

AFFORDABLE HOUSING APPARTMENTS, CHARTERHALL DRIVE (26/01735/FUL)

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY COMMENTS

Summary

The major archaeological remains on the site can be expected to belong to the Chester Leadworks, especially twentieth-century extensions, but the possibility of the survival of remains of earlier periods should not be ignored, and an appropriate programme of mitigation should be agreed. At an appropriate time, a detailed, accessible overview of archaeological discoveries on the whole of the Leadworks site should be published. The proposed apartments would rise four storeys above the consented but as-yet unbuilt canalside apartments; their appearance ought to make a more positive contribution to the landscape of this part of Chester. The architects should be encouraged to move away from the now clichéd and arguably dehumanising 'industrial/warehouse/mill' appearance to one more interesting and stimulating.

Detail

1.0 Archaeology

1.1 The development site lies in Character Zone 65 of the *Chester Archaeological Plan*, defined by the extent of the Leadworks. The Character Zone statement says under Archaeological Potential:

There is a strong archaeological potential for below-ground remains relating to the leadworks in this area. It has been demonstrated by previous archaeological investigation that below ground remains of earlier phases do survive while the low density of redevelopment suggests a good level of preservation.

and under Key Considerations:

This zone has preserved archaeological remains that may influence national perspectives with the potential for further discoveries of significant archaeological remains.

1.2 In the *Archaeology Assessment* accompanying the planning application, the likelihood of prehistoric remains surviving on the site is dismissed as negligible because of later disturbance, by the Leadworks and more recently by Premier House; this judgement may be correct, but the possibility of isolated artefacts cannot be excluded. A ditch assigned to the Roman period has been found further west on the Leadworks site, and agricultural soils of the period have also been identified. Soils containing medieval pottery and the remains of Civil War Royalist outworks are reported in the area, and medieval field boundaries may be expected; again, any such remains on the development site may have been truncated by later buildings but their potential should not be ignored. Given the proximity of the site to Flookersbrook, the possibility of the survival of waterlogged palaeoenvironmental remains should be considered.

1.3 The *Archaeology Assessment* lists eight monuments listed in the *Cheshire Historical Environment Record* that would be affected by the development, all but one associated with the Leadworks (the other is the railway line to Crewe, which actually lies outside the development area, although one of the other monuments is the Leadworks sidings). Maps and detailed plans show the spread of Leadworks buildings across the development site, especially in the twentieth century.

1.4 There have already been several campaigns of archaeological excavation of the Leadworks site as it has been redeveloped, and these should continue. The use of the site for lead-processing means that the ground is likely to be contaminated to an unknown depth and may need to be removed; this may constrain any archaeological investigations.

1.5 In connection with application 20/01823/FUL for the construction of a hotel further north in the area, the Development Management Archaeologist stated:

... the present application area forms ... part of the wider Chester Business Quarter development which was granted permission in 2012 under 12/04895/FUL. Condition 26 of this requires a programme of archaeological mitigation for each phase.

The applicant should therefore liaise with the Development Management Archaeologist to discuss foundation design and other groundworks and any modifications that may be required, and to agree a programme of archaeological mitigation; further pre-determination evaluation should be carried out if judged necessary.

1.6 When the various consented schemes in the area have been completed, the Leadworks site will have been completely redeveloped. Given the importance of the works to Chester's industrial history, the opportunity should be taken to compile a detailed overview of the results of the numerous archaeological interventions across the site and publish them accessibly for the benefit of residents.

2.0 Proposed Use of the Site

2.1 The failure of the area to develop commercially is regrettable, as it reduces the opportunities for Chester residents to find work without having to travel far. If commercial development is not viable, then intensive housing is a reasonable option, given the proximity of the railway station; it would accord with our declared preference for the Sustainable Transport Corridors option for the new *Local Plan*. It also reinforces the case for the station to be developed as an intermodal transport hub with improved links to other residential and employment areas. We support the emphasis on active travel, but cycling cannot be expected to become popular without a coherent network of cycle lanes around the city centre. Access to Waitrose and Boughton is currently impeded by the Shot Tower bridge, which suffers poor access, with steps at its north end and a lift that we understand often does not work; it should be rebuilt with a ramp (perhaps as a true, spiral, roving bridge). Given that a relatively small amount of car parking is provided on the west side of the site, what will be done to stop residents without on-site parking permits leaving their vehicles on neighbouring streets, to the detriment of their inhabitants?

3.0 Design

3.1 The *Heritage Statement* characterises the proposed buildings as two parallel rectangular, brick-built, flat-roofed blocks, eight and ten storeys high, aligned north-south and separated by a garden courtyard. They are supposedly intended as a contemporary interpretation of a warehouse or mill building, with the projecting stairwells facing the courtyard being reminiscent of lift hoists.

3.2 The *Townscape and Visual Impacts Assessment* considers the proposal both in isolation and cumulatively alongside neighbouring, consented, buildings – none of which have actually progressed. The development would supposedly not be

conspicuous, being hidden behind the other proposed buildings, although the Assessment considers that views from Dee Banks and the Meadows would be harmed. Some of the supposed improvements consist simply of the erection of new buildings on what is currently a 'scruffy' car park.

- 3.3 We have already commented on the quality of existing and proposed buildings in the area in our [response](#) to the developer's pre-application consultation. Charterhall, House, currently being converted to apartments, is totally uninspired, and the recent apartments on Queen's Road and Shot Tower Close are unattractive, with often small, widely spaced windows, crude metal balconies and monopitch roofs; we should not be sorry to see these demolished and rebuilt. The Shot Tower apartments ('Walker's apartments') exhibit imaginative design and industrial references in their cladding, but their style is probably not to be copied more widely, as this would detract from their distinctiveness. The Wharton Court apartments south of the canal are in warehouse style but visually interesting, thanks to their varied massing and the detailing of the brickwork. The plain designs of the consented but unbuilt warehouse-style apartments along the north bank of the canal (now uniformly six-storey in their latest iteration) are competent but forgettable. The design of the consented hotel adjacent to One City Place (20/01823/FUL) is international rather than having local references and is bizarre.
- 3.4 Architects working on schemes in this part of Chester seem to be unable to move on from industrial clichés in their designs, whether warehousing or mills. Admittedly such designs harmonise with the surviving industrial buildings along the canal bank, and they are certainly preferable to some of the late twentieth-century buildings listed above; nationally, disused warehouses and mills are (sensibly) being converted for housing; and the style provides established and convenient 'clothing' for large apartment blocks. However, the historical justification for building anew in this style is weak: the implications are that people are goods to be stored or that they should live in austere, factory-like buildings rather than in more attractive, domestic ones: the manager's house by the Leadworks was not built in an industrial style but is a normal three-storey Georgian house. The proposed buildings are a competent and thoughtful example of their type in an appropriately coloured brick, but we consider that another architectural 'language' should be employed, especially further from the canal.
- 3.5 The proposed apartments would rise four storeys above those proposed to their south and would be a substantial addition to the landscape of this part of Chester; the Visual Impacts Assessment should be able to point to the positive contribution that their design makes rather than how they are concealed behind other buildings or are supposedly an improvement on a 'scruffy' car park (which we would simply see as a blank canvas). Their residential, rather than industrial, nature should be reflected in bolder detailing and more generous fenestration, as found on the design for the hotel to replace the Mecca Bingo Hall (23/03823/FUL), plus the addition of colour, to break up and articulate the mass of the facades and make the buildings appear more interesting and welcoming. The top storey might be clad in dark-coloured metal to reduce the apparent mass.
- 3.6 The buildings should have recognisable fronts and backs. It would seem sensible for the sides overlooking the courtyard to be regarded as the front, and the functional-looking stairwells to be placed at the back, adjacent to the access roads.