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Archaeology, archives and architecture: the practical work of the Society 1849–1915

ONE of the foremost aims of the founders of the Society was that it should collect and protect archaeological finds, manuscripts and curiosities, and that there should be a library available to those members who were engaged in practical research into local history and archaeology. Before 1849 the more interesting of the relics which were frequently unearthed during building work in the city and surrounding areas were either sent to the British Museum or passed into private hands, a loss which caused considerable disquiet and a certain resentment. Many people felt that the material should be retained locally and that it should be more readily available for public inspection or use. Such feelings, imbued with a strong Cestrian patriotism, were a driving force behind the formation of the Society itself, as the fourth in the list of objectives quoted in the first chapter indicates: ‘the collecting of historic, archaeological, and architectural information, documents, relics, books’. The collections were seen as the third ‘pillar’ on which the Society would build, complementary to the production of a journal to record for posterity the accumulated knowledge of the Society and to working meetings at which active discussion of finds and developments in archaeology and history would stimulate intellectual labours and historical investigation.

Initially no clear distinction was drawn between the collecting of objects and the building-up of a library. The minutes and lists of the holdings of the Society emphasise the attention given to preparing drawings, engravings and rubbings of antiquarian and architectural subjects, by which means information could be more widely disseminated: for example, by comparison between items from different locations. These drawings and plans were seen both as material for the library and as items in the antiquarian collections. The recording of buildings and monuments, especially those which were threatened with change, demolition or heavy-handed restoration, was one means of preserving the true or authentic form of the past, a matter of major intellectual importance at a time when fierce debate raged over the purity or degradation of architectural styles. Such drawings, often of medieval and ecclesiastical subjects, were enthusiastically exhibited at meetings, used to illustrate lectures, and formed the basis of plates and text illustrations in the *Journal*, their ultimate destination being storage among the Society’s library collections.¹ Examples taken from the first year of the accession book which was maintained from the start of the Society’s existence include brass rubbings from Macclesfield, Beaumaris and Ormskirk churches; James Harrison’s plan for the re-pewing of St John’s, Chester; a printed charter of the Duchy of Lancaster; maps and drawings of the ancient bridge recently unearthed

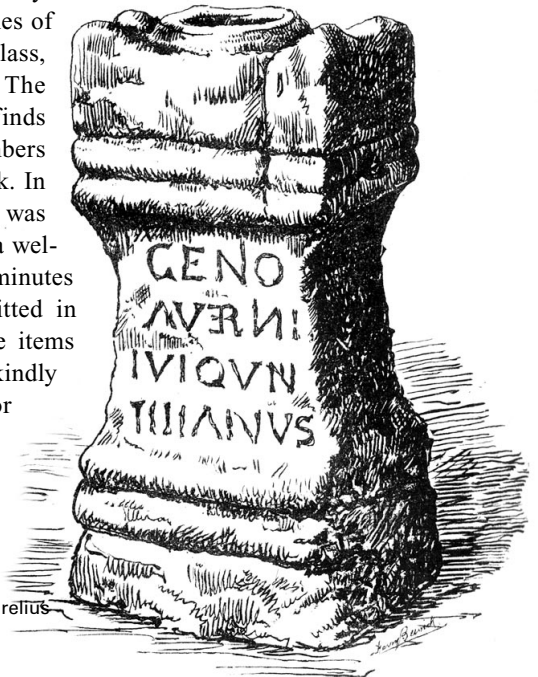
during the excavation of Birkenhead dock; and lithographs of Canterbury Cathedral and York Minster.

In the absence of a museum or other public repository, individual members immediately saw the Society as a suitable custodian of an immense diversity of antiquarian objects. Thus, as with a number of other leading archaeological and local history organisations, the Society accumulated the beginnings of a major museum. The collections eventually began to divide logically into printed and published works, forming a library; the documents and manuscripts in a growing archive collection; and the objects from antiquarian and archaeological excavation and discovery. The Society tried to keep purchasing to a minimum, relying very heavily upon donation of items, exchange with other organisations or, within a couple of decades, bequests of material left at the death of members and well-wishers. The precise legal status and ownership of much of the collection was at best ambiguous, and in later years there were unseemly wrangles over some items, with gentlemanly honour being impugned.

The archaeological work of the Society before the 1880s

The revival in the commercial fortunes of Chester during the early Victorian period encouraged the redevelopment of sites within the city centre, while the expansion of the built-up area beyond the old confines of the City Walls and the small suburbs meant that numerous historically significant green field sites were subject to development. In the centre of the city the rebuilding work on individual plots often involved excavation to greater depths than had hitherto been the case and was complemented by digging within the curtilage of the streets themselves, particularly as gas and water mains were laid. As a result the number of sites of archaeological interest — especially those of the Roman period — increased rapidly, and the quantity of

finds, ranging from sections of columns and patches of mosaic pavements to coins and small objects of glass, iron and pottery, grew correspondingly fast. The Society had no premises for suitable storage of finds and neither had it any properly experienced members who could undertake the necessary curatorial work. In the early years, therefore, the growing collection was perhaps something of an encumbrance as well as a welcome asset. A further difficulty, evident from the minutes and the accessions records although never admitted in public, was that a considerable proportion of the items which were given could have been classified, unkindly but truthfully, as ‘junk’. Odd bits of rusty iron or fragments of pottery, unidentifiable as to period or purpose and with no satisfactory provenance, were



Ill 16 Roman altar found along Tarvin Road in 1849. The inscription reads: *Genio c(enturiae) A(ureli) Verin(i) Iul(ius) Quintilianus*. ‘[Dedicated to] the Genius of the century of Aurelius Verinus by Iulius Quintilianus’.

all too numerous. Some members perhaps saw the Society as a convenient vehicle for disposing of these objects, surely a more worthy destination than the rubbish dump. Yet at the same time some outstanding material was acquired. Examples of items donated or loaned to the Society in its first decade include a Roman altar from Boughton ('about a foot square, mouldings perfect, having an inscription 'Genio' plain the other 3 lines very illegible'),² a Roman pig of lead from Commonhall Street, coins of James I and Charles II found hidden in a jar in the roof of a building in the city, a 'figure of a Cupid' from Duke Street, an altar with a Greek inscription from near the Exchange, and a gold torque ring discovered in St Werburgh Street.³ The collections were varied and eclectic and it was increasingly clear that in the longer term curatorial work was essential.

While collecting material steadily during the 1850s and 1860s the Society maintained its interest in the structural remains found during building projects and contractors' excavations within the walled city and its immediate surroundings. At the first meeting, in June 1849, members asked for a report on the renovation work taking place in the crypt of the cathedral, and pointed to another direction of investigation which would be of enduring interest when they discussed at length the recent discovery of Roman remains in Commonhall Street — they were told of the finding of 'a large stone having formed either the base or capital of a column of early date in a perfect state' ten feet below the modern road surface. Soon afterwards the Council commissioned a detailed descriptive report on the discoveries and also ordered an investigation into the carved stones in the fabric of the City Walls between the Phoenix Tower and the North Gate, research which pointed to the existence of substantial quantities of Roman material in this area.⁴ This heightened awareness in turn meant that during major repair and consolidation work in the late 1880s and early 1890s great care was taken to check the stone of the existing wall and as a result very important finds of Roman inscriptions were made.

By 1858 the collection was regularly referred to as 'the museum' and it was recognised as the obvious destination of any interesting material unearthed in the city,⁵ while in 1856 the first major bequest was received. The executors of William Massie, the Society's founder, presented the bulk of his collection of coins, seals, pottery and other small archaeological objects and, partly as a result, the original premises in the City Library were deemed to be too small. However, as we have seen, the closure of the City Library allowed the Society to expand its premises. In 1865 Stanley Palace was bought with the intention of turning it into a museum, but the building turned out to be unsuitable and by this time the Society itself was becoming moribund. There was now a real danger that valuable collections would be lost for want of a satisfactory repository. In December 1867, for example, Samuel Peacock offered the valuable collection of Roman and other material which had been formed by his late father but, while anxious to acquire the items, the Society regretted that it would only be able to accept them when it had opened a permanent museum.⁶ So matters remained until the revival of the Society in the 1880s.

The archaeological work of the Society from 1883

While plans for the Grosvenor Museum were being finalised and before building work had begun, new (and often very considerable) collections of archaeological finds were being

given to the Society in anticipation of proper accommodation. There was a substantial backlog of material still in private hands which could not be handed over in the 1870s because of the state of the Society. During the autumn of 1883, for example, it received a collection of Roman material which had been uncovered in 1874 during the construction of a new interceptor sewer across the Roodee, while in March 1884 Roman columns and other items from Bollands Court were given by the owner, Frederick Bullen, and housed temporarily in Grey Friars.⁷ As the opening of the museum became a certainty the Council of the Society was able to anticipate the new facilities and storage space which it hoped would be available by purchasing collections and accepting bequests which had hitherto been an embarrassment for want of proper accommodation. Local firms and property developers, especially those which in the relatively small world of Chester had some direct personal involvement with the Society, were a significant source of major collections in the years after 1885. Thus, in September 1886 the Society gratefully acknowledged material deposited by the Gas Company and the General Infirmary which had come to light during building work in the previous two years.

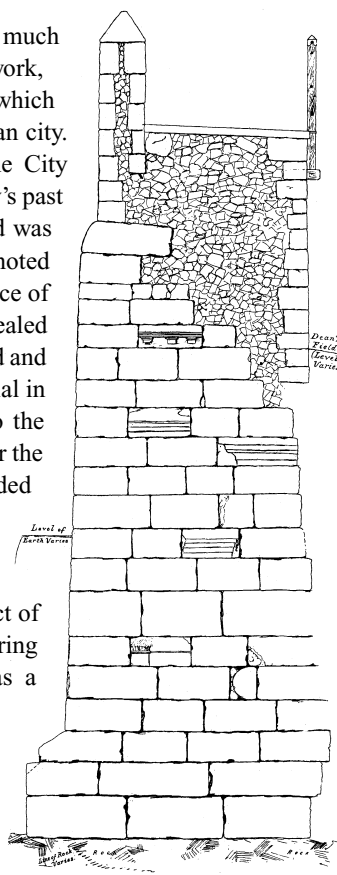
In 1884 the Society became involved with William Thompson Watkin, the author of *Roman Cheshire* and *Roman Lancashire* and one of the leading antiquarian-archaeologists in the region. Watkin was anxious to make use of material held by the Society to illustrate the book on Cheshire, and permission for him to photograph Roman inscriptions and sculptures was granted on condition that this was 'done in such a way as to preserve them from the slightest injury'.⁸ Watkin was unlikely to do much harm, but the deplorable conditions in which the Society's collections had been housed were far more disturbing: in October 1884 the curator, Thomas Pritchard, resigned and his successor, George W Shrubsole, later reported on the shocking state in which he found the museum and recommended that large new items should not be accepted until the public museum was opened.⁹ The library books were also in poor condition, and in September 1886 the new librarian, John Parsons Earwaker, agreed to take the books to his house, arrange and dust them, and hold them there until accommodation was available at the new museum. All this would mean that in the long-term the Society would need to find considerable sums of money.

Archaeology and history were now recognised as academic disciplines, having evolved both intellectual principles and (by comparison with the *ad hoc* and individualistic procedures which had hitherto prevailed) an increasingly systematic and widely applicable methodology. Not all members were necessarily sympathetic to this emerging rigour. Neatly encapsulating the non-archaeologists' view was a speech made by the president, Bishop Stubbs, at the 1886 annual general meeting, in a contribution to a debate on 'whether archaeology is an art or a science'. He claimed that 'it would be a very long time before the most ardent archaeologists could attempt to lay down laws or pretend they had discovered laws which regulated the domain of archaeology in the same way as geology, theology, or the other words ending in '-ology' '.¹⁰ Although a hundred years later we can still observe the romantic view of archaeology to which Stubbs so closely adhered, one of the more immediate developments was that professional or semi-professional archaeologists began to replace some of the amateur antiquarians of earlier decades, a change which soon became apparent in Chester.

With the opening of the museum the Society could play a much more direct and active role in practical archaeological work, something which many members had long desired and which was increasingly important in the fast-altering late Victorian city. The repair and restoration of the northern section of the City Walls, which began in the summer of 1887, brought the city's past to public prominence in a hitherto unprecedented way and was Chester's first large-scale archaeological excavation. As noted above, the Society had been aware of the possible importance of the site since the end of the 1840s, but the 1887 work revealed a very rich and nationally important collection of sculptured and inscribed stones which had been re-used as building material in the fabric of the wall. To add the spice of controversy to the discoveries, opinion had been strongly divided as to whether the wall itself was Roman or medieval, and the new finds provided ammunition for both sides. In late January 1888 the Society held a public meeting, attended by over two hundred people, in which exponents of both theories presented their cases and then submitted them to the verdict of the audience. The conclusion (a correct one, it emerged during the twentieth century) was that the northern stretch was a mixture of work of both periods.

Although the building work was carried out by the Corporation, the Archaeological Society provided some funding for the first stage of the excavations during September and October 1887 and also oversaw all archaeological recording and the preservation of the items which had been recovered. In January 1888 the Society wrote to the British Museum to draw attention to the discoveries and to request advice on the preparation of a full report and descriptive list, and as a result Francis Haverfield was asked to produce a definitive report. His preliminary findings, published in the spring of 1891, urged that the investigations should continue and that efforts to recover more 'Roman stones' should be extended to include the section east of the North Gate. The Society again raised funds for the next phase, in which excavations were directed by E F Benson, then a scholar of King's College, Cambridge.¹¹ In November 1891, after one of his regular appeals for more money, the Council was able to point out that the Society had raised £107 11s for the excavations.¹² As a result of this work the museum acquired one of the most important collections of Roman inscriptions in Britain, the conservation and display of which gave the major impetus to the construction of the new galleries and extension in 1893–5.

The enthusiasm and widespread public interest which 'the Roman stones' had aroused was reflected in a heightened awareness of the entirety of the city's archaeological heritage,



III 17 Section through the north wall at the Deanery Field: drawing by I M Jones, the City Engineer, to accompany the first report on repairs to the wall. (*Journal* 2, 1888, facing p 1)

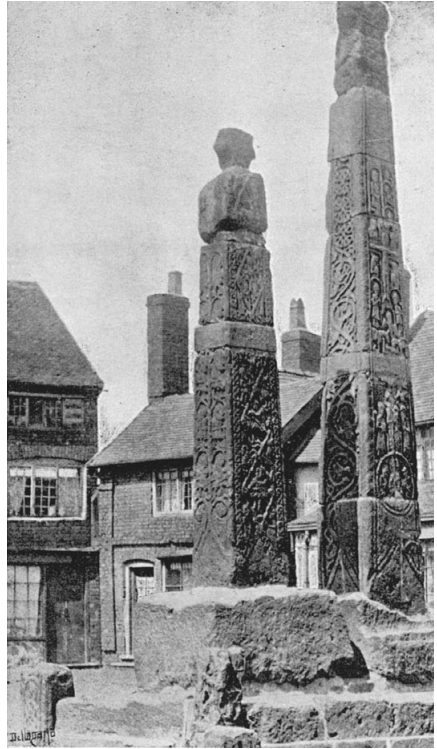


although the Roman period remained — as it perhaps still is — that which attracted most attention from professionals and laymen alike. In May 1892 the Society was eager to pay £7 to acquire sections of a Roman hypocaust discovered in Northgate Street, and its concern for the medieval walls was expressed in a lengthy correspondence with the Corporation about the collapse of the small tower known as Pemberton's Parlour, near the railway cutting at the north-west corner. By 1890 there was a serious possibility that large sections of the Rows would be either removed or drastically reconstructed, and the Society began to campaign for their protection. It also

sponsored further research into their origins, holding a conference in October 1893 at which John Hewitt put forward a range of theories which are now widely accepted, including the close relationship with Roman structures below and at street level and the possibility that a major early medieval fire had been a catalyst to their construction.¹³ There was also concern over the fate of archaeological and historical monuments beyond the city boundaries: in January 1896, for example, the Society pressed Birkenhead Corporation to protect and conserve the priory buildings.¹⁴ The formation of the National Trust in 1895 encouraged hopes (in vain, as it transpired) that the new organisation would provide a means of taking a wide range of monuments into a semi-public ownership: among those suggested to the Trust in the late 1890s were the Sandbach crosses and Derby Palace in Chester. Because the Archaeological Society now had a more prominent role in the preservation movement and in the sponsorship of archaeological investigation, and was of course one of the owners of the Grosvenor Museum, it was frequently consulted on conservation and 'heritage' matters. In April 1901, for example, the County Council asked for its help in identifying 'monuments worthy of preservation' under the Ancient Monuments Act of 1900;¹⁵ in November 1905 the solicitor for the new purchasers of the site of the Roman camp at Kinderton near Middlewich asked if the Society would investigate and excavate (it declined, since it was facing an acute financial crisis); and in May 1907 it accepted an invitation to survey, plan and section the prehistoric camp at Rossett near Gresford on behalf of the Committee on Ancient Earthworks & Fortified Enclosures.¹⁶

Ill 18 Photograph of Professor Francis Haverfield, who oversaw the recovery of the Roman inscribed and sculptured stones from the north wall and published a catalogue of them in the *Journal* 7, 1900. Haverfield died in 1919 and the photograph accompanies his obituary. (*Journal* 23, 1920, *frontispiece*)

Another major opportunity came in September 1908 when work on the foundations of the new telephone exchange in St John Street revealed prehistoric, Roman and medieval finds and exposed sections of the Roman wall. The Society sponsored a proper excavation and the curator, Professor Robert Newstead, prepared a detailed report which paid full attention to such topics as the stratigraphy and geophysical context of the site. In October, at the instigation of the Society, a meeting was held between the Corporation, the architects, the National Telephone Company and the Society at which the company agreed to alter its plans in order to preserve over sixty-six feet of the wall from destruction. A month later the Society sent three members to inspect and report upon the condition and future protection of the Sandbach crosses, at the request of the urban district council.¹⁷ The growing professionalism of archaeology is apparent in these developments, as also is the Society's much greater awareness of contemporary trends in the discipline. Nevertheless,



a great deal continued to depend (as it still does) upon maintaining a watching brief upon commercial and private building work, securing a good relationship with landowners and developers, and individuals making casual finds known. In May 1915 Frank Simpson, one of Chester's leading local historians and the general secretary of the Society, reported that although he and others had kept watch upon various excavations in the city over the previous months nothing had been found, but 'there had been a general rumour that a pot of Saxon coins was discovered a few months ago, while the workmen were [laying] a gas main along Water Tower Street. He had heard of several people having some of the coins, but had not up to the present time seen any of them. No information in regard to the find had been reported to the Society'. Following this episode the Corporation was asked that its workmen should report all finds to the Town Clerk.¹⁸

The Society's collections had been augmented not only by the stones from the north wall but also by a series of major bequests and gifts from members. In 1891 G W Shrubsole, the Society's honorary curator, resigned and presented his glass case of Roman pottery and other items and his collection of traders' tokens from Chester and elsewhere. Seven years later another stalwart, Frederick Potts, left his entire antiquarian collection to the Society, including a Roman altar which in 1896 had been the subject of an unseemly wrangle over

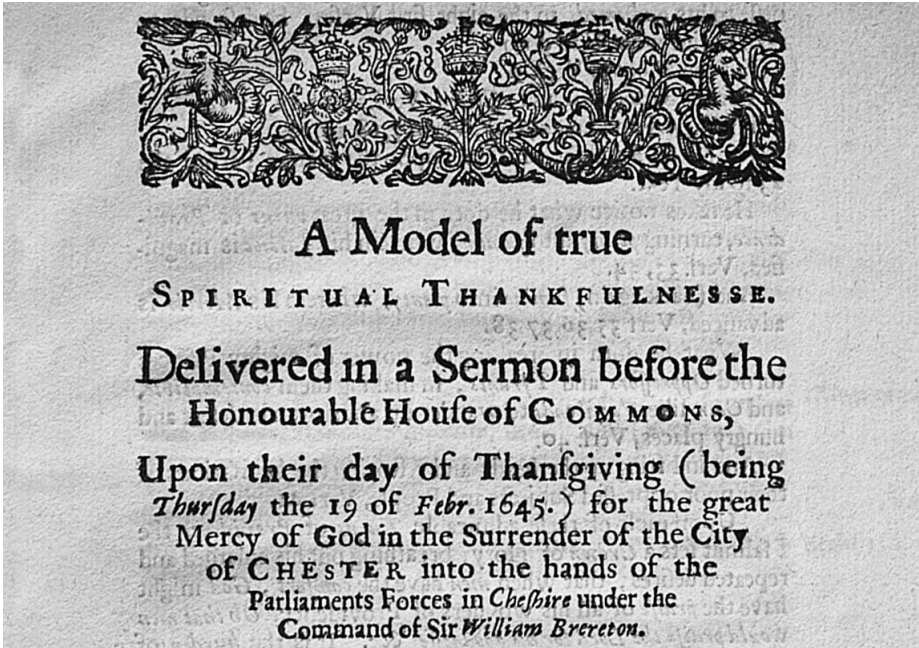
Ill 19 The Saxon crosses at Sandbach. Illustrated in the frontispiece to *Journal* 5 (2), 1895, to accompany an article on early Christian monuments by J Romilly Allen

ownership involving strongly worded letters to and from the Society's solicitors. In May 1899 Thomas Gleadowe, Shrubsole's successor as curator, bought the extremely important collection of prehistoric, Roman, pre-Conquest and medieval material from the Wirral shores (in particular from Meols) which had been built up by the late Charles Potter of Liverpool, and gave it to the Society, 'enriching it to an almost unprecedented degree'. The Society did not yet have a formal acquisition policy: it accepted almost everything which was offered, and in 1904, for example, took possession of items as diverse and miscellaneous as the Roman finds from Forest House in Foregate Street (including bone objects, glass fragments, bronze brooches and pottery, some with graffiti), 'a curiously worked stone (use doubtful) from Gwern Barer Farm, Llangelgnin, nr. Conway' and a large accumulation of nineteenth-century fashion items such as buckles and pins.¹⁹

All this added to the richness and variety of the museum's holdings, but also meant a much heavier workload for the staff. Robert Newstead had been appointed as full-time curator on the opening of the museum in 1886 and in 1903 he became additionally the honorary curator and librarian of the Archaeological Society. Although by training a naturalist he became the leading figure in Chester's archaeological circles for an extraordinarily long period, from the mid-1880s until the Second World War. He attempted to resign in March 1905 on his appointment as professor of entomology in the School of Tropical Medicine at Liverpool — a post he was to hold until his retirement in 1924 — but was persuaded to stay on as honorary curator.²⁰ However, his relationship with the Society was sometimes uncomfortable, and in February 1913 he left in outrage after the Society had with remarkable lack of tact appointed an honorary librarian during his absence from England, without telling him of the plan: he concluded that the Society was about to 'do away with his position as Hon. Curator'. Worse, his paper on the archaeological discoveries in Infirmary Field had been criticised in his absence. The Council hastily passed a unanimous resolution in Newstead's support and the invaluable work which he had undertaken during the previous decade, urging him to withdraw his resignation. In May he duly did so but the relationship had been badly soured. Criticism of his work continued and a resolution of Council in October 1913 'to form a small sub-Committee to consider and act with regard to the correct labelling of the various objects belonging to the Society in the Museum' was interpreted, not unreasonably, as a slight upon his competence. It was swiftly followed by his second letter of resignation, in which he stated that 'after all that transpired at the meeting...it is my painful duty to say that I can do nothing further in the interests of the Chester & North Wales Archaeological Society'. This time Newstead's departure was accepted, with suitable expressions of regret but no request for him to change his mind.²¹

Archives and the Society's library

Just as the Society determined from the beginning that it would make a serious effort to collect archaeological relics (though it is doubtful if it envisaged that whole sections of Roman structures would eventually come within its custody), so it was conscious of the need to acquire and make available manuscripts which, like the finds from excavations, would otherwise be threatened with loss or dispersal. The earliest archival acquisition appears to have been a pair of early thirteenth-century deeds from Stanlow Abbey, given in the summer of 1849 by Canon Francis Raines of Milnrow.²² Contemporary archives were also collected — working drawings, architects' elevations, and plans for the restora-



III 20 Copy of a sermon delivered to the House of Commons, 19 February 1645, on the capture of Chester by parliamentary forces during the English Civil War. The Society's collections contain many sermons relating to the city. (Reproduced by kind permission of Chester Archives)

tion of churches and properties in the city, sketches of antiquities, and rubbings of inscriptions and carvings were all actively sought and gratefully accepted. However, the collections did not grow as rapidly as those of archaeological material, perhaps because whereas members found objects such as pottery and carved stone somewhat difficult to store and display, and so handed them over, documents could be accommodated relatively easily and safely in private libraries and chests of family papers.

Instead, the Society acted as a vigorous campaigner on behalf of the records of county and city, frequently urging the authorities to improve the care of archives and their conditions of storage. In December 1851 the Secretary corresponded with the county and city authorities about the muniments held at Chester castle, and a sub-committee produced a report, *The Records of the County & City of Chester*, which among other ambitious and far-sighted suggestions recommended that a branch of the Public Record Office should be established in Chester to house the county palatine records and those relating to North Wales: a memorial was sent to the Master of the Rolls, and the support of the Marquis of Westminster was elicited. The sub-committee also drew particular attention to the extreme danger resulting from the storage of the muniments next to the gunpowder magazine at the castle, and proposed that some of the records should be printed and published. Unfortunately these ideas were not adopted by the government, the archives were for a long time neglected further, and in March 1887 the Council noted with dismay and regret that the records of the county palatine had been removed from the castle to the Public Record Office 'in five large luggage vans of the London and North-Western Railway'.²³

As a consequence of this loss, the records of Chester Corporation received renewed attention. In 1886 it was proposed that the Society should fund or encourage their publication, since they were ‘practically unknown to the citizens, and very few even are aware of their existence’. Many other cities, including Manchester, Liverpool, Oxford, Bristol and Carlisle, had published muniments and it was suggested that Chester should follow suit with the assembly books, mayor’s books and Pentice chartulary. There were also proposals to publish the early parish registers and churchwardens’ accounts of St Mary on the Hill. This increased activity was associated with the appointment of the erudite and talented local historian John Parsons Earwaker as librarian of the Society. Earwaker himself had gathered a large collection of documents and was particularly anxious that historical research should be based upon reliable sources. In March 1888 the Society debated a proposal from the secretary, Henry Taylor, that it should actively seek to acquire manuscripts relating to Cheshire and North Wales, or — as a second-best — that it should borrow these and have them transcribed. He indirectly condemned the Historic Manuscripts Commission and the Public Record Office because their efforts were ‘in great measure...not directed to purely local history’. Earwaker warmly approved of this view, urging the ‘extreme importance of writing history from original documents’ and pointing out that while few people bothered to look at large collections of archives, ‘they contained a greater amount of information than the ordinary reader could possibly imagine. During the last fifty or a hundred years enormous numbers of these old deeds had been destroyed’.²⁴ Later in the same year Bishop Stubbs, presiding at a meeting of the Society, declared that early printed books and manuscripts, including parish records, needed to be brought to central or county repositories for safekeeping — a very early exposition of the idea of county record offices.²⁵

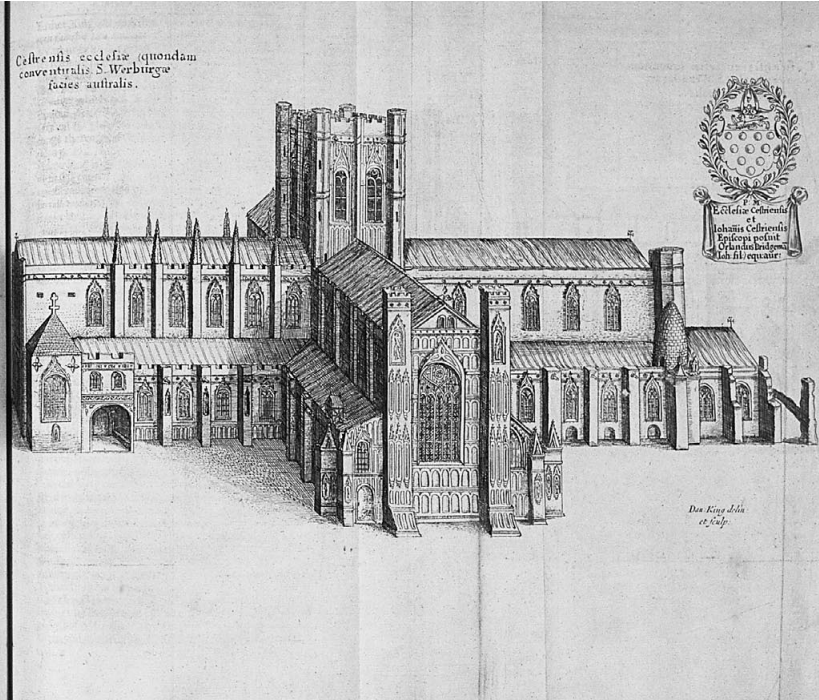
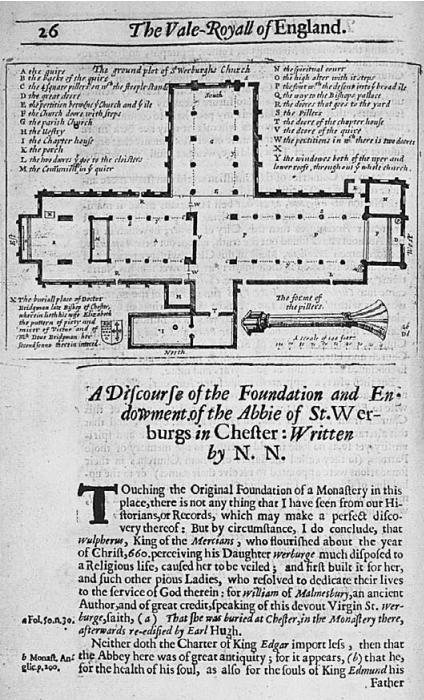
By this time the Society had been widely recognised as a convenient and appropriate equivalent to a record office, particularly after the museum opened and permanent premises were available for archive storage. When Earwaker died in 1895 his private collection of manuscripts and notes was threatened with sale and dispersal but was rescued by the Duke of Westminster, who bought the entire collection outright and in 1898 presented it to the Society. This precedent was followed by the families of other leading members of the Society after the First World War: in 1918, for example, the papers and manuscripts of Canon Rupert Morris (1844–1918) were donated, and in 1925/6 the exceptionally important collection which had been accumulated by Thomas Hughes (1826–90) was given by his son Thomas Cann Hughes.²⁶ The acquisition of the Earwaker papers presented the Society with a major challenge, because it lacked the experience to deal with such a large and important collection, but in 1904/5, when the library was refitted, the papers were given proper accommodation and in 1910 it was decided that they should be classified and better protected ‘so that they may be available for future students of our County History amongst our Members’. As significant, perhaps, was the proposal that this work could be extended to include the city muniments, with the co-operation of the Town Hall Sub-Committee of the Corporation. It is clear that in 1910 some influential members of the Society were beginning to envisage the creation of a City Record Office, in which the Society would play a key role.²⁷

The Society’s library was intended as a valuable research resource for the more active members. It was built up largely from donations of books and articles given by authors and

editors and by exchanging volumes with other local history and archaeology societies, the number of purchases being always limited by the small resources of the Society. Exchange remained an essential element in building-up the holdings: in 1886 the Society had arrangements with, *inter alia*, the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, the Society of Antiquaries, the Royal Historical Society, the Archaeological Association of Ireland, and county societies in Northamptonshire, Cambridge, Montgomery, Somerset, Sussex, Surrey and elsewhere. Four years later the library holdings included over 500 books, of which about 60% were transactions volumes from other societies.²⁸ After storage in the highly unsuitable premises in Lower Bridge Street during the 1870s the condition of the library was very poor, but under the custodianship of J P Earwaker from 1886 it was thoroughly overhauled: in 1887 it was said to be ‘in better condition than for many years, the books completely bound and catalogued and the prints and diagrams arranged and classified’. The Council asked that ‘kind Friends’ who were members of either house of parliament or of any royal commissions should ensure that the government supplied the Society with any relevant historical or archaeological publications and in 1888 the plea for gifts was reiterated: ‘as we are anxious to make it, in the course of time, a really good reference library for all students of local archaeology and history’.²⁹ The building of the museum extension in the early 1890s at last gave the Society the opportunity to realise this ambition, although the casual habits of members who borrowed and failed to return valuable items were a perpetual headache for the Society’s librarians. A sternly worded resolution in 1902 forbade the borrowing of manuscript material in the future, but security was poor: in 1904, for example, several items carrying the bookplate of George Ormerod went missing.³⁰

One of the aims of the 1904/5 refurbishment of the library, at a cost of almost £200, was the provision of a proper strong room and up-to-date shelving and electric lighting. As with the archaeological material, the Society’s ownership of some of the library stock was questionable. When, in 1898, the Duke of Westminster presented the Earwaker papers the Society was careful to enquire of his agent whether the material was a loan or an outright gift and was gratified to learn that it was the latter. In 1907, on the other hand, the local historian Frank Williams found that a book which had long been missing from the library of the Dean and Chapter had turned up in that of the Archaeological Society, and conducted a long and tedious correspondence with the Secretary over what should be done with the errant volume.³¹ At that time, too, the Society agreed that the books and manuscripts should be completely recatalogued using the system employed at St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden,³² but the project was slow to be implemented and it not until the autumn of 1907 that one of the Council, the sheriff Mr H B Dutton, ‘kindly offered to get the index cards written by one of his clerks as required, upon the understanding that should they become very numerous his clerk should be remunerated’ — the eventual cost was £13 6s 8d.³³

The years before the Great War were marked by the alarming proposal that the records of the county palatine of Chester and Flint, transferred from the castle to the Public Record Office in 1886, should be moved once more. During the autumn of 1911 the Society heard rumours that the Public Record Office proposed to relocate the collections in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth, part of a more nebulous plan to create a Welsh Public



A Discourse of the Foundation and Endowment of the Abbie of St. Werburgs in Chester: Written by N. N.

Touching the Original Foundation of a Monastery in this place, there is not any thing that I have seen from our Historians, or Records, which may make a perfect discovery thereof: But by circumstance, I do conclude, that *Wulphorus*, King of the *Mercians*; who flourished about the year of *Christ*, *660*, perceiving his Daughter *Werburga* much disposed to a Religious life, caused her to be veiled, and first built it for her and such other pious Ladies, who resolved to dedicate their lives to the service of God therein: for *William of Malmsbury*, an ancient Author, and of great credit, speaking of this devout Virgin *St. Werburga*, saith, (a) *That she was buried at Chester, in the Monastery there, afterwards re-edified by Earl Flath.*

Neither doth the Charter of King *Edgar* import less, then that the Abbey here was of great antiquity: for it appears, (b) that he, for the health of his soul, as also for the souls of King *Edmond* his Father

Ill 21 Illustration of St Werburgh's abbey (Chester cathedral) in *King's Vale Royall of England*, an important local history originally published in 1656. Part of the Earwaker Collection given to the Society by the Duke of Westminster. (Reproduced by kind permission of Chester Archives)

Record Office. The plan filled the Council with alarm, for not only was there a very strong argument that most of the material was not Welsh at all, but Aberystwyth was deemed to be remote and inconvenient: to travel to London and spend time there while researching Cheshire records was generally acceptable, but to have to make the expedition to the fastnesses of Cardiganshire was not. Whether a certain anti-Welsh feeling was also evident is not clear, but even those Council and Society members who lived in Flintshire and Denbighshire were perhaps suspicious of, and unfamiliar with, mid-Wales.³⁴ Although the Public Record Office denied that there was such a plan, the scheme was revived in 1913, and in that year the Society passed an emergency resolution protesting, pointing out that these were 'mis-labelled [as] Welsh Records', and urging the Master of the Rolls and other decision-makers to reconsider. A bill to create a Public Record Office of Wales was presented to parliament early in 1913 and the Society, the Corporation and the County Council petitioned against the inclusion of the records of the county palatine within its scope. The bill was amended in their favour, a pyrrhic victory since the legislation was then dropped for parliamentary reasons and when re-presented in the spring of 1914 the original wording had reappeared.³⁵

Culture and conservation

The role of the Society as a guardian of the built environment was, like its other practical concerns, slow to mature but in the long term of the greatest importance to the heritage of

the city of Chester. Early members were deeply concerned about the architectural integrity of new development and about the conservation or restoration of existing historic buildings. With crusading zeal some espoused the passionate arguments in favour of ‘correct’ architectural practice — in this case authentically medieval styles — while others lamented the loss of the familiar elements in Chester’s streetscapes. In keeping with the vigour of the arguments over the relationship between architecture and liturgy, and also with the pronounced clerical bias of the Society, some of the early issues which attracted attention were those concerned with re-pewing and interior redesign of city churches. In 1849, for example, the Council debated the new seating plan for St John’s church, applauding the removal of eighteenth-century galleries. Shortly afterwards there was a discussion about the style of monuments and tombstones which was desirable for Christian churches, and designs were approved: ‘instances of prevalent bad taste in epitaphs and obituary inscriptions, were contrasted with examples of more becoming and reverent spirit’.³⁶ Later in the century this strict rectitude became less apparent, as loathing of the work of the eighteenth century began to give way to a more sympathetic attitude, and the Society as a whole became more pragmatic.

The aesthetics of improvements in the city were a matter of concern as so many property redevelopment, streetworks and restoration schemes were planned or in progress by the 1850s. The Society took upon itself the role of a watchdog, checking on progress and inspecting plans, often using its intimate connections with the commercial and political establishment to obtain prior viewing of plans and drawings and to exert a behind-the-scenes pressure. In the absence of a planning system, and even of building controls until the 1870s, such activity was perhaps the only powerful restraint upon developers. The Society and its members had well formed prejudices and personal tastes in architecture and design, and their preferences were by and large conservative. They must have been regarded as deeply reactionary by many developers, local government officials and councillors, but their restraining hand was a not inconsiderable factor in shaping the city’s later nineteenth-century appearance. The reputation of the Society as a bastion of wisdom and good taste in matters historic meant that, as with archaeological questions, it was often approached by other organisations seeking advice. As early as December 1851, for example, the Watch Committee of the Corporation sought its opinion before erecting gas lamps on the city gates, while the Council liaised with the architect and owner of properties in Eastgate Street and gave a vote of thanks for the quality of the restoration work which they implemented.³⁷ When Brown’s were designing their new store in 1858 William Brown, a leading member of the Society, consulted and exhibited drawings for the approval of Council, and a similar exercise was undertaken for the new barracks block in the castle, where the Society had influence with some of the officers of the militia who had addressed it on military history.³⁸ Forty years later, when the Corporation proposed to build municipal baths in Hop Pole Paddock, close to the City Walls and cathedral, the Society protested vigorously and effectively, using the progressive argument that the city’s architectural heritage would suffer and tourists would be deterred: ‘With their accompanying machinery and chimney stack [the baths] would be of great detriment to one of the most interesting portions of the city... not only to the citizens but also to the thousands of strangers who come to visit our unique town’.³⁹



III 22 Drawing by the Chester architect James Harrison of the old pews in St John's church to accompany his article in the *Journal* (os 1, p 143)

The Society itself became a participant in conservation with the purchase and restoration of Derby House. Although this proved to be a complete failure in terms of administration and finances, it was an important milestone in the development of a civic consciousness of Chester's heritage. There was serious concern in the early 1860s that the building (dating from 1591) was likely to be demolished, and its rescue proved that it was possible to take positive steps to protect the architectural legacy. Similar concerns lay behind the Society's enthusiastic campaigning for the preservation of Bishop Lloyd's house, which in the late 1890s seemed likely to be sold, dismantled and shipped to America. In November 1898 Alderman Charles Brown, in the last, and perhaps the most important, of his contributions to the cause of conservation in the city, bought the building, which was later restored (excessively so, by the more demanding criteria of the late twentieth century) by the architect T W Lockwood. In 1888 the Society tried to undo some of the destruction of the past, asking the Duke of Westminster if he would allow the upper part of the medieval High Cross to be returned from Nether Leigh for conservation, restoration and display in the city.⁴⁰

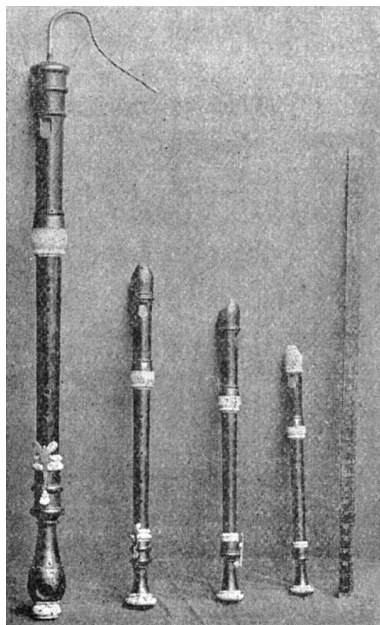
The work of the Society in promoting the study of the Rows was highly influential in the formulation of the Corporation's policies towards that uniquely valuable feature, and the Society also lobbied developers to try to ensure that new work did not damage or destroy the integrity of the Rows. In 1909 it protested to the Duke of Westminster that the redevelopment of property in Bridge Street Row to create the new arcade was 'out of harmony with the architecture of the City' — it was to be faced with white tiles. The protests were to no avail, but at a later meeting of the Council of the Society the bishop promised that he would use his influence with the duke to secure a modification of the plans, so that the street frontage was not damaged.⁴¹ On the other hand, many buildings were cleared to make way for central area commercial schemes, as a result of which the city's distinctive Victorian black-and-white architecture emerged as a striking element in the streetscape, while the museum's growing collection of Roman antiquities was frequently enriched by the discoveries made during the digging of new foundations. The Society was often called upon to undertake last-minute rescues of Roman columns, bits of mosaic floors, and miscellaneous carved or inscribed stones which obstructed developers and building contractors.

As the awareness of the architectural legacy grew, and as the Society began to lead campaigns aimed at protecting at least some of the most important monuments and buildings, it also began to consider other elements in the city's cultural heritage. In the 1880s Dr Joseph Bridge (1853–1929), organist and master of choristers at the cathedral, began to take an active role in the Society. Although in 1908 he became professor of music at Durham, he remained prominent in Chester's musical life until his death, serving as director and conductor of the triennial music festival from 1877 until 1925. Bridge, whose extensive papers on musical and antiquarian matters were bequeathed to the Society, was exceptional in being fascinated by two themes which are now fundamental to modern performance and musicology but which were then deeply unfashionable: early music and the use of 'authentic' period instruments. In 1891/2 he gave a series of very popular lectures for the Society on the development of music between 800 and 1650, in which members of the cathedral choir and imported vocal and instrumental soloists performed selected pieces. Among the instruments used was a 1750 harpsichord and a piano of 1789.



In December 1892 he brought the celebrated Arnold Dolmetsch to perform for the Society, ‘the only man in England who could play the lute...who had the courage, ability and enthusiasm to practise that old-time music’, and in 1908 a series of lectures by Bridge included performances from ‘the Coventry Mystery Plays, Mummers’ Plays, Masques, Purcell’s *Dido & Aeneas*, Giles Farnaby & Wm. Byrd’, all of which had long languished in obscurity but are now recognised as among the finest achievements of pre-eighteenth-century English music and drama.⁴²

Events such as this prompted the Society to take a greater interest in the wider heritage. In July 1906 a letter was received from the English Drama Society asking for help in reviving one of the greatest of the city's cultural treasures, the Chester Mystery Plays. The Council was very enthusiastic, declaring that this could be 'exceedingly valuable from an historical, antiquarian and educational point of view', and in August held a meeting with the director, the theatrical impresario Nugent Monck, at which it agreed to act as sponsor and to advertise the project through its members and with explanatory lectures. The curious formal procedures whereby the Corporation was brought into the partnership were also the responsibility of the Society. On 8 October 1906 the Council requested the mayor (who was, of course, one of its leading members) to hold a public meeting to consider the plan and, following this anything but spontaneous submission, he duly convened a meeting at the Town Hall ten days later.⁴³



The decision to proceed was not without controversy. The dean, John Darby, was vehement in his opposition, declaring that he and 'others whose judgement is worthy of attention, earnestly deprecate the reproduction of religious subjects by a drama society'. At the public meeting, however, Nugent Monck spoke of the reverence and seriousness with which the subject would be treated and the dean was publicly humiliated when the bishop not only spoke in favour of the plan but also promised to be a guarantor of the funding. The archdeacon, like the dean and the bishop a senior officer of the Society, moved the formal motion to approve the project and announced that he had sought and obtained the personal backing of the Duke of Westminster. Largely as a result of the Society's vigorous championship and promotion, using — as so often — its strong influence with leading town officials, part of the mystery play cycle was produced at Whitsuntide in 1907 and the whole cycle was subsequently performed, quickly being recognised as one of the most important works of medieval drama to have survived anywhere in England. Two years later the Society was a leading participant in arranging a great pageant of Chester, which had as its theme the glorious episodes in the city's long and illustrious history, selected by the Council. The increasing desire to celebrate Chester's past, partly a product of the growth in the tourist trade, was also reflected in the strong support given by the Society to the idea of denoting historic buildings and those with interesting historical associations by commemorative and instructive plaques, as had already been undertaken in boroughs such as Shrewsbury and Rochester.⁴⁴

left: Ill 23 Bishop Lloyd's House, Watergate Street, bought for restoration by Alderman Charles Brown after a campaign by the Society. Illustrated on the frontispiece to *Journal* 6 (2), 1899, where the building was the subject of an article by R H Morris

above: Ill 24 Set of early 18th-century recorders by Peter Bressan, one of the finest makers of his time. Given to the Society in its earliest years by Colonel Cholmondeley and now in the Grosvenor Museum. The illustration is taken from a note on the recorders in the *Journal* 5 (1), 1895, 104-5 by J C Bridge

Chester Mystery Plays,

NOVEMBER 29th, 1906.

The following Music was performed:—

IN "THE SALUTATION AND NATIVITY PLAY":

1. "Hec est ara Dei celi," to music adapted from the York Plays.

BEFORE "THE SHEPHERDS' PLAY":

2. The Shepherds' Trio, "As I outrode this enderes night," from the Coventry Plays.

IN "THE SHEPHERDS' PLAY":

3. "Gloria in Excelsis," to traditional setting from Chester Plays. This being the only music now remaining.
4. Before the Play of the "Three Kings" was sung the "Lullaby" from the Coventry Plays: "Lullay thou little tiny child."
5. Between the Third and Fourth Plays (which were amalgamated) was sung the traditional Carol: "We Three Kings of Orient are."

JOSEPH C. BRIDGE.

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The only remaining Music of the Chester Plays from the M.S. of James Miller, written in 1607. British Museum. Harleian 2124. (Sung by the Angel to the Shepherds.)

The musical score is written on two staves in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and contains the notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, with lyrics 'Glo - - - - - ri - a'. The second staff begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and contains the notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, with lyrics 'in ex - cel - sis'. The second staff continues with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic, then a ritardando (*rit.*), and ends with a piano (*p*) dynamic, containing the notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, with lyrics 'De - - o De - o De - o De - o'.

III 25 Record of a trial performance of three of the Chester Mystery Plays in 1906. (*Journal* 14, 1908, appendix iii)

Notes

- 1 From the 1849 lists in the Society's Chronological Accessions Book 1849–1891 (CA CR75/11).
- 2 CA CR75/1 (13 July 1849)
- 3 CA CR75/11 1849 and 1852 accessions lists
- 4 CA CR75/1 (22 June 1849, 6 July 1849)
- 5 As in June 1858, when Mr John Peacock presented 'for the Museum...a curious vase & votive lamp, both of red baked clay, recently discovered in the Barrow Field' (CA CR75/1 (17 June 1858)).
- 6 CA CR75/1 (9 December 1867)
- 7 CA CR75/2 (26 November 1883, 4 February 1884, 1 March 1884)
- 8 CA CR75/2 (4 February 1884)
- 9 CA CR75/3 (30 November 1885)
- 10 Quoted in the *Chester Courant* 23 October 1886. Bishop Stubbs, one of the greatest constitutional historians of the late nineteenth century, took what seems now to be a very traditionalist view of archaeology but one which was very widely held: archaeology was, like history and fine arts, a subject without laws (essentially because it dealt with an irrational humankind) and without a scientific methodology even though it was becoming ever more systematic. The inclusion of theology among the disciplines with immutable laws of course reflects the speaker's position as a devout churchman.
- 11 E F Benson, son of Archbishop Benson of Canterbury, is now best known for his 'Mapp and Lucia' novels, which include a good deal of humorous comment on amateur archaeologists and their over-optimistic misidentification of finds.
- 12 CA CR75/5 (15 April 1891, 27 May 1891, 28 September 1891, 30 November 1891)
- 13 CA CR75/5 (April/May 1893); the meeting about the Rows is reported in detail in the *Chester Observer* for 21 October 1893.
- 14 CA CR75/5 (20 January 1896)
- 15 CA CR75/6 (15 April 1901)
- 16 CA 75/6 (21 November 1905, 6 May 1907)
- 17 CA CR75/6 (16 September 1908, 20 October 1908, 6 November 1908)
- 18 CA CR75/7 (20 May 1915)
- 19 CA CR75/5 (16 November 1891, 1 August 1898, 25 May 1899, 7 May 1900); Annual Report 1904/5
- 20 CA CR75/7 (4 May 1903, 24 March 1905)
- 21 CA CR75/7 (3 February 1913, 19 May 1913, 21 October 1913, 22 October 1913). Newstead (1859–1945) was not a professional archaeologist, as his appointment at Liverpool indicates, but as a scientist he adopted a methodical and systematic approach to his work as curator and in the important excavations (such as those in the Deanery Field and the amphitheatre undertaken between the wars). For a more complete assessment (which is, however, not entirely accurate insofar as Newstead's relationship with the Archaeological Society is concerned), see Lloyd-Morgan. The Newstead years, 1886–1947. *J Chester Archaeol Soc* **72**, 1992/3, 25–36.

- 22 Canon Raines, whose very large collection of manuscripts and antiquarian notes is in Chetham's Library, Manchester, was a founder of the Chetham Society and one of the most important local historians in nineteenth-century Lancashire.
- 23 CA CR 75/1 (1 December 1851, 23 April 1852, 13 April 1853)
- 24 1886 Annual Report; CA CR75/4 (19 March 1888)
- 25 The first county record office was Bedfordshire, established in 1913.
- 26 Details of the provenance and contents of these and other collections are given in the relevant catalogues of Chester Archives (formerly the Chester City Record Office), to which they were transferred in 1969. The references for those noted are: Morris CR59; Hughes CR60 and Earwaker CR63.
- 27 CA CR75/7 (15 March 1910)
- 28 CA CR75/11 Chronological accessions book 1849–1891; CR 75/14 Library catalogue lists 1849–1890
- 29 CA CR75/3 (14 May 1887); CR75/4 (30 May 1888)
- 30 CA CR75/7 (21 October 1902, 31 October 1904)
- 31 CA CR75/7 (21 February 1907)
- 32 CA CR75/7 (5 December 1905)
- 33 CA CR75/7 (7 November 1907, 18 February 1908)
- 34 CA CR75/8 (21 November 1911)
- 35 CA CR75/8 (20 May 1913, 21 May 1914): the outbreak of the war ended consideration of the P R O W project.
- 36 CA CR75/1 (25 July 1849, 22 February 1850)
- 37 CA CR75/1 (1 December 1851, 23 April 1852); this was Mr Platt's shop, where the greatest part of the fabric was in fact new construction in a 'tasteful' style in keeping with the older properties around.
- 38 CA CR 75/1 (17 June 1858)
- 39 CA CR75/4 (6 April 1889); Annual Report 1888/9
- 40 CA CR75/4 (25 January 1888)
- 41 CA CR75/7 (10 August 1909): the bishop (with other influential voices) was successful, since the street frontage of the Row was modified to give a timber-built facade. Although the rest of the original design was implemented, the opening among the shop fronts harmonises reasonably well with the older properties on either side and T W Lockwood's arcade is now recognised as one of the best Edwardian buildings in the city.
- 42 *Chester Courant* 30 November and 14 December 1892; CA CR 75/7 (4 February 1908)
- 43 CA CR 75/7 (27 July 1906, 13 August 1906, 5 October 1906, 18 October 1906)
- 44 CA CR 75/7 (5 October 1906, 18 June 1909, 10 September 1909); *Chester Chronicle* 23 May 1913