic townscape and urban form of the city.

Respect .... the setting of listed buildings, notably the Town Hall, .... the Guildhall and rear of buildings on Watergate Street ....

These are important and clear principles that should guide the design of new buildings and against which proposals can be evaluated.

The CWaC *Local Plan Part 2*, policies CH5 and DM3 make the same points eg

respect and where possible enhance local distinctiveness through the use of building layout, design, materials, architectural detailing, public realm and boundary treatment. (DM3, 5)

as do *National Planning Policy Framework* Principle DP 3, 1 A, 'Context' and *Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance*, page 11. 'Context' 19 and 20, and pages 53–7, 'Identity', eg:

New development should complement its surroundings, reflecting local or regional character, built and natural form, vernacular, landscape and distinctive elements of the area. Key considerations include: .... building design: scale, proportions, façade design, details of windows and doors, colours, textures and patterns. (*Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance*, 55)

It is better for buildings still to be cherished in one hundred years' time than just to be fashionable for a decade or so, as were the present buildings on the site; they should add to the stock of fine buildings in the city and be ones that people will want to look *at* rather than look *from* in a parasitic way across a wasting architectural heritage. The design code for Lichfield referred to in para 1.2. above exemplifies how a new area can be planned that integrates seamlessly with its surroundings.

- 5.5.2 The proposed buildings seem to be mainly six-storey apartments. The proposed density, at 400 households in an area of less than 2 ha, seems extremely high. Is there a need for such a density? Could some of the buildings be multi-storey houses rather than apartments? Six storeys are out of character in the centre of Chester, especially in a backland area. Restricting heights to four to five storeys maximum would be far preferable and avoid the danger of streets and courtyards being

overshadowed. The skyline from a variety of viewpoints should be dominated by the ridges and spires of the Town Hall and Guildhall (former Holy Trinity).

- 5.5.3 The proposed buildings are generally in the 'warehouse' style that seems to be fashionable in Chester at the moment. This may be understandable in former industrial areas but not in a traditionally residential one and in any case suggests that people are merely goods to be stored. Some have incongruous-looking penthouses perched on their roofs. The design of buildings should take its cue from other backlands of the city centre, eg the Whitefriars/Commonhall Street area and King Street, where the dominant architectural style is Georgian, with some Arts and Crafts in the former area, but any copies need to be executed competently. In accordance with the dominant characteristic of Chester buildings, facades should generally be short; the second iteration of the proposed hotel at 1-13 Frodsham Street (planning application 25/01919/FUL) shows how a single building can successfully be faced in a variety of ways.
- 5.5.4 The site of the former assay office on Goss Street should be marked by a landmark building of exceptional quality.
- 5.5.5 Thought needs to be given as to how best to display the Strongroom of the Roman Headquarters Building at the east end of Hamilton Place.
- 5.5.6 At the moment the development is entangled with the Crowne Plaza hotel on its western boundary. Given that this is highlighted in the *Chester Characterisation Study* as a key detractor, its demise and replacement should be planned for. The edge of the development on the eastern side of Trinity Street needs to be carefully designed and thought given to how the site of Matthew Henry's chapel might be marked.
- 5.6 *Proposed Cultural Building*
- 5.6.1 It is suggested that this building could support uses such as gallery and performance spaces, community spaces and exhibitions celebrating Chester's unique history. We should obviously like to see a new museum that celebrates the city's role as a 'persistent place' over two thousand years and as a 'crossroads of Britain' – something that we have been advocating for twenty years. The Grosvenor Museum in its existing form is too small and needs expansion to display the full range of its collections from the city and west Cheshire (eg prehistoric, early medieval and medieval); moreover, we understand that there are ongoing concerns about its structural condition, which have led to the closure of the Period House. We see Tullie House Museum at Carlisle as a possible model. Relocating the museum to the Northgate area near to other cultural facilities has its attractions, but the idea should only be pursued if sufficient floor space can be created and if enough money is available; we note that the original version of the One City Plan foresaw investment in the museum but that this commitment has been removed from the revised version. We should strongly oppose the replacement of the Grosvenor Museum by a heritage-centre-style 'museum-lite' that replaces original objects, well-researched stories and the opportunity to reflect on the past with ephemeral high-tech, VR etc experiences. Whatever the purpose or the building, it needs to be of the highest design quality and should not compete with the Town Hall.

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