

# THE FUTURE OF CHESTER'S PAST: 1989-96

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## *Introduction*

Although the period covered by this chapter is relatively short, it has been a time of great change in British field archaeology, in local government, and in archaeological provision for Chester. Until 1989 the Grosvenor Museum (including the Excavations Section) formed part of the City Secretary and Solicitor's Department. In that year a new Department of Leisure Services was created which took over responsibility for the City Council's cultural services, including the museum. As part of the same reorganisation the Excavations Section was brought out from under the management of the museum and transformed into a separate Archaeological Service in recognition of the importance of archaeology to the heritage of the city. The old post of Field Officer was upgraded to that of City Archaeologist and I was fortunate enough to be appointed as its first holder in 1990.

Although the City had lost two of its archaeological staff, in the form of Tim Strickland and David Mason, when I arrived I was fortunate to become part of a team of considerable experience and talent, including long-standing members such as Peter Alebon (Illustrator), Peter Carrington (Post-Excavation Officer), Janet Rutter (post-Roman finds) and Simon Ward (Field Officer). There were also some relative newcomers, such as Alison Jones (Roman finds) and Cheryl Quinn (Archaeological Draughtsperson). During my first few months several vacant posts, some newly created as part of the reorganisation, were filled: Keith Matthews joined Simon Ward as a Field Officer; Lesley Harrison took charge of faunal and environmental remains, whilst Gillian Dunn and Julie Edwards were taken on to work on Roman and post-Roman finds respectively. Jane Hebblewhite, working in the museum office, continued doing our administration, her post later being transferred to the Service.

Since 1991 the team in Chester has in many ways been a model for an urban unit, being able to provide on-the-spot expertise in the main sub-disciplines required for managing a nationally important urban archaeological resource. Whilst there have been some personnel changes in the past few years, this is still the case as I write.

We continue to receive independent advice on strategic and policy issues from leading archaeologists through the Excavations Advisory Group chaired by Dr Ian Longworth. Although the death of Hugh Thompson was a serious blow to the Group, it has subsequently been strengthened by the addition of Dai Morgan Evans, Secretary of the

Society of Antiquaries, Dr Peter Gaunt from University College Chester, Dr David Gibbins from Liverpool University and Professor Bill Manning from University College Cardiff.

### *Dealing with development*

In retrospect, the high level and relative stability of archaeological provision in Chester has enabled the recent changes affecting British field archaeology to be successfully, if not always smoothly, weathered. Some of these changes have been clearly beneficial, whilst others are of debatable value.

On the positive side has been the issuing of Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning (PPG 16) by the Department of the Environment in 1990. This obscure-sounding document has transformed the daily lives of field archaeologists in England. Without going into too much detail, it has given archaeologists an important role in vetting planning applications where archaeological remains may be affected by a development. It has had two main effects in Chester: firstly, if a prospective developer wishes to build on a site of potential archaeological significance, the local planning authority can insist that an archaeological evaluation (usually trial-trenching) be carried out before the scheme is considered for approval. Thus, much of the archaeological work now carried out in the city and district is desk-based or small-scale investigation to see how much damage, if any, a development may cause to the archaeological remains on a site. Normally, the next step is to get the developer to minimise any such damage by, for example, using less intrusive foundations.

A good example of this kind of thing is the recent development of the car park on Weaver Street, beneath which lies a stretch of the western defences of the Roman fortress. A proposal for a major office development on the site resulted in an evaluation which established the precise line and depth below the surface of the Roman defences and also the thickness of modern overburden above the archaeological deposits. Armed with this information we were able to persuade the developer to raise the ground floor level of the building above any sensitive layers and also to use pile foundations, which affected only a very small proportion of the site.

The methodology of evaluation requires a different approach to digging and writing-up than traditional research or rescue excavation, and we have sought to keep at the forefront of debate in this field. In 1993 we published the papers from a seminar on this subject, several of which were contributed by staff members (Carrington ed 1993). This was the first in a planned series of occasional publications.

In a small proportion of cases it may not be possible for a development to avoid major damage to archaeological deposits and a rescue excavation is needed. It is in these circumstances that the second major effect of PPG 16 comes into play: rather than rely on public funding from sources such as English Heritage, as was the case in the past, developers have to provide adequate time and funding for the site to be investigated. In the historic core of Chester only a handful of sites have been so treated since 1990, but where this has happened, significant increases in knowledge have resulted.

In 1991 at 49-51 Lower Bridge Street, our first developer-funded project uncovered part of the Roman extra-mural settlement, where the recycling of lead was found to have

been an important industry. A sequence of Saxon and medieval pits was found, as was the cellar of a house which had burned down, apparently in the Civil War.

Excavation at 3-15 Eastgate Row later in the same year involved digging up part of the walkway in what used to be known as the 'Dark Row'. The resulting monograph (Matthews and others 1995) combined archaeology, documentary evidence and standing building survey to create a rounded picture of the evolution of this central site over almost two millennia.

The development of an extension to the rear of W H Smith at 5-7 Foregate Street provided the opportunity to examine a stretch of the city's defensive ditches to the north of the East Gate. Evidence for the Roman fortress ditch was recorded as well as the massive medieval ditch which was found to contain well-preserved organic remains of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century date, including wooden bowls and numerous leather shoes.

At 32-6 Foregate Street, an unusually complete sequence of urban occupation deposits was recorded just behind the street frontage. These were over two metres deep and included Roman, Saxon and medieval levels. This project also recorded the surviving fabric of the early nineteenth-century New Union Hall.

At Hamilton Place, to the rear of the modern 'Forum' building, investigations in 1994 revealed drains and walls associated with the enigmatic Roman Elliptical Building complex, which was last seen in the 1960s. Also, because the more recent deposits were being destroyed, the opportunity was taken to examine in detail the remains of a Victorian courtyard development.

Another consequence of PPG 16 is that, because developers are sometimes faced with the possibility of changes to their proposals and significant delays and costs in order to satisfy archaeological requirements, it is not unusual for them to employ their own archaeological consultants. In recent years therefore, we have frequently found ourselves discussing development proposals with Tim Strickland in his new role as Director of Archaeology for Gifford and Partners.

A more contentious change has been the trend towards competitive tendering for work resulting from the planning requirements outlined above. It is too early to say what the long-term impact of this will be on the quality of archaeological investigation and research in Britain. There is considerable concern within the profession that it may lead to fragmentation and loss of access to information, and it clearly has the potential to weaken local centres of expertise and experience, especially urban units. In Chester's case, most developers have preferred to engage our services for work in the city. But doing a quality job requires time and resources, and with cost often being the determining factor the story may well be different in the future.

#### *Other fieldwork*

Non-developer funded work in the city has included recording and interpreting two important standing structures. The city's largest and best known monument is, of course, the City Walls. Because of the instability of the north and west walls (a consequence of the method of construction of the Roman fortress wall) two sections have had to be dismantled and rebuilt since 1989. On both occasions detailed archaeological recording

was undertaken. This provided important evidence of the structural development of the Roman phases in particular. A considerable quantity of artefacts has also been recovered, including ballista balls and part of a bow strengthener, from Roman deposits used as infill in the wall structure at some time

At a conference of the British Archaeological Association held in Chester, a visit to the ruined choir and eastern chapels of St John's Church prompted comments from members about the architectural importance of the remains. As a result of this visit, the City Council co-ordinated a programme of recording and conservation funded from several sources. It provides an accurate record of the sandstone masonry as it now exists, and provides unique evidence for the interpretation of its structural history.

Most recently we have undertaken the first archaeological work in recent times within the Cathedral, in response to proposals by the Dean and Chapter to renovate the floor and install underfloor heating. Our measured survey of the late eighteenth-century sandstone floor of the nave has been described as the most detailed record of an ancient cathedral floor in England. Following on from this work, several evaluation holes were dug, revealing for the first time the character and depth of the archaeological deposits beneath the nave floor. We now know that deposits, features and structures of Roman, medieval and possibly Saxon date survive to a depth of 750-1000 mm below the floor, although much disturbance has been caused by later burials (Ward and others 1995, 1996).

#### *Publications and conferences*

Since the rescue era of the 1970s, urban archaeology in Britain has been overwhelmed by the pace of excavation and has consequently lagged behind in publication of the results. One of the things which attracted me to Chester was the ability of the staff to publish academic results. Just before my arrival, a major volume on the city's lesser medieval religious houses appeared, the sixth volume of the excavation report series (Ward 1990). This was followed in 1994 by a synthesis of the evidence for Saxon Chester within the fortress (Ward and others 1994), the Eastgate Row monograph, and the other publications mentioned elsewhere in this chapter.

In contrast, the post-excavation backlog from an earlier era presents a less satisfying story. As Dennis Petch has described earlier, the rescue and salvage work of the 1960s was carried out on a shoestring budget with little provision for writing up the results. In the 1970s and 1980s, progress on writing up the ever-mounting backlog continued to be hampered by the need for the key staff to continue excavating. In the early 1980s a 'backlog' programme was drawn up, and with funding from English Heritage (then part of the Department of the Environment), work commenced on the mammoth task of writing up these excavations. A thematic approach was adopted, with, for example, projected volumes on the Roman fortress being divided into defences, barracks, and major buildings. The mysterious Elliptical Building has also been written up for publication by David Mason. At the time of writing, several volumes are well advanced, and I am hopeful that the next five years will see the bulk of this important evidence properly published and available to the archaeological community.

In addition to the heavy responsibility of publication, the Service has sought to participate in broader professional and research debates. A series of regionally based

seminars has been held since 1992, covering themes such as regional research aims, the methodology for field evaluations, and the history and archaeology of the port of Chester (the last published as Carrington ed 1996). We were also pleased to host the 1993 Interpreting Stratigraphy seminar, which attracted participants from as far afield as Scandinavia.

### *Research in the hinterland*

In the 1980s there was a burst of enthusiasm among archaeologists for looking at towns in the context of their hinterlands, although more recently this enthusiasm has, to some extent, been drowned by organisational changes in the profession. In Chester, a deliberate attempt has been made to broaden our knowledge of the rural area both in terms of the urban hinterland and of the prehistory of the area. Whilst the administrative boundary of Chester District is a modern creation, it does cover much of the west Cheshire plain, a reasonably distinct geographical area.

Working with the County Archaeologist and with funding from English Heritage, all known evidence has been collated and assessed in a District-wide archaeological survey. This work has been of great benefit: previously regarded as something of an archaeological desert (apart from isolated Roman sites such as Heronbridge and the odd fine motte-and-bailey castle or moated site), the District is now looking distinctly fertile. Also, along with the adjoining areas of Cheshire, Merseyside and Greater Manchester, fieldwork, aerial photography and metal-detector finds are revealing more and more sites (Collens in Carrington ed 1994b).

A small exhibition in 1994 of the museum collection of prehistoric finds from the area has done much to re-open local interest in the pre-Roman period. Looked at as a whole for the first time, the quality and quantity of finds, especially flints, made impressive viewing. In 1995 the cave shelter site at Carden, known from the odd flint find, produced a good surface collection of late Mesolithic flints. Also in 1995 we took a small group of supposedly Iron Age pottery sherds from the Abbey Green site in Chester for examination by the British Museum. Surprisingly, these were re-identified as Neolithic, making these the first examples of pottery of this period known from Cheshire. Such work, together with the publication of the nationally important Bronze Age evidence from Beeston Castle in 1993, has begun to bring the area out of the prehistoric backwaters. The historic period has not been neglected, and currently a joint project with Liverpool University is beginning to examine the medieval abbey and grange at Poulton, near Pulford, where there are also hints of Roman occupation.

A small number of evaluations have been carried out in the District in response to planning applications but, in a sense fortunately, these have so far failed to reveal many sites of significance. An exception has been the discovery of the first burnt mound (prehistoric cooking site) in Cheshire on the site of a proposed fish farm at Hampton, near Malpas.

Since 1945 there has been a massive erosion through ploughing of the marvellous medieval ridge and furrow landscape of west Cheshire. A more recent threat to this resource has been a spate of golf course developments. We have tried to identify and ensure the preservation of historic landscapes within such proposed developments, but

this has not always been totally successful, as witnessed by the recent ploughing of extensive well-preserved earthworks at Mollington Grange, just to the north of Chester, even after they had been highlighted in the archaeological assessment.

Trying to make sense of recent discoveries in the broader geographical context has been at the forefront of our thinking, and this led us to organise a seminar at the Grosvenor Museum looking at current research in the Dee-Mersey region. It was particularly pleasing to see a good number of Chester Archaeological Society members on this occasion. The results were published under the light-hearted title of *From flints to flowerpots*, with contributions from six members of staff (Carrington ed 1994b).

### *Public archaeology*

Whilst 'independent' status from the museum was liberating in many ways, losing this link has made it more difficult for the Service to reach the public. Tucked away in offices in 22 Castle Street at the back of the museum, with no dedicated display space or outlet, we have nevertheless carried out a range of activities and displays intended to keep local people and visitors in touch with what has been happening in the busy world of Chester's archaeology.

We have held numerous temporary displays and exhibitions on various recent discoveries. The main venue has been the foyer case in the museum, but locations as diverse as the Cathedral and the Cash Hall of the City Council's Forum Offices have also seen finds displays. By far the biggest exhibition we have undertaken was *DIG 94*, held in the museum. For this, a mock excavation was created in which children and others could uncover the archaeological remains of a 'Saxon' hut. A full-scale reconstruction showed the visitor what the original might have looked like, and hands-on experience of artefacts and animal bones gave visitors a feel for post-excavation work.

Another innovative venture in which we have been involved is the 'Dewa Roman Experience'. Planned and built by a local businessman, Peter Dentith, this commercial attraction opened in a converted showroom on Commonhall Street in 1993. It contains reconstructions of various aspects of Roman life in Chester. A unique feature is that excavated trenches, dug by the Archaeological Service, are featured as an important part of the display.

A good deal of time has been spent on producing popular publications such as leaflets on the City Walls and the shrine of Minerva, a booklet on the city defences as revealed in the excavations behind W H Smith, and in co-operation with local guide specialist Tony Bowerman in producing large-format guides to Roman Chester and the Rows. We have also upgraded our quarterly newsletter, which now has a national readership of over one thousand.

One of the most difficult but nevertheless fundamental duties of the urban archaeologist is to interpret the whole history of a city through the evidence of its buried and built remains. The nature of our excavation reports facilitates a degree of synthesis, but each volume is necessarily limited to a single period or theme. Thus, to my mind, our single most important achievement since I have been in Chester has been the publication by Batsford in 1994 of the English Heritage book of Chester (Carrington ed 1994a). This is the first serious publication to look at the whole of Chester's history from an

archaeological and architectural viewpoint. It was compiled by a joint team, with all members of the Archaeological Service contributing towards it, as well as staff from the Conservation and Museum Services. Although intended to be popular, it is based on many years of detailed and meticulous investigation and research, much of it written by those involved in carrying out the original work. In a sense, such a history book is an 'end product' justifying the substantial investment which the community has made in Chester's archaeology.

The City Walls have been a tourist attraction since the eighteenth century. Indeed, they largely owe their survival to the fact that they were regarded as a public amenity. Nevertheless, they have hitherto been conspicuous for their lack of signs and interpretation, with visitors being left to fend for themselves as to which direction to follow and where to access or leave the circuit. This shortcoming has long been recognised but remained unresolved because of lack of funding and the contentiousness of detracting from the atmosphere of the wall walkway by 'cluttering' it up with signs. A fresh look at the problem was made possible by European funding, and in summer 1995 the new signs and waymarkers were installed. While these will no doubt offend the sensibilities of some wall-users, every attempt has been made to reflect the dignity of walls, and it is hoped the signs help make a walk around the walls more enjoyable to the vast majority of people.

It is a commonplace that the City Walls are the product of several periods and requirements. It was with this in mind that a new roof was erected over Thimbleby's Tower in 1994. This medieval tower, adjacent to the Wolf Gate, was refurbished in the nineteenth century but was left open to both the elements and passing litter louts. It accumulated a collection of rubbish and even with regular cleaning out it was a continuing eyesore. The roof, designed by the City's Conservation Officer, Peter de Figueiredo, is in the style of the leading local nineteenth-century architect John Douglas. I hope that this is just the first of several possible schemes of architectural merit and innovation which might be developed around the walled circuit.

Of all the Roman sites in the city, the amphitheatre seems to be the one which most catches the imagination of local people. From the campaign to divert the road away from it in the 1930s and the contentious heritage development proposals of the 1980s, the site continues to evoke strong feelings. Should more of the site be uncovered? Should Dee House, the listed building standing over part of the remains, be demolished to allow the Roman site to be more fully appreciated? These are issues which continue to be debated by interested parties and in the local press. The current position is that a new body (the Chester Heritage Trust, established in 1994) is in the process of reviewing options for enhancing the presentation and interpretation of the site. The outcome of this review, and its acceptability to the interested parties, potential funders, and the people of Chester, will provide a measure of the maturity of the conservation and heritage community at the end of the second millennium.

The future of public archaeology in Chester is a currently a key issue in our strategic planning. Greater integration with other heritage-based services such as Archives and Education may be a good way forward, and a joint focal point is actively being sought.

*Retrospect: swimming against the tide?*

Having put forward the integrated urban unit as something of an ideal, it is fair to ask what lasting advances and changes have been achieved whilst it has been operating. Certainly, the recognition of archaeology as a crucial feature in the planning and development of the city is a basic step forward, but this is in large degree a consequence of national policy. Hopefully, however, we have laid the basis for future generations of City Archaeologists to actively steward the archaeological resource in the context of a living and changing city. There has also been a developing emphasis on the integration of below- and above-ground archaeological evidence which will surely continue into the future. Similarly, we are in the process of exploring and documenting the archaeology of the hinterland to a greater extent than previously, and the development of long-term research partnerships with other bodies, such as that with Liverpool University, will be an important element in this process.

A change to be regretted is the decline in amateur involvement in rescue excavation since the mid-1970s. This is largely a consequence of increasing professionalisation and the more restricted circumstances of much urban fieldwork. On the positive side, volunteers and students are regularly involved in finds processing and in desk-based research.

Turning to academic and research concerns within the historic urban core, what new knowledge and understanding has been gained about the history of the city? It must firstly be admitted that fieldwork discoveries, particularly with regard to the Roman fortress, have been small steps rather than the great leaps of previous decades. This is perhaps the inevitable consequence of a system which seeks to control and minimise the impact of development; and anyway, the level of urban redevelopment is far below that of the great period of renewal in the 60s and 70s. Nevertheless, these small steps accumulate and provide fine-grained evidence about the city, and continued detailed analysis and publication provide a unique source of information for future generations.

It is interesting to observe that most of our recent work has dealt with the Saxon, medieval and post-medieval periods. Of note is the increasing interest in modern (ie, post-1750) deposits, but the outstanding feature has been the advance since the 1970s in our understanding of the Saxon town. In my view the synthesis arising from this work is the most important research advance in Chester since the Second World War.

What future areas of research might produce notable gains in our understanding of the city's history? An almost endless list of possibilities springs to mind. There is certainly much of significance to be looked at in the archive: for example, painted Roman wall plaster and medieval and post-medieval ceramics. To pick a few areas of possible fieldwork, the port and river stand out as largely blank areas in our knowledge. Similarly, the lack of cemetery excavation of all periods must be remedied. A related sphere of untapped potential is church archaeology, with the Cathedral, St John's and St Peter's as prime resources for the Saxon and other periods. Finally, there are the City Walls. Despite much research into the Roman defences, the medieval and later walls are little understood. Surely survey, photogrammetry and archival work would reveal much about their complex history.



The preceding papers have illustrated the many changes and developments in Chester's archaeological provision. However, despite some fluctuations, the post-war archaeological story of Chester has so far been predominantly one of linear progress and expansion, culminating in the existing integrated team. It is to be hoped that current changes and trends, such as the reorganisation in the role and structure of local government, the impact of competition, and the splitting of managing and contracting roles in the development process, do not reverse this process.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank my friends and colleagues in the Archaeological Service who have carried out the work outlined in this chapter and have helped me to put it all down on paper. I should also like to record the continued support shown towards archaeology in Chester by senior officers and members of the City Council during a period of rapid change.

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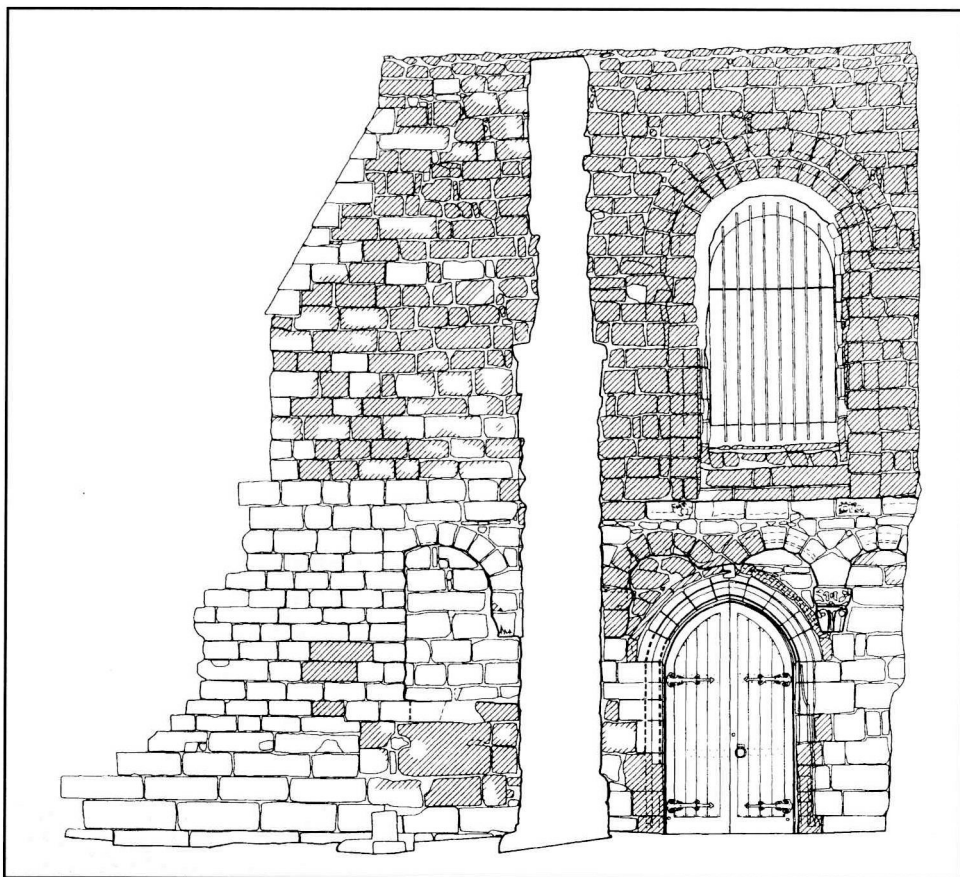


23 Chester Archaeology staff 1994.

*Left to right:* (back row) Simon Ward, Lesley Harrison, Keith Matthews, Jane Hebblewhite, Gillian Dunn;  
(front row) Julie Edwards, Michael Morris, Cheryl Quinn, Alison Jones, Peter Carrington.



24 Official opening of the new roof on Thimbleby's Tower, 1994.  
*Left to right:* Lyndon Harrison MEP, Cllr Eric Plenderleath, Eileen Willshaw,  
Cllrs Marie Nelson and Sandra Rudd, Peter de Figueiredo.



25 North elevation of the chapter house of St John's church, drawn by Cheryl Quinn.



26 National Archaeology day at Chester Archaeology offices, September 1994: sorting and reconstructing broken pottery.



27 Excavation of a prehistoric rock shelter at Carden Park by Liverpool University students under the direction of Keith Matthews, summer 1996.

