

# The Chester Antiquary



Newsletter of the Chester Archaeological Society  
2002 Issue 1 (Spring/Summer)

## Debenhams Dig

A major excavation in the heart of the city has produced some unusual and unexpected results

**O**VER the last six months a major archaeological excavation has taken place in the heart of Chester. The work has been carried out by Gifford and Partners in association with Chester Archaeology and has been generously funded by Debenhams in advance of the construction of an extension to Browns department store.

The site occupies a parcel of land between Bridge Street Row and Eastgate Street Row and contains deeply stratified archaeological deposits associated with the legionary fortress, sub-Roman Chester and the centre of the medieval and post-medieval city. The excavation has recovered structural evidence for property divisions associated with five building plots which fronted onto Bridge Street during the late medieval period. These properties have yielded evidence for formal gardens, rubbish pits, possible horn-working pits and ovens. Earlier uses of the site include a metallised surface and associated stone-built drain dating to the Roman period. This road ran to/from Bridge Street (the *via praetoria*) and probably marked the northern limit of the fortress bath-house complex to the south and divided it from the tribunes' quarters to the north. The current alignment of Fletchers Passage respects the line of this road and demonstrates the remarkable continuity of land divisions in Chester. A second metallised surface with an associated stone-lined drain ran parallel to the Bridge Street alignment and is thought to be a side road between two buildings within the fortress. The final phase of silting in the drain contained *tesserae* and late fourth-century pottery, suggesting that it had a long period of use, possibly even into the fifth century, as paralleled at Wroxeter.



Excavating at Debenhams  
(Photograph by Gifford & Partners)

A huge number of artefacts have been recovered, representing a complete stratigraphic sequence from the Roman period to the nineteenth century. A particularly surprising and unexpected find was an elephant's leg bone, which has been radio-carbon dated to the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. It is tempting to imagine that the bone was brought back to Chester as a curio from a trading expedition.

Other highlights include corroded iron fragments of a sixteenth-century jack-of-plate, which was excavated from a seventeenth century pit. This garment

acted as armour for the chest and arms and was made from a canvas doublet on to which iron plates were sewn. This is the first example of such a garment to have been found in Chester and compliments an example recovered from Beeston Castle in the 1980s.

The excavation ended in mid March and a long programme of post-excavation has now begun, leading to a landmark publication. Further updates will be included in future issues.

**Anthony Martin**  
(Gifford & Partners)

## Developments at the Castle

**I**n March 2001 a Conservation Plan for Chester Castle was published. It provides a detailed history of the Castle and its architecture, as well as a thorough analysis of the conservation issues that will need to inform decisions to be taken, in particular by English Heritage as guardian of the Inner Bailey (except for Napier House). This publication is highly recommended reading as a succinct and thorough history of the Castle.

With the final ending of the MOD presence in the Castle and the marketing by The Crown Estates of Napier House and Colvin House, it has become vital for a new use to be found for the Inner Bailey. Although only the Agricola Tower is currently open to the public and the Inner Bailey is virtually unvisited by the public, it is obvious that the area could become a tremendous attraction to visitors. Appreciating this, English Heritage are prepared to spend very substantial sums in restoration if a realistic scheme emerges. Although the Castle that one sees today is largely the creation of Chester's great architect, Thomas Harrison, the Inner Bailey contains not only the thirteenth-century Agricola Tower, with remnants of nationally-important wall paintings commissioned by Henry III, but also the medieval Flag Tower (situated on the remains of the Norman motte), Half Moon Tower and the surviving curtain wall. Public access to the roofs of the towers and the curtain wall parapet, a high quality interpretive exhibition of the history of the Castle, landscaping of the open areas, and the permanent exhibition of excavated foundations of demolished structures, could transform the Inner Bailey. Consideration is being given to the future use of Napier House and Colvin House – as hotel, residential accommodation or exhibition space.

Any work to be undertaken in the Inner Bailey will include a full archaeological examination of existing structures and thorough excavation where below-ground levels are disturbed. The area is recognised as an important archaeological site, much of which has been undisturbed for many years.

Chester Castle is central to the history of the city and its region, first as the seat of the palatine jurisdiction of the independent Earls of Chester, then as the base for Edward I's conquest of North Wales. Throughout the medieval period, the castle was the prime royal fortress in a county renowned for its bowmen, and in modern times it represented the centre of administration and justice in the county. After the Jacobite rebellion, medieval strongholds were no longer required. The City Walls survived as a picturesque perambulation, but sadly, practical considerations resulted in the demolition of the Inner Bailey in the early nineteenth century, following that of the Outer Bailey from 1785. This took place despite the strong objection of the Board of Ordnance to the 'levelling of so ancient and venerable a structure'. Luckily the new buildings were Thomas Harrison's and there remains more than enough to treasure.

**Anthony Holliday**

### Northgate Redevelopment Scheme

As most members will know, the proposed Northgate Redevelopment Scheme will affect the very heart of the historic city of Chester. As far as archaeology is concerned, the relevant section of the Development Brief prepared by the City Archaeologist, Mike Morris, requires the disturbance of archaeological deposits to be kept to a minimum and where this cannot be avoided, full and proper excavation will be required. The developers have also indicated that they will include a permanent exhibition of the results of such work. A vast amount of excavation took place in this area in the 1960s and 1970s, when many impressive archaeological remains – including the ruins of the Elliptical Building and an adjoining bath-house – were destroyed. Much information was retrieved at public expense but, apart from a small fragment of the fortress strong room, there is nothing in the area to explain the historical development of the city centre, the focus of administrative, religious, economic and social life in the city for nearly two thousand years. The

proposed development affords an ideal opportunity to rectify that omission by including a quality interpretation gallery, setting out the story of Chester's cultural aspects of the development and making amends for all that was lost in the 1960s.

If you would like to see an historic interpretation gallery included in the Northgate Development, then please make your views known by writing as soon as possible to

Mr Andrew Farrell  
Chief Planning Officer  
Chester City Council  
Town Hall  
Chester CH1 2HS

**David Mason**

### Heronbridge

The Society's major new fieldwork project at Heronbridge is all set to go ahead this year. Scheduled Ancient Monument Consent has been obtained and sufficient funds raised to make a start. The formal commencement of work on site will be Saturday 6 July 2002 and excavation will continue until late August. Those wishing to participate, who have not already registered, should contact either Phil Miles, Fieldwork Section Co-ordinator (Tel 01829 741207; Email: philkath.chester@virgin.net) or myself (Tel 01978 760834; Email: djpmason@dircon.co.uk).

**David Mason**

*Heronbridge Project Director*

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### Best Value

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**T**HE Council has made a detailed submission to the City's 'Best Value' programme, stressing the need for a master plan for history and archaeology, including improved and innovative displays and a new museum in addition to the Grosvenor. Chester Archaeology needs more support and a cross department co-ordinator should be appointed to focus the City's work.

**Alan Comyns**

## Recent Publications

### *Deva Victrix – Roman Chester Re-assessed*

**T**HE long-awaited papers from the research conference organised by the Society at Chester College in 1999 have just been published. Among other things, the nine contributions set Chester in the wider context of Roman fortress studies in Britain: provide an overview of advances in knowledge over the past forty years and current research questions: and look at the problems surrounding the beginning and end of the fortress. A full list of contents can be found on the Society's website

This volume is additional to the Society's regular journal, but members,

and indeed non-members who attended the conference, get the benefit of a discount price of £7.50 plus £1.00 p&p. Copies are available from Dr David Mason, Ochr Cottage, Porch Lane, Caergwrle, Flintshire, LL12 9HG (payment to be made to Chester Archaeological Society)

Members of the public can obtain copies from the Grosvenor Museum Shop, 27 Grosvenor Street, Chester. CH1 2DD, price £9.95 plus £1.00 p&p. (payment to be made to Chester City Council)

P Carrington ed. *Deva Victrix: Roman Chester Re-assessed*. Papers from a weekend conference held at Chester College 3–5 September 1999. Pb. viii + 120pp. ISBN 0 9507074 9 X.

### *Condate Castellum*

Congratulations to Brian Curzon on his recently published *Condate Castellum* which chronicles thirty five years of excavations in Northwich. It combines descriptions of the excavations with explanations of what archaeology is about and puts the Roman past in context with modern Northwich. It is an interesting read and will be particularly useful in giving an insight into archaeology to the general public.

**David Roberts**

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## The Library

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**T**HE Library has had a chequered existence, having been housed in a variety of locations. My first recollection of it was when it occupied the top floor of the annex to the old City Library in St John Street (some of the rare items were in a locked bookcase in the librarian's office). With the relocation of the Public Library, the Society's collections were removed to the City Record Office in the Town Hall. At the same time, in 1969, a quantity of archival items, such as the Earwaker Collection, were transferred to the County Record office.

In the Town Hall, the collection was split between the public search rooms and storage in what had been police cells. This was the situation until Autumn 2000, when the Chester Record Office merged with the County Record Office and the new Chester History and Heritage Centre was opened in St Michael's Church in Bridge Street.

As part of the City Record Office, the Society's collection was a valuable supplement to the reference works kept in the search room. With the move to St Michael's most of these volumes were transferred and are again available to the public and members.

The present situation is not entirely satisfactory. While the majority of the Society's books are readily accessible, there are four important collections still at the Town Hall and these can not be easily used, despite the willingness of the staff at Chester History and Heritage Centre.

The first collection is of maps, drawings and prints, consisting of around two thousand items. These have not yet been entered on computer, but are recorded in the card index. Secondly, there is a room at the Town Hall filled with runs of journals from other archaeological societies. Many are ongoing, being added to on an exchange basis. The future of this collection has exercised the minds of the Council for some time and an investigation is currently taking place to try to ascertain how other societies have accommodated, or disposed of, such collections.

Thirdly, there is a small collection of perhaps four hundred books which are regarded as of special rarity or value. These are kept in archival boxes, except for thirty bound copies of early Chester newspapers. Fourthly, there are forty six boxes of pamphlets, many of them

being printed sermons or descriptions of archaeological sites or finds.

The current situation is a compromise, which does not lend itself to efficient cataloguing or use of those items locked away. Then there is the ever-present threat that this storage facility may not always be available. Ideally, the entire collection should be in one place, with every item fully recorded on both cards and computers, and with a comprehensive catalogue.

Over the years it has been argued that members do not make enough use of the Society's library. It has also been said that the collection includes many works which are peripheral to the main theme. What is perhaps overlooked is that the Society's members, over its one hundred and fifty years of existence, have embraced a wide range of interests within the 'archaeology, history and architecture' of the Society's official title. Many past members have donated items so it could be said that the library, as it now stands, reflects the interest and influence of the Chester Archaeological Society and its members over the last one and a half centuries.

**Derek Nuttall**

## Forthcoming Excursions

Conwy Valley  
Saturday 18 May 2002

Leaving Chester Railway Station at 08.45am by Meredith's coach, the first visit will be to Bodysgallen Hall, where coffee will be served. The Hall, now a hotel, dates from the seventeenth century and has a beautiful garden, including a seventeenth-century parterre. The next visit is to Plas Mawr, the sixteenth-century merchant's house in the centre of Conwy. The house has many interesting features such as the rich ornamental plasterwork and examples of the furniture and kitchen equipment dating from the early times of the house.

After lunch in Conwy, taken on an individual basis, (there are numerous cafés as well as picnic places), we shall visit the Roman fort on the banks of the River Conwy. We shall then visit the

Roman and Victorian Spa further up the valley, which the Twentieth Legion is said to have used. There is a coffee shop here where members can take refreshment. We plan to arrive back in Chester by 06.00 pm.

Halifax  
Saturday 6 July 2002

Leaving Chester Railway Station at 08.45am, we shall go straight to Halifax where there will be a chance to have coffee in the many coffee shops in the Piece Hall. This splendid square was built in 1779. We shall then be met by a member of the Halifax Civic Trust who will guide us around some very interesting places, including the Parish Church, parts of which date from 1120 although it is mainly fifteenth century, and the Town Hall, which was designed by Sir Charles Barry.

The final visit will be to Snibden Hall, which was built about 1420. It was a family home until 1933 after which it was opened to the public. It still has a family atmosphere with many interesting features, including musical instruments, a powder closet and many good pieces of furniture. The extensive barnyard was built in 1550 and has a number of workshops and displays including a cooper, a wheelwright, a blacksmith, a clog maker, a basket maker, a brewhouse, threshing machines carriages from 1725 onwards, a pub, and estate workers cottages. As well as all this there is an attractive terraced garden and coffee shop.

If you wish to join either of these excursions, please return the form(s) enclosed with this newsletter with a cheque payable to Chester Archaeological Society to Mrs P Wendt, 28 Church Lane, Upton-by-Chester CH2 1DJ. There is normally no acknowledgement. It is regretted that no refunds are possible, as this would cause a loss to the Society

## Society Information

### Contacts

*Chairman* Dr Alan Comyns, 21 Churchwarden Close, Chester, CH2 2BG.  
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*Excursions co-ordinator* Mrs Prue Wendt, 28 Church Lane, Upton, Chester CH2 1DJ  
*Fieldwork co-ordinator* Mr Phillip Miles (address as for Mrs Kathryn Miles)

### Library

Members are reminded that they are welcome to come in and browse through the Society's library at Chester Community History and Heritage.

### Internet

<http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk>

### Prue Wendt

### Society's Main Excursion

This year's main excursion will be to Northern Northumbria and the Eastern Borders, most probably based in Berwick upon Tweed. Provisional dates are Friday 6 to Tuesday 10 September. The itinerary will include Bamburgh Castle, Floors Castle, Melrose Abbey, Newstead Roman site, Mellerstain House, Paxton House and Berwick itself with its complete circuit of Elizabethan town walls. For more information without commitment contact the Society's Vice Chairman David Mason on (01978) 760834, or email him at djpmason@dircon.co.uk. There is no need to re-register if you have already signed up for information.

### David Mason

The *Chester Antiquary* is published twice a year, in Spring and Autumn. We welcome letters and articles from Members. Contributions for the next issue should be with the newsletter editor, Dr David Roberts, no later than 23rd August 2002.