

THE EARLY GROWTH OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN CHESTER: 1849-95

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The founding of the Chester Archaeological Society

The first formal beginnings of archaeology in Chester can be said to have started on Friday 16 March 1849, when there was a gathering at the rectory of St Mary's on the Hill to discuss the first steps towards setting up an 'Architectural, Archaeological and Historic Society for the County, City and Neighbourhood of Chester'. Individuals representing architects, artists, the laity and clergy of Chester were present. A constitution had already been drawn up, and there was a formal announcement in a letter to the *Chester Courant* on 28 March of that year. Among its objectives were 'The extension of knowledge and registering of information in the details of local history, the evidences of which were in danger of being soon altogether lost beyond memory'.

The beginnings of the Society can be traced through the early volumes of its *Journal*, which was first published in 1850 and covered the proceedings of the meetings, which at first were held at St Mary's rectory, and later at the City Library and other venues in the city. From the first there was an enthusiastic response, with one hundred and twenty-three paid up members by the July of that year. The interest in the young Society was also marked by the gifts of books, journals, prints, curios and archaeological finds which were noted in the *Journal* over the years and were later to be catalogued, described and published by the antiquarians and collectors who took a keen personal interest in the various items of what was rapidly becoming an expanding collection.

Amongst the first archaeological finds given to the Society was the altar to the 'Genius of the Century of Aurelius Verinus [set up] by Julius Quintilianus' which had been found at Boughton in 1849 (RIB no 447; Wright & Richmond 1955, no 4). Another important find in the same year was the lead pig found in Commonhall Street (Wright & Richmond 1955, no 198; Webster 1952-3, 22-3). Other gifts included two Roman rings. One example was a gilded copper alloy ring set with a glass paste intaglio in imitation of nicolo. This is said to have been found in 1800 in the garden of Thos Fletcher, in Upper Northgate Street. In later years it was in the collection of Dr Hastings in Abbey Green. It is probably the same ring which was noted in the accession book of the Society c 1885. An earlier find was a gold ring set with an amethyst *en cabuchon* and said to have been 'Found opposite the College in Field in May 1855'. This ring has been dated to the third century AD, that from Northgate Street to the late second century AD.

These were not the first major finds from Chester and its environs. Several important finds had already come to light during the seventeenth century. One of the first was the altar to Jupiter Tanarus dedicated by Lucius Bruttius of the Galerian voting tribe during the consulships of Commodus and Lateranus, which can be dated to the year AD 154. The altar was found in Foregate Street in 1653, about 8 ft below the surface. Unfortunately, it was exposed to the weather in the garden of a certain Richard Tyrer, with consequent erosion of parts of the inscription. In 1675 it was taken to Oxford and is now in the reserve collection of the Ashmolean Museum (Horsley 1733, 192, no 67, iii and 315; RIB no 452; Green 1982). Some forty years later another altar was discovered. This was said to have been found *in situ* on the south side of Eastgate Street, and was dedicated to the Genius of the place by a tribune of the Twentieth Legion, Flavius Longus, and his son Longinus 'for the welfare of our lords, the most invincible Emperors'. Fortunately, this piece has remained in Chester. A slightly later find came from Watergate Street in 1779. In 1836 it was presented to the British Museum. In this case, the dedication was to *Fortuna Redux*, and had been set up by the freemen and slaves of the imperial legate Titus Pomponius Mamilianus Rufus Antistianus Funisulanus Vettianianus. These early inscriptions were the forerunners of the many examples which were found during the nineteenth century and later.

Gifts other than archaeological finds were also donated to the young Society. These included brass rubbings from churches in Macclesfield, Beaumaris, Ormskirk and elsewhere. Other gifts included prints and lithographs of cottages and architectural buildings. Deeds and charters were also given, which would with time grow into a valuable resource for research work being carried out by local people and many others in and around the county. A good number of other well-established societies sent copies of their latest journals and pamphlets, whilst gifts of books were donated by private persons and became the core of the Society's library. As might be expected, over the years journals were exchanged with other societies and groups, and in many instances this practice has continued to the present time .

The search for a home

As has already been mentioned, several meetings of the Society were held at St Mary's Rectory during the summer months of 1849. Other meetings were held in different venues: on the 24 December 1849, for example, a meeting was held at the County Court. An agreement was made with the proprietress of the City Library for the use of the rooms and access to the books at £15 per annum from 1 January 1850. Much of the property of the Society remained at the library during the early months, but in the course of time it was found to be more useful to use other, larger rooms, especially as the Society was now growing in membership and importance. At times the Society could be found to be using a cupboard at the Commercial Buildings; thence they migrated to the Episcopal Palace in Abbey Square, and subsequently voyaged to Lower Bridge Street. These last premises at the Albion Rooms became the main home for the Society and its collections. Other temporary accommodation had been suggested at different times, such as a disused chapel in Pepper Street; part of an old skating rink in the Linen Hall; and at one time it is reported that 'they were even considering taking over part of the Old City Gaol'. However, 'On

mature consideration, hard up as they were, they thought this rather *infra dig*'. The Society's museum was described in scathing terms in the *Chronicle* for 1 November 1884:

The lamentable apology of a museum offered by the Archaeology Society in Lower Bridge Street is open only to members of the Society, and even to them only for two hours per week – probably lest familiarity should breed contempt. Not that there is a scarcity of good and valuable objects in the collections but from the higgledy-piggledy jumbling which want of space and accommodation causes.

Looking back in 1886, Prof T McKenny Hughes, the second president of the Natural Science Society, said that the Archaeological Society 'might have done far better work, collected a much larger store of information and saved from destruction many interesting objects...had it received proper arrangements and been provided with a place in which to keep and study the relics of the past'.

In the end the Duke of Westminster came to the Society's aid, and with Dean Howson's help the Archaeological Society joined with its younger sister society to build the premises now known as the Grosvenor Museum, and public appeals were launched to raise the money.

The Chester Society of Natural Science, Literature and Art had been founded on 26 May 1871, having its origins in a series of inspired lectures which were given by Canon Charles Kingsley during his summer months of residence from 1869 to 1873. In March 1873 Kingsley accepted the offer of a Canonry at Westminster Abbey, but by January 1875 he was dead, to the great grief of many friends and like-minded colleagues in Chester. The members of the Natural Science Society faced the same difficulties as did the Archaeological Society in maintaining its growing collection, and the most elegant solution was to bring the two societies together, along with the School of Science and the School of Art. A joint effort was launched to find a site and the funds to provide a building with all the appropriate facilities to house the collections, rooms for lecturing, and other areas for teaching boys attending evening classes.

A committee was put together drawing in members of the institutions involved, and a public meeting was held at the Town Hall on 15 November 1883. The Duke of Westminster presided and is said to have started off the appeal for funds with a gift of some £4,000. Another £1,000 was collected at the meeting, and within a few weeks a fund of £6,000 had been raised. The Duke was also of great help in obtaining the site which was eventually chosen. That part which belonged to him was presented to the committee; the remaining portion was purchased from the County and other lesser owners. The plans for the museum were prepared by T M Lockwood, who had already been responsible for restoring several buildings within the City Walls.

The foundation of the Grosvenor Museum

After various false starts, including the death on the 18 January of the Earl of Wilton, the cousin of the Duke of Westminster, the date for the laying of the foundation stone of the new building in Grosvenor Street was announced as set at noon on Tuesday 3 February 1885. The *Chronicle* noted in its edition of 7 February, page 2 that: 'The event which has

been so long looked forward to by the friends of science, art and archaeology in the City of Chester, the County of Cheshire and the contiguous district of North Wales came to pass under very agreeable circumstances'. The account continues:

The site of the new Museum adjoins that of the Savings Bank and extends obliquely towards Bunce Street. The day was fortunately fine and mild so that the open air demonstration in connection with the stone laying could be enjoyed by all present. Tickets for admission had been obtainable by the citizens generally during the week, and fully on the hour before the time appointed the enclosure began to fill.... The basement walls which were already laid down received a substantial platform of planking to support the stone laying party. Barriers were erected to prevent crushing. A place was assigned for everybody...and everything was done in the most orderly manner possible...Schools were represented: the Modern School, Grosvenor Road; the Kings School; the Queens School; Mr Birch's School, Northgate Street. The occasion was enlivened by the arrival of the Blue Coat School headed by their band..and the Boughton Industrial School and their band. Police Inspectors Farrell and Lindsay were on the ground with a large force of City Constables, but their duties were of an ornamental character. Flags floated gaily above the line of the frontage where hereafter is to rise one of the noblest edifices of the city. A few minutes before twelve an open carriage and pair drove up containing the Duke and Duchess of Westminster, Sir Philip Cunliffe Owen, and Col Scotland, the Duke's Agent.

The ceremony of laying the stone was brief. A heavy tripod had been erected, from which the stone was suspended by means of a pulley. Three or four men at a rope were instructed to 'pull up'. Mr Shephard, a founder member of the Chester Society of Natural Science and a member of the building committee had a sealed bottle ready to put under the stone '..for the delight and wonder of the archaeologist of the dim future...who...shall chance to unearth this permanent record of our day'.

The contents of the bottle included copies of the local newspapers; *The Times* for 3 February; coins from 2/6 to 1/2d dated 1884; latest reports published by the societies and the schools involved in the museum project; the Kingsley Memorial Medal; and photographs of the principal participants in the proceedings.

The silver trowel with which his Grace was to perform the duty of the day was very elegant and bore the following inscription: 'Gratefully presented to the Duke of Westminster K G by the Committee of the Chester Museum, and schools of Art and Science on the laying of the foundation stone February 3rd 1885'; and was presented to the Duke by the Dean, Dr John S Howson. His Grace proceeded to lay the stone in the usual manner. In his brief speech the Duke said: 'No money, no contributions would have been of any avail unless there had been a spirit shown amongst the many citizens of Chester who promote all that favours the higher life of the inhabitants of this city...' and he expressed a hope that the building would 'prove of infinite value of all time to our old city'. Further speeches were made devoted to the purpose of the new building and its funding. The Dean called for three cheers for the Duchess, who had earlier presented each member of the Management Committee with a beautiful red rose. The Duke replied and

asked for three cheers for the success of the Museum, followed by three cheers for the Duke, and the Blue Coat band played 'God Save the Queen'. Following the ceremony, 'An admirable luncheon was served in the Assembly room of the Grosvenor Hotel, the company numbering nearly 200 (tickets for ladies or gentlemen being 4 shillings each)'. As might have been expected there were further speeches at the luncheon dealing with questions of archaeology, art and science 'from some of the best exponents of these subjects'. It was noted at the time that 'Mr G F Holway of Grosvenor Street has produced an excellent photograph of the gathering on Tuesday on the site of the New Museum. The Duke of Westminster, the Dean, Dr John Howson, the Mayor, Charles Brown, Mr Lockwood, the architect and many other gentlemen connected with the movement are "very well photographed" and anyone desirous to possess a memento of the interesting event would do well to secure one of these admirable productions'.

On Tuesday 10 August 1886 the museum was opened to the public. As the Mayor, Mr G A Dickson, said at the time: 'It was scarcely to be believed that so beautiful a Museum, with so magnificent an exterior should have been erected so quickly'. On 14 August it was reported that:

The splendid building which will be hitherto known as the Grosvenor Museum of Natural History and Archaeology, with schools of Science and Art for Chester, Cheshire and North Wales, was opened amidst much general congratulation on Monday by his Grace the Duke of Westminster.

On the occasion of the formal opening by the Duke of Westminster, the committee had obtained the sanction of the Town Council for the stopping of all vehicular traffic in Grosvenor Street and Bunce Street between the hours of 11.30 and 1.30. The Chief Constable, Mr G L Fenwick, had told a number of his officers under Inspector Farrell to secure the observance of this arrangement, and the strictest order was in consequence maintained throughout the whole proceedings. There was a large concourse of people in Grosvenor Street, when at ten minutes to twelve the Mayor, Sheriff and Corporation (His Worship being preceded by the sword and mace bearers) arrived with the borough magistrates in front of the new Museum. At noon His Grace arrived accompanied by the Duchess of Westminster and was received at the entrance gates of the Institution. The Bishop of the Diocese, Dr William Stubbs, having offered up a special prayer for the divine blessing on the Institution and its work, Mr Alfred O Walker as Chairman of the Museum management committee handed the Key of the building to His Grace, who unlocked the doors and formally declared the building open. The Duke and Duchess of Westminster, the Mayor Mr G A Dickson, the Sheriff, Mr Geo Dutton, the Members of the corporation (the aldermen like the Mayor and Sheriff being dressed in their robes of office), the magistrates, and the invited guests then proceeded to view the inaugural exhibition under the direction of Mr Lockwood, the architect, Prof T McKenny Hughes, Mr A O Walker and Mr Lamont, after which an adjournment was made to the lecture theatre. Among the visitors the committee were glad to welcome Mr J B Manning, Governor of Her Majesty's Prison, Wakefield, who was formerly Treasurer of the Art School, Chester.

A charming note was made by the Duchess of Westminster who had sent, accompanied with her compliments, a sufficient number of beautiful red roses which the stewards wore as a distinctive badge on opening day.

His Grace addressed the assembly in the lecture theatre as follows:

My Lord Bishop, ladies and gentlemen, if it was a pleasure to lay the first stone of this building on the third of February 1885, it is a far greater pleasure to declare it open after a period of 17 months on this 9th of August 1886. Then was all hope and anticipation; now we have the completion and realisation of our hopes; and from this date and henceforth science and art will be enshrined in a fashion worthy of the position which they hold in our city and which they ought to occupy in every town of the Empire. Our learned Societies have at last a 'local habitation' for which they have waited long and patiently. For the name given to the Museum I have to express my grateful acknowledgements and thorough appreciation of the compliment paid to my family.... I venture to assert that the Museum will not only prove to be a valuable addition from the nature of its contents, but will be in itself a conspicuous addition and ornament to our city....'.

He also noted that: 'The Natural History department is interesting, and that the Collection of archaeological remains would be especially interesting to the members of the Royal Archaeological Institute', which was holding its annual meeting at Chester from 10 to 17 of August, with the Duke of Westminster as its President. On the afternoon of 10 August 'The whole body united at the Grosvenor Museum, where the Roman Inscriptions and antiquities from Chester and the neighbourhood area were explained by Mr W Thompson Watkin, Mr G W Shrubsole and Mr J H Williams'. Other festivities connected with the opening of the Museum included an inaugural exhibition with works of art lent by Her Majesty's Government, the Royal Academy of Arts, and the Duke of Westminster among others, which ran until 2 October. There was also a series of lectures and concerts. On Saturday 14 August there was an instrumental concert by members of the Chester Orchestral Society, conductor Dr Bridge M A (organist at the Cathedral for nearly fifty years), and another on Wednesday 18 August at 8.00 pm.

Although the archaeological exhibits in the new museum were somewhat overshadowed by the displays of the younger and more vigorous Natural Science Society, the members of the Archaeological Society rose to the occasion. Thompson Watkin published his *Roman Cheshire* (price £1-5s-0d), which surveyed the finds and remains from the county – a book which still remains a classic account. Frank H Williams produced his *Synopsis of Roman inscriptions of Chester*, an account which partly overlapped and complemented *The illustrated catalogue of the Roman altars and inscribed stones in the Grosvenor Museum belonging to the Chester Archaeological Society compiled by the honorary curator – G W Shrubsole*.

There was much praise for the new museum building. *The Builder*, in an edition published in mid-August 1886, contained an article on it, as did the *New Weekly* a few years later (March 1894). The local press was full of the delights of the collections and

the architecture: 'The Italian mosaic pavement of the Entrance hall is particularly chaste and agreeable in effect. The arms of the city are worked in the centre of the circular space round which winds the great staircase'. It was laid by Ludwig Oppenheimer of Manchester. 'A free use has been made of artistic stained glass in different parts of the building... and in the antechamber of the Lecture Hall there is a very beautiful window which one faces immediately upon entering the building and lends a glow to the general effect. In the upper panels of this window are the City and County arms splendidly painted by Shrigley and Hunt of Lancaster, while below there appears in the midst of the small and richly tinted and diapered square, a scroll bearing the following inscription:

"Tis education forms the common mind
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined".

Back to reality

Alas the public ideals and hopes! The mosaic floor which was described as being 'Comparatively speaking imperishable...and washable without detriment' needed to be repaired or otherwise attended to five or six times during the first twenty years of its life.

The stained glass window so lovingly described was reset in sections in three different windows just outside the present Natural History Gallery on the first floor, presumably as a consequence of the building of the museum extension in 1894-5. Indeed, some of the glass did not even survive the first month of the opening, as we have a record of three panes of stained glass in the vestibule door:

18 panes of stained glass broken in the science classroom;
4 in the Chemical laboratory and 9 in the lecture theatre.

Indeed, the first entry in the Caretaker's Register reads: 'On or before the 9th (August 1886) the following articles were taken from the workshop in the basement:-

1 wash leather; 1 hand vice; 2 screwdrivers; 1 square; 1 bradawl; 1 pair of pliers'.

Later, one screwdriver and the pliers had been returned.

Flooding in the basement was a problem from the beginning:

10 September 1886: 'After heavy rain on the 9th September (1886) I found a large pool of water just inside the cellar door. A drain is provided to carry off this water, but the cement is not pitched the right way'.

12 September 1886: 'A colony of cats have established themselves under the floor of the archaeology room. They gained admittance through the ventilating holes as the grates haven't been put in'.

Problems were also encountered with the pupils attending the Schools of Art and Science for both day and evening classes. One of the incidents that was recorded noted that on 5 February 1892: 'Someone attending the evening artisans class (School of Art) on leaving the room at 9 o' clock on the above date fired off a loaded pistol, the bullet of which has since been found and is produced here this evening. The bullet is not large but might have done some harm if it had hit anyone'. A less serious incident on the night of 5 April 1894 involved three of the male students who knocked a hat off the peg and battered it about so that it was 'scarcely fit to wear afterwards.' The hat was the property of Mr F Turner, schoolmaster at Eccleston who was 'much annoyed'.

The museum extension

The *Chronicle* for 20 February 1894 noted in the editorial on page 8 column 3 that: 'I have frequently directed attention to the excellent educational work performed by the teaching staff at the Grosvenor Museum. The time has at length come when increased accommodation is necessary for the development of the Institution, and an appeal is being made to the public to assist. In order to extent and complete the building a further sum of £5,000 is required, towards which the Duke of Westminster has contributed £1,250. Subscriptions will be received by Mr T Shephard of Bridge Street, or Mr Baille the Hon Sec or at any of the Chester Banks'.

On 19 January 1895, the *Chronicle* announced that an Exhibition of Pictures etc would be opened on Monday 4 February 1895, and would remain open for several weeks. The pictures included a series of 'Turner drawings from the National Gallery; with an Historical series of paintings from South Kensington – and a unique and valuable loan collection of modern paintings etc. Admission 1/-'.

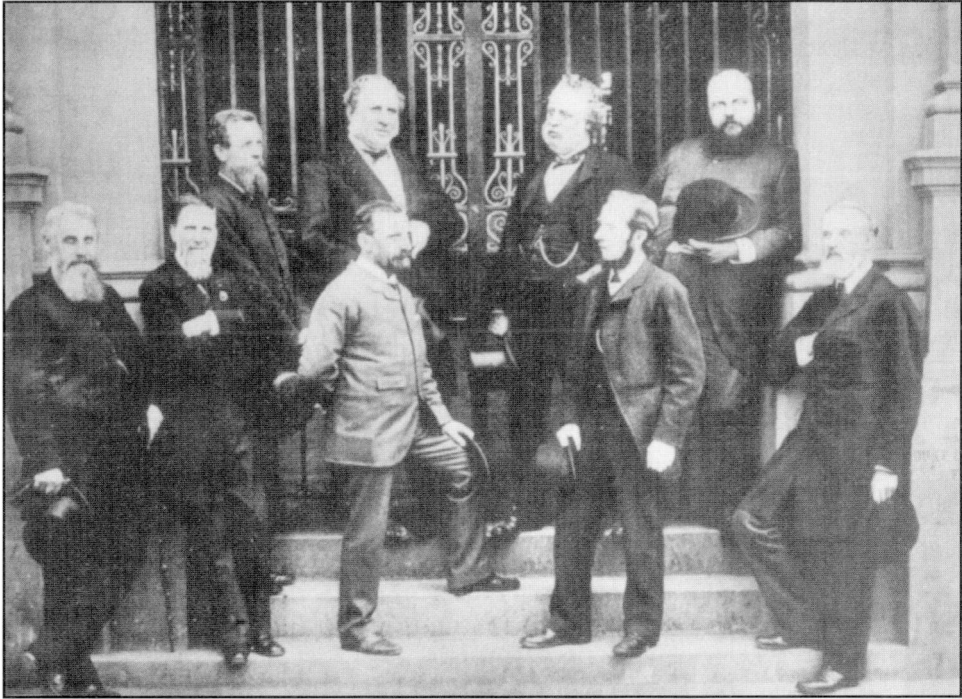
The *Chronicle* again announced in the Saturday edition, 2 February, page 8 column 2, that the Duke of Westminster would open the Grosvenor Museum extension tomorrow (Saturday), and 'the Duchess of Westminster will distribute prizes to the successful competitors in the classes. An interesting feature at the Museum will be a unique collection of pictures constituting the art exhibition'. The formal opening of the museum extension took place in the afternoon with the usual opening ceremony and speeches by the Duke and the Mayor.

When the museum was conceived, the main portion of the rooms which now constitute the extension were included on the plan. The immediate erection of this portion was not considered at the time essential, and attention was given to those portions of the building which were absolutely necessary. Owing to the growing needs of the museum, however, and the felt want of increased accommodation, it was decided that the time had arrived when the the extension should be proceeded with. ...Technical workshops and instruction rooms have been added which are commodious, well lighted, and in every way adapted to requirements. The archaeological Museum is upon the ground floor, on a level with the art gallery, which in the past has constituted the temporary museum for the archaeological and antiquarian relics. On the first floor the Natural History museum is now securely housed and properly displayed, and for the first time the nature and extent of the

valuable collection representing flora and fauna of the district are open to the public. This room displays the true artistic perception of the curator Mr Robert Newstead FES whose life histories have wrought out true to nature and by common consent the collection is regarded as unique. The upper stories of the extension are devoted to art classrooms for the advanced students and for art classes.

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2 The Building Committee outside the main entrance of the Grosvenor Museum.