

**CHESTER
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SERVICE**

Newsletter

New Union Hall

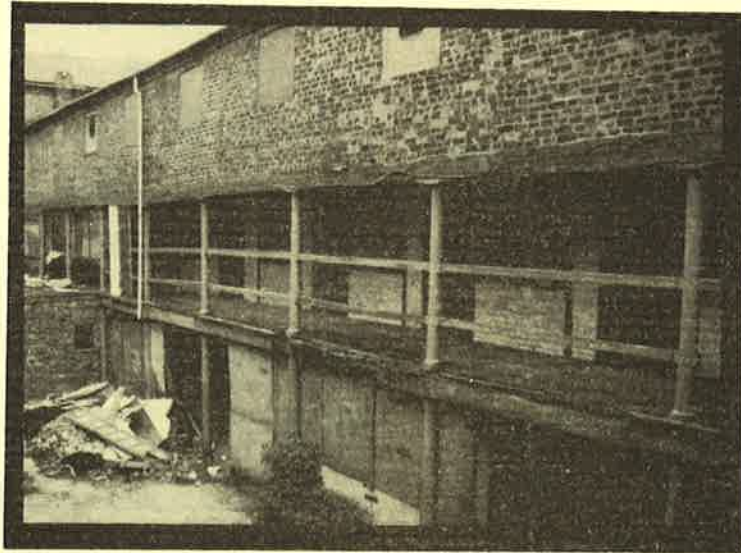
19th century clothing market hidden away behind Foregate Street

Projects

Excavations have recently been carried out inside the former New Union Hall in Foregate Street (see plan, p3). They revealed a great deal about its construction and the buildings which occupied the site before it was built. However, a lot of information can also be gained by examining the standing buildings themselves. Lynne Walker, who specialises in the study of historic structures, assisted by Gareth Davies surveyed what remained of the Hall before it was demolished in October.

The New Union Hall, a large courtyard building, was opened in July 1809. It was built by subscription for clothiers from Manchester and Yorkshire to sell their wares at the annual Trade Fairs in July and October. The eastern wing of the building survived until this year, but the street frontage and the southern range were rebuilt just after 1900. The western wing was demolished some years ago.

The function of the New Union Hall is fascinating. Merchants paid subscriptions to sell their cloth but were not allowed to sell elsewhere in the city or at any time other than the annual fairs. A similar arrangement operated for the Irish linen merchants who operated from the Linen Hall and another group who ran a building known as the Commercial Hall on the north side of Foregate Street. This restricted trading is unlike anything we know today and was perhaps the last



Inside the courtyard of the New Union Hall, showing the first-floor gallery

flowering of the medieval system in which guilds of traders distributed their goods, fiercely protecting themselves from competition.

From what remained we can tell that it was a three-storey brick building with a gallery at first floor level. The ground and first floors were divided into small compartments. The structure blended traditional technology in its wooden beams with the new industrial technology in the colonnade of cast iron supporting columns in the Doric style at ground and first floor level. The front of the building had nine bays and a central entry. The entrance was cobbled with raised kerbstones at the edges. On either side of the building an alleyway ran back from the street frontage.

The eastern side of the building retained its original appearance. The windows were flush with the

brickwork and had pegged wooden frames. Most seemed to have sixteen panes of glass. From the central courtyard access to the individual 'shops' was from the covered galleries; each had a door and window facing the gallery. The southernmost door at first-floor level and the handrail appeared to be original.

The top floor was not subdivided into stalls but remained an open hall. It was chiefly occupied by the Yorkshire clothiers. One room on this floor was let for a short period in 1809-10 to the Grosvenor St John's Sunday School at an annual rent of £20. After the Union proposed to double the rent the school moved to premises in Vicars Lane.

**Keith Matthews &
Lynne Walker**

More of Elliptical Building found at Hamilton Place

Any major new development in an ancient city like Chester is likely to have considerable effect on the archaeology of the site. This was certainly the case when plans for redevelopment in Hamilton Place were suggested (see plan, p3).

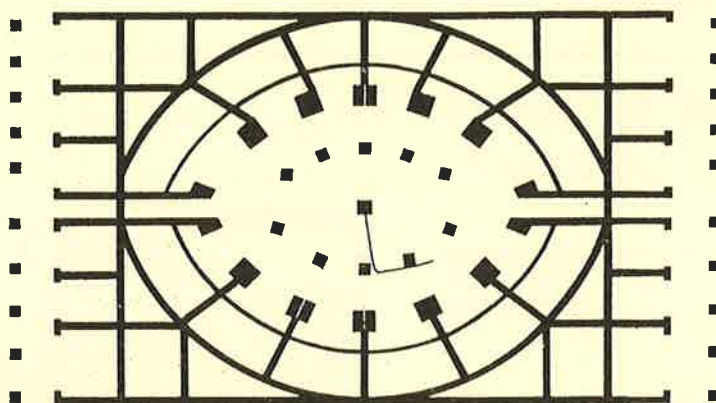
The Forum Precinct with the associated Market Hall and Gateway Theatre were built during the 1960s, and their underground car parks and service areas removed all the archaeological deposits beneath them. As a result, one of the largest excavation programmes ever mounted in Chester was undertaken. Extensive remains of major Roman buildings were uncovered, including the mysterious 'Elliptical Building'.

A grant from the St John's House Trust meant that work was resumed on this project last year. All the photographs, drawings and other excavation records are being studied. Initial work on the finds shows that the site produced a wide range of material from the Roman to the post-medieval periods. However, much information was lost without proper record. Only one area on the southern side of the block occupied by the Forum and Town Hall was untouched i.e. the part occupied by the buildings of the Will R Rose photographic laboratories.

Consequently, when Scottish Widows wished to consider this block for redevelopment, the Archaeological Service were commissioned to carry out an evaluation so that a proposal could be drawn up which damaged the archaeology as little as possible.

The Elliptical Building

We expected that most of the site would lie in the area occupied by the Elliptical Building. This was



one of the largest and finest structures in the Roman legionary fortress, but its function is still uncertain. Excavations within the basement of the laboratories revealed Roman sandstone paving. This lay on the line of the substantial wall which bounded the southern side of the Elliptical Building complex and it is possible that this paving lay in an entrance-way.

To the north of the modern building a sandstone wall still standing at least four courses high was discovered. It lay on just the right line to be the southern wall of the Elliptical Building complex. As this area was not to be disturbed by redevelopment excavation was not carried any further. Just to the north of this was a considerable depth of cultivation soil which contained finds dating from Roman to the 16th century. This in turn sealed a Roman wall but only the south-eastern face lay in the excavated trench. However, this ran at an eccentric angle to the general line of the Roman buildings in the fortress. The parts of the bath house excavated to the east of this site during the 1960s contained rooms with apses, so perhaps the best explanation of this wall is that it too formed part of an apse. Only further excavation could resolve this.

One or possibly two hearths were revealed in the north eastern part of the site but it is unclear how

Plan of "Elliptical Building"
(after DJP Mason)

these relate to the Elliptical Building.

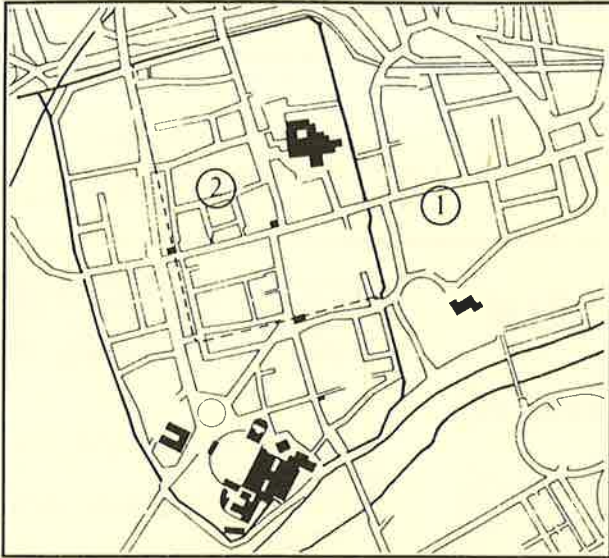
Later Activity

Brick walls, surfaces and drain pipe trenches representing the demolition of the 18th and 19th-century houses which preceded the existing building were found on the eastern side of the site. Demolition rubble of the 17th and 18th centuries was also found above deposits of Roman date to the north east. Part of an 18th-century cess pit, lined with sandstone, was discovered to the north.

In conclusion, the evaluation confirmed that substantial remains of Roman buildings still survive, even beneath the modern basement. No evidence for Saxon occupation was found, but this is not surprising given the small areas sampled. After this the area was given over to cultivation and gardening until the early 18th century when it again became increasingly built up.

The evaluation has enabled the Archaeological Service to draw up appropriate recommendations to safeguard the important archaeological remains during redevelopment of the site.

Simon Ward



Location plan showing sites of excavations

- 1 New Union Hall,
Foregate Street
- 2 "Elliptical Building"
Hamilton Place

News from the County

Victoria History in need of help

Cheshire Archaeology Day 1993

The first Cheshire Archaeology Day was so successful that another is to be held at the Memorial Hall, Northwich, on Saturday 27th March 1993.

It will include news of the Congleton coin hoards, the Chester Castle wall-paintings, the newly-discovered Roman farmstead at Irby, and the archaeology of the salt industry, together with all the latest discoveries from both the city and county. There will be displays, bookstalls, videos and much more. A cash prize will be given for the best display by a voluntary group.

Numbers are strictly limited, so early booking is advisable. For further details, contact Adrian Tindall, Principal Archaeologist, Cheshire County Council, Environmental Planning, Commerce House, Hunter Street, Chester CH1 2QP Tel. Chester (0244) 603160.

The compilation of the Victoria History of the Counties of England was started more than 90 years ago. They bring together a large amount of historical information from a variety of sources including manuscripts, maps, photographs and drawings and have become standard works of reference.

Cheshire's Victoria History was begun in the 1970s. Three volumes have been published so far. The fourth volume, which is nearing completion, will be on the City of Chester. This will be followed by further books on the history of every town and parish in Cheshire and one on the economic and industrial history of the county.

To date, the History has been funded mainly from public sources including Cheshire County Council. However, increasing financial pressure has meant that other sponsors are required to enable this valuable work to continue. A Cheshire Victoria County History Appeal Fund has therefore been set up. If you would like to support the Appeal or would like any further information please contact the Chairman

of the Appeal Committee, Chorlton Hall, Backford, Chester, CH2 4BJ.

Gillian Dunn

Cheshire Past 2

Issue 2 of *Cheshire Past* (1993) is out now, and includes items on a new Mesolithic site at Aldford, a rare Iron Age coin from near Nantwich, prehistoric mining at Alderley Edge, Bronze Age axes from Cheshire and the Lindow Moss bog bodies. There are also reports on Roman roads at Oakmere and Winwick, recent discoveries in Chester, two medieval moated sites near Chester, four silver coin hoards from Congleton, plus news from Sutton Weaver, Helsby, Macclesfield and elsewhere.

Price £2.95 (plus 55p postage and packing), it can be ordered by post from the Editor, *Cheshire Past*, Environmental Planning, Commerce House, Hunter Street, Chester CH1 2QP. Please make cheques payable to Cheshire County Council.



**Council of the
CITY OF CHESTER**

**DEPT OF LEISURE SERVICES
(Cultural Services)
Archaeological Service**

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M Morris, BA, MIFA*

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Grosvenor Museum, 27 Grosvenor St,
Chester CH1 2DD. Tel (0244) 321616*

English Heritage to dis- pose of Cheshire sites?

Notes&News

Most of us have heard on the national news about proposed changes in the role of English Heritage. They intend to make new arrangements for looking after many of the 'Guardianship' sites. Guardianship sites are Scheduled Ancient Monuments (protected by law) which are open to the public and include monuments such as Stonehenge and Birdoswald Roman fort.

English Heritage has three 'Guardianship' sites in Chester District:

The Amphitheatre (free admission): substantial remains of the Roman amphitheatre just to the south east of the Roman fortress of Chester.

Chester Castle (free admission): the inner bailey of the castle including several medieval buildings and a small exhibition. It is located to the south of the walled city close to the River Dee.

Beeston Castle (entrance charge): the well preserved remains of the medieval castle are located on a spectacular rock outcrop on the eastern boundary of the District. It is also an important Bronze Age and Iron Age site.

On hearing of the proposals Paul Durham, the City Council's Chief Executive wrote to English Heritage asking to be kept in-

formed of any proposals affecting these three sites. He also said that if English Heritage were going to dispose of these sites, the City would be interested in taking them over, subject to satisfactory financial safeguards.

The English Heritage proposals have aroused strong feelings throughout the country. We expect it will be some while before English Heritage begin negotiations about specific sites but it may be that the City will eventually take on responsibility for one or more of these sites. Whatever happens we must do all we can to secure a long term future along with public access and interpretation at these important monuments in Chester and the District.

Mike Morris

The Chester Archaeological Service Newsletter is compiled by Gillian Dunn and is published four times a year, in March, June, September and December. If you have any comments or questions, we should be pleased to hear from you.

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Staff Profile

Cheryl Quinn

*Assistant Archaeological
Draughtsman*



Cheryl graduated from Buckinghamshire College in 1981 after studying 3-D Design. After spending almost a year at Greenfield Valley Heritage Park near Holywell, she worked for the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust on the excavations of the Roman bath house in Prestatyn. She later became the Education Officer, organising Open Days and giving tours and lectures. She became curator at Rhyl Library Museum and Arts Centre in 1986.

Cheryl joined the Archaeological Service in 1988 to work on the excavation of part of the Dominican Friary at Nicholas Street Mews. One of her recent projects was to make a detailed record of sections of the City Walls whilst structural work was being carried out. Cheryl is currently engaged in the design of our 'Discovering Chester' series of leaflets and is looking forward to next year when it is planned that she will be recording the remains of St John's Church, Chester's original cathedral.