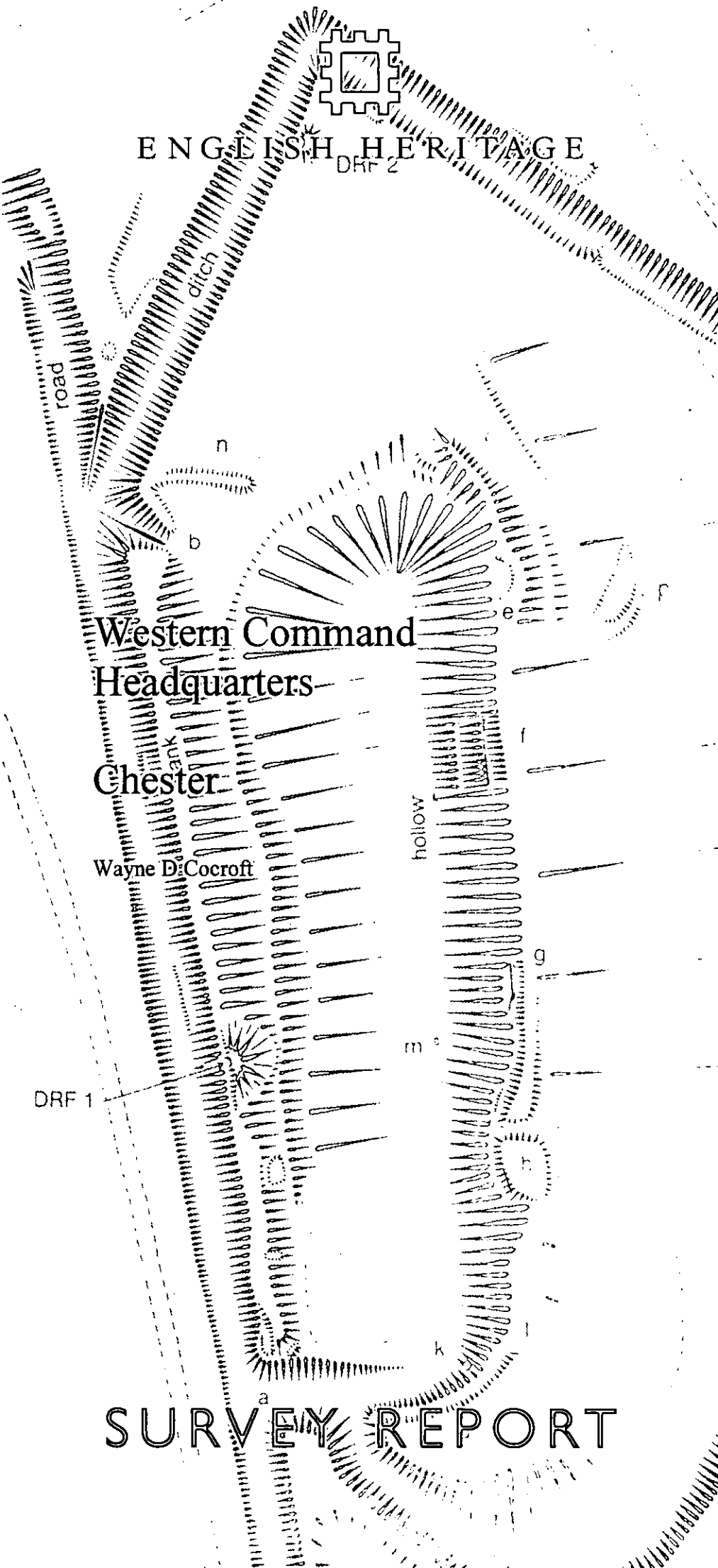




ENGLISH HERITAGE
DRF 2



SURVEY REPORT

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE DISPOSALS PROJECT

SURVEY REPORT

WESTERN COMMAND HEADQUARTERS

**Chester
Cheshire**

NBR No:
NMR No: SJ 46 NW 166
NGR: SJ 4096 6586
Hob UID: 1085383

June 1997

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SUMMARY

Western Command Headquarters, Queen's Park Chester was established in 1937 to act as the main administrative centre for the Western Command of the British Army. The principal surviving feature of the headquarters is a large, imposing neo-Georgian building overlooking the river Dee and the city of Chester. Adjacent to its southern side is a modern records centre constructed during the 1970s. The headquarters was considerably expanded during the Second World War and many temporary timber huts were erected in the vicinity, they have all been removed.

At the time of the investigation in June 1997 the site was due to be relinquished by the army and redeveloped as a banking centre.

DESCRIPTION

Western Command Headquarters, Chester is sited on the crest of the southern escarpment of the River Dee and is built directly on the under lying bedrock, Bunter pebble beds (BGS 1965). It occupies a commanding position with views across the city of Chester to the north. The principal function of the headquarters building and associated structures was to provide administrative support to the Western Command of the British army. This included the administration, and storage of pay and service records.

Main Headquarters Building

The main approach to the building was formally from Queen's Park Road, which entered through a pair iron gates decorated with the royal cipher ER (Edward VIII), with the cross within a circle motif of Western Command beneath. The gates are hung on rebuilt brick pillars each surmounted by a lantern. This approach led at a slightly oblique angle to the main front entrance of the building, but was superseded by the side entrance in Victoria Crescent when the new library building was erected in the 1970s blocking the original approach. The side entrance retains its original gate pillars, gates and lanterns.

The main office is an imposing two storey neo-Georgian style building laid out in a H shaped plan. It is constructed of brick laid in stretcher bond. On the central arm is a slight central projection on the front of the building and a deeper one bay projection to the rear.

The southern and principal elevation is 21 bays in length: the central five bays break forward, with five bays to each side; these are flanked by side wings three bays in width. The building is entered up a flight of four steps through a wooden panelled door in the central bay. It has an ashlar surround into which above the door is carved a king's crown, the royal cypher of GVI and the date 1937. There are also minor entrances in the centre of the projecting wings. The window openings comprise 20-light windows, with 12-lights below and eight above, except the two windows either side of the main door where there are 12-light windows. The ground-floor windows are all beneath decorative brick lintels with a stepped extrados. The upper windows are also of 20- lights, and are directly beneath a sandstone string course, the top of which marks the level of the flat roof. Above this string course are another six courses of bricks on which is laid a slightly projecting cornice over which is an indented parapet.

The side wings of the building are 13 bays in length with a central three bay entrance. The entrances are approached up a flight of stairs to a door, which is similar in appearance to that of the front of the building, although lacking the king's crown, cypher and date. The building is terraced into the hillside, so that on its southern and principal side it appears as a two-storey structure. But to the sides and rear the basement are progressively exposed which gives the appearance of a three-storey building. Doors along the side walls open into the basement area which is lit by 12-light windows. In the central section of the rear projection at ground level is a door which allows access to the basement.

Internally the building is arranged on three levels. The principal functional areas of the basement comprised, in the north-eastern wing, the boilers for the central heating system and

fuel storage. Other functions located in the basement included the teleprinter room, battery room, power room, ventilating plant, telephone switch boards, stand-by power plant and stores. Some offices were also located in the basement, including those for the intelligence typist, signals officers and their staff. On the ground floor, in the centre of the building, is the main entrance hall, leading from either side of it the main corridor connects the two side entrances together. The majority of this floor was divided into offices for the chaplain, typing pool, central registry, stenographers and officers. On the first floor above the main entrance was the conference room, while the remainder of the floor was divided into offices for the Chief of Staff, his officers and clerks. All the internal floors are concrete and were originally covered in rubberised flooring.

As described above, the roof parapet was unusually deep approximately 1.7m (5ft 6ins). The roof is flat, and is drained by gullies which run through the parapet and discharge into cast iron down pipes just above the string course over the upper windows. Features on the roof include a raised area above the conference room over the southern entrance and glass lights to illuminate the stair well. Also of note are the vent pipes which pass through the roof to the top of the parapet. These together with the depth of the parapet may suggest there was an intention to fill the roof area with sand and gravel to provide protection against incendiary bombs - a feature found on some contemporary airfield structures. It is believed that during the war a light anti-aircraft gun was mounted on the raised central part of the roof.

Underground Battle Headquarters, the 'Catacombs'

Probably shortly after the buildings was erected, perhaps after the Munich Crisis in autumn 1938, an underground Battle Headquarters, colloquially known as the 'Catacombs', was tunnelled in the bedrock to the east of the office building. The Catacombs, are today entered through a trap door in the suspended concrete floor in the basement Ladies Shower Room, which overlies the original concrete steps. The Catacombs comprise four parallel galleries or long tunnels between which are set 19 chambers or rooms. The galleries and chambers were cut into the red sandstone bedrock, and the walls and roofs were generally unsupported except for odd brick walls or piers to support areas of weakness in the rock. Other shoring was provided by pit props and railway sleepers, many of which are now rotten. Due to the sloping hill side the depth of rock cover diminished as it near the river, and the gallery sides are reinforced in concrete as they neared the river. The floors of the galleries are of rammed earth. Four escape ways from the galleries were provided along the river Dee, although their portals have been bricked up. A vertical ventilation and access shaft was also provided at the southern end of second tunnel from the building. The chambers measure 10.44m by 2.82m (34 ft 3 ins by 9 ft 3 ins) and are entered through a short tunnel from the galleries to either side, the doors being placed in opposing corners of the chamber. Although excavated from the live rock, the chambers were strengthened by rolled steel girders, with corrugated iron sheets placed above the roof girders and the space between the girders along the wall infilled with bricks set on their sides, a typical wartime economy measure. The chambers were either left as a single open space or divided by brick partition walls. Electricity was used for lighting and heating, and in some of the chambers the positions of wall heaters may be discerned. Many of the door surrounds and girders retain traces of light green paint.

Temporary Wartime Accommodation

The administrative needs of the army in the lead up to, and during the Second World War quickly outgrew the accommodation in the new building. To remedy this situation the army requisitioned many of the private houses in Victoria Crescent. These included 'Tentry Heyes' at the junction of Queen's Park Road and Victoria Crescent, which was used as the Sergeants' Mess. The need for additional accommodation was also met by the construction of temporary huts. The first phase was characterised by timber huts, with stud panels set on dwarf brick walls and covered by pitched roofs. Huts of this type were constructed immediately to the east of the headquarters, over the Catacombs. Temporary buildings were also erected to the south of the headquarters to either side of the main approach road. Two huts set parallel to one another were erected away from the main offices in vacant corner plot at the northern end of South Crescent Road and its junction with Victoria Crescent and another pair of parallel huts were built at the junction of Lower Park Road and Victoria Crescent. Air photographs show this phase of development was completed by June 1942. Between 1942 and the end of the war further accommodation was created by the construction of semi-circular Nissen type huts on the open land in the oval shaped piece of land defined by Victoria Crescent. Piecemeal additions to the temporary huts continued throughout the postwar period until the temporary accommodation was finally cleared, probably in the early 1970s.

1970s Collocated Pay and Records Office

In the early 1970s Majorcas Guest and Partners, Chartered Architects in association with the Property Services Agency worked together to remodel the Co-located Pay and Record Office. Immediately south of, and parallel to the 1937 administrative building a new registry was constructed, thereby obscuring the front facade of the old building. The new building is a three-storey, steel framed structure clad in brick with a flat roof and smoked glass windows. The ground floor was lit by a mixture of windows occupying a full bay height and small rectangular windows at head height. The majority of the bays on the middle floor, which was used as offices, are fully glazed. On the rear of the building at either end of this floor two steel framed bridges covered by smoked glass link the new building to the upper floor of the wings of the original headquarters building. The third storey, which was entirely taken up with racking for file storage was lit by small rectangular windows at the top of each bay. The building is protected by close circuit television cameras mounted high on each corner.

This building effectively blocked the main entrance from Queen's Park Road and the main entrance was relocated to Victoria Crescent. As described above this also dates from the late 1930s, but a new guardhouse was built on its northern side to control access to the site.

It was probably at this time that the grounds around the headquarters were redeveloped. To the northeast of the building the temporary wartime huts were cleared and a carpark built on their site and over the Catacombs, and to the north the huts were cleared and their sites covered by grass. The buildings along the western side of the headquarters and to the south were also cleared. To the south a large carpark was laid and along its southern edge two small buildings constructed, one of which was identified as garage. The carpark was separated from the new building by an earthwork bank approximately 2m (6ft 6ins) high. This landscaping formed part

of the security perimeter around the site to shield personnel from observation from adjacent public roads. A peculiar feature of this bank was a number of benches set facing it without any view, again another security feature to prevent people becoming targets for terrorist sniper. The earthwork bank was also continued around the eastern side of the headquarters to shield it from view.

Site Archive

A small archive of drawings is held on site, consisting of three original linen floor plans of the building, and paper copies of wartime and later plans of the establishment. In most cases the original room functions have been erased and new functions marked in pencil. No drawing were seen of the building elevations, nor did any of the drawing indicate the architect(s) responsible for the work. The archive will be passed to the site's new owners.

At the time of survey the building was being cleared prior to disposal by the Ministry of Defence. The building and site was due to pass its new owner NWS Bank on 4 July 1997.

This report is the result of a field investigation carried out by Wayne Cocroft and Roger Thomas on 17 June 1997. Roger Thomas also took the 35mm record photographs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Major R Lewis in facilitating access to the building in its last few weeks of military occupation.

SOURCES

Primary

Plans consulted on site

HQ Western Command Plan showing Battle HQ (Catacombs) enlarged from CEWC Drwg 5/50 15-2-50

HQ Western Command Basement plan Drwg No. C.E.Western 190/57 revision of 1955

HQ Western Command Ground floor plan Drwg No. C.E.Western 190/57 revision of 1955

HQ Western Command First floor plan Drwg No. C.E.Western 190/57 revision of 1955

HQ Western Command Works Organisation accommodation in 12, 13, 14 no date

Co-located Pay and Records Office Chester Phase 2 , Majorcas Guest and Partners Chartered Architects, 101-109 Ladbroke Grove London W11 1PG in association with PSA November 1980

Co-located Pay and Records Office Chester Building No.2, Majorcas Guest and Partners Chartered Architects, 101-109 Ladbroke Grove London W11 1PG in association with PSA August 1983

PSA Photographs held by NMR

P/G21641	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	17 10 1975 B
P/G21867	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	18 12 1975 B
P/G23540	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	07 1978 C
P/G21945	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	21 01 1976 B
P/G22170	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	10 03 1976 B
P/G22358	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	28 04 1976 B
P/G22474	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	15 06 1976 B
P/G22547	CH Chester Pay and Records Office	22 07 1976 B
P/G18555	CH Chester Queens Park HQ Building	25 10 1972 B

Summary list of air photographs held by NMR

Sortie Number	Library Number	Cam Pos	Start Frame	End Frame	Held	Date	Copyright
CPE/UK/1935	556RS42094211				H3	17-JAN-47	CRW
540/760	1265	V	5014	5015	H2	27-MAY-52	CRW
540/760	1265	V	5091	5093	H3	27-MAY-52	CRW
58/2280	1788	F21	186	188	H3	26-SEP-57	CRW
58/2280	1788	F21	213	214	H2	26-SEP-57	CRW
58/2280	1978	F22	186	188	H3	26-SEP-57	CRW
58/3617	2303	F22	181	182	H2	21-JUN-60	CRW
543/385	2303	F21	2	3	H2	11-SEP-58	CRW
543/385	2303	F21	63	64	NNH	11-SEP-58	CRW
543/385	2303	F21	65	65	H1	11-SEP-58	CRW
106G/UK/484	3613	FP	1050	1050	H1	07-JUL-45	CRW
HLA/571	'M'8517	FS	2014	2105	H2	03-JUN-42	CRW

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British Geological Survey, 1965. Chester Sheet 109 Drift Edition

Elgin, G 1966. Chester – A cushy number *Cheshire Life* 32 no.7, 48-53

Ordnance Survey, 1970. 1.1250 plans SJ 4065 NE, 1967 SJ 4165 NW

The Standard 'More jobs promise as bank moves HQ' 12 June 1997, 4

The Standard 'Pay office plans are put on hold' 4 September 1997, 5

More jobs promise as bank moves HQ

A MAJOR jobs boost is being predicted as the city cashes in on a new banking headquarters for a leading employer.

NWS Bank has announced they have successfully concluded negotiations to buy the former Army Pay office complex in Queen's Park, Handbridge.

The site is one of the most prestigious locations in Chester, with panoramic views across the River Dee.

A multi-million-pound refurbishment programme is already being planned and the move will be the dawning of a new era for the company - which expects to recruit significant numbers of new workers in the future.

Bosses have also pledged to increase the workforce with "predominantly local people" in a double boost to the city's economy.

A planned occupation date of late next year is being targeted and executives say the relocation will enable the existing City Road complex to house the rising numbers of staff which will be necessary to keep pace with the company's ever increasing growth.

The Army pay, manning and records office closed in May, leading to the loss of around 150 civilian jobs, although no compulsory redundancies were expected. Some staff were relocated whilst others opted for voluntary redundancy.

The closure followed a two-year fight by local politicians, unions and community leaders to keep the jobs in the city.

But the site now appears to have a bright

future following the NWS acquisition.

The banking giant is one of the UK's leading finance houses with assets of £7.4 billion. The firm employs almost 5,000 staff at its Chester complex and throughout a network of 90 branches. It also has an international operation with subsidiary companies in France, Ireland and Australia.

Managing Director John Mercer said an even more prosperous future was being predicted for the rising financial institution.

He explained: "We have seen exceptional growth in our business which has led to NWS Bank increasing its Chester based staff numbers by some 2,000 over the last three years.

"There is every indication that this business growth will continue and it is essential that we have sufficient accommodation to house an increase in staff numbers."

He added: "I am therefore delighted that we have been able to secure

this site which will enable us to plan for the future. I believe this acquisition also confirms our commitment to the local community and the City of Chester by allowing us to further increase our workforce with predominantly local people."



The old Army Pay Office building in Queen's Park.



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