

50th Anniversary of the Historic Towns Studies

1969 - 2019

CHESTER



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On a Friday afternoon in 1969 a copy of *Chester: A Study in Conservation* arrived on my desk at County Hall with a brief handwritten note from the Clerk to Cheshire County Council, John Boynton, which requested comments by Monday morning!

As the architectural historian John Cornforth observed, almost ten years later, *“the amount of thinking, writing and action going on throughout the 1960’s was amazing when one looks back and it was wrong to see the reports on the four towns in isolation”*.

In Britain, it had begun in 1961 with the setting up of a Steering Group to study the long term problems of traffic in towns. 1962 saw local authorities able to make repair grants and HMSO published *Town Centres- Approach to Renewal*. In 1963 Colin Buchanan’s *Traffic in Towns* was published and the Council of Archaeology, CPRE and SPAB urged the need for surveys of town centres.

It was in 1966 that Richard Crossman, in a brief but stimulating period as Minister of Housing and Local Government and advised by his parliamentary secretary Lord Kennet, who cared deeply about historic towns, set up a Preservation Policy Group. Four historic towns – Bath, Chester, Chichester and York – were selected to act as pilot studies. Consultants were appointed jointly by the government and local authorities : Colin Buchanan for Bath, a team from West Sussex Planning Department for Chichester, Lord Esher for York and Donald Insall for Chester. If the local authority had agreed, there would have been a fifth town – Kings Lynn. The government decided that the studies should be commissioned *“to examine how conservation policies might be sensibly implemented”*. There were two objectives : *“to produce solutions for specific local problems, and to learn lessons of general application to all our historic towns”*.

In Chester, Donald Insall discovered a city without a clear vision, dependent on its special identity for its economic survival, but with many of its historic buildings vulnerable and in a critical state of decay. In a comprehensive analysis Insall and his team looked at the city in its regional context, at the pressures for change, at traffic and movement, image and identity, and at the specific factors that were impacting on the character of the historic environment. At the detailed level, his team surveyed over 400 historic buildings and developed a series of actions for 10 specific study areas, with three areas for further study. He planned a five-year initial repair programme for 142 buildings and a subsequent ten-year programme for a further 229 buildings. An action plan for listing the city’s buildings by 1975 was proposed, together with revising the listing grades and publication of the lists in a more accessible form, changes that found their way into the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act.

The public had been aware of the survey work whilst it was in progress in 1966-67 and, with members of Chester Civic Trust, impatiently awaited publication of the report. Anticipating the publication of the report, the Chester and District Junior Chamber of Commerce issued a report *Chester at the Crossroads* which promoted the merits of pedestrianisation. Sensing a fear on the part of traders that the absence of vehicles would have a serious effect on their trade, they quoted successful examples in Norwich and in Dusseldorf, Germany.

Completed and published in 1968, distribution of copies of the report was delayed for several months until 1989 due to a strike at the HMSO warehouse. Initially, only a few copies were available when the report was launched and, at £7 a copy (equivalent to about £100 today), did not encourage members of the public to purchase when copies were eventually released. The copy which had arrived on my desk on a Friday afternoon had been loaned to John Boynton for the weekend by the editor of one of the local papers, hence the request for comments – and the return of the report – by Monday morning. John Boynton, the Clerk to Cheshire County Council, was a legal

member on the council of the Royal Town Planning Institute (later President of the RTPI and knighted in 1979). It was a coincidence that both he and Donald Insall had contributed to a Civic Trust Survey on Conservation Areas which had been published in the Architects' Journal in 1967.

The local press were generous in their extensive and supportive publicity and, together with regional TV, ensured that Insall's recommendations were widely known in the city. The universal view was that the report provided a practical framework for reconciling the pressure for economic development with the protection of the city's outstanding character.

It was to the credit of elected members that they accepted the report in full and, in this, they were supported by Chester Civic Trust which appointed a group of members to examine the details and explore ways in which the Trust could support the City Council in implementing the recommendations of the report. The Civic Amenities Act of 1967 had enabled the Council to designate an area of 80 hectares as a Conservation Area in January 1969 and a series of positive actions followed, the first of which was the establishment of a Conservation Fund. Chester was the first local authority to establish such a fund, a feature of which was that it accrued interest and, unlike most Council budgets, the money did not have to be spent in a particular year and could be built up to provide grants. In the first year the City Council contributed £29,200 to the fund (equivalent to a sum in excess of £400,000 today based on the UK Retail Price Index).

Ratepayers knew it as a specific 2d rate for conservation purposes; it was never controversial and, as had been forecast, attracted matching support from government. It became an essential element of the conservation programme, enabling grants to be offered for essential repairs and an incentive for owners to improve their properties at their own expense. With double-digit inflation in the 1970's there was always pressure to increase the Council's contribution to the Fund and by 1980 it had increased to £200,000 per year (equivalent to in excess of £800,000 today).

Two further critical decisions by the City Council followed in 1971. Donald Insall was retained as consultant, providing both continuity and an impetus to implement the recommendations of his report. The team recommended the appointment of a specific Conservation Officer in the planning department and Roger Tilley was appointed England's first Conservation Officer, able to devote himself full-time to advising owners of historic buildings and keeping a daily eye on what was happening, such as a builder beginning unauthorised work on a listed building or a blocked gutter threatening damage. 1971 was also the year in which Chester became the first city to form a Conservation Area Advisory Committee on which nine local societies were represented. The Committee met regularly to examine and comment on planning applications : later that year the Department of Environment advised all historic towns to set up similar bodies which could be consulted on developments planned in their conservation areas.

The Conservation Programme gradually gained momentum, greatly aided by the pro-active Conservation Officer, the Conservation Consultant, senior members of the City Council, the local press and the universal support of citizens. This was often remarked upon by visiting councilors and officials from other historic towns in the UK and in Europe. Duncan Sandys, who as a government minister sponsored the 1967 Civic Amenities Act and had also founded the Civic Trust movement, brought several groups of European elected members and officials to Chester as President of Europa Nostra. The contacts provided opportunities to exchange information and, although probably not appreciated at the time, began to recognise heritage tourism as an important by-product of the conservation programme.

Local Government Reorganisation in 1974 could have disrupted the conservation programme. The city amalgamated with two adjoining authorities to form the new Chester District Council which

acquired city status for the combined area. The author moved from being Assistant County Architect to the new post of Director of Technical Services for the new authority. I had met with the consultant's team in connection with my responsibilities for the County Council's properties in Chester which included the Castle Courts and early conservation projects, in particular the Old Rectory on St Mary's Hill and Shipgate House. John Boynton, whose interest in conservation has previously been mentioned, sent me to a short conservation course in London and Venice in 1972 organised by the Centre for Advanced Studies in Environment and, appropriately, chaired by Donald Insall. Whilst the employment of an architect to lead a department with responsibilities for engineering, planning and architecture was not unique, it was unusual. It was, no doubt, in the minds of the considerable number of members who made the appointment, that the conservation programme was of paramount importance. It positively aided continuity and the conservation team was strengthened. To quote an independent opinion "*a more coordinated approach to the new authority's architectural, engineering and planning functions was fostered, not only in the city centre, but also throughout the rural towns and villages*". It began almost two decades of productive collaboration between the Conservation Consultant and the City Council's conservation team. Happily, the author's friendship with Sir Donald Insall has continued throughout the former's 30 years of retirement from local government!

European architectural Heritage Year in 1975 was a focus for conservation in Chester and has been recorded in greater detail in a Chester Civic Trust publication. The Bridgegate Action area became one of 50 pilot projects in Europe, giving national and international attention to the city and the conservation programme. A series of events throughout the year included study tours, a film produced by the Department of the Environment, a commemorative stamp and the reinstatement of the High Cross in its original location by Chester Civic Trust. The climax was a Royal Visit and the opening of Britain's first Heritage Centre in one of three redundant churches in the city centre. The city justifiably adopted a logo *Chester Heritage City* which, two decades later, was expanded to *Chester International Heritage City* on signs on the approach roads to the city.

It was also in the mid 1970's that several writers for architectural and planning journals visited the four historic towns to compare progress since the publication of the reports. One of these was Anne Dennier who, writing in the *Town Planning Review*, observed that the degree of accord in Chester differed from both Bath and York, whose conservation policies and planning decisions had aroused heated controversy. In Chester she had found Chester Civic trust and CPRE working in co-operation with the Council. There was also a sympathetic account, written by Tony Aldous following a visit to Chester, which cited the partial pedestrianisation of the city centre as the greatest achievement of the conservation programme.

John Cornforth, in particular, wrote two well-researched articles for *Country Life* on the impact of the studies on each of the four towns. His view was that the Chester and York reports had, and were still having, an impact on both cities and also a national influence. He considered the Bath report to be the most limited of the four, because it was only one of several studies on the city. The remarkable turn round in attitude and achievement in Bath could not, in his view, be attributed solely to the historic towns report. Chichester had been the only city to produce its own report which had followed theories accepted in the early 1960's but which by 1978, Cornforth considered less sound. He was critical that two of the city's four quadrants had been "*rebuilt and scraped away to provide rear access and the cross plan of the city now seemed only skin deep*".

Whilst Chester was receiving favourable comments for the conservation programme controversy was never far away. The Architects' Journal published a critical article by Gillian Darley, suggesting that little had been achieved since the publication of the historic towns report and that the city

centre had become a “ghetto of shops and offices, sprinkled with waste spaces and derelict buildings”. She criticised the concentration on larger projects in the city centre and the general quality of new architecture in Chester. Our response was that the city centre emphasis was one of the conservation programme’s greatest strengths as it had helped to build confidence and encourage investment. A host of minor projects were also underway in order to build momentum.

There were also planning proposals which excited national as well as local interest. Amongst those was a planning application to demolish a Grade 11 listed building which stands on top of part of the Roman amphitheatre and to reconstruct the amphitheatre as a visitor attraction. It was described by Gavin Stamp as “a right old Roman carry-on”. Thirty years later, the now derelict Dee House still awaits a decision on its future and a new Courthouse has, surprisingly, been built on the footprint of the southern part of the amphitheatre.

How was the impetus maintained? The city was fortunate to attract a succession of experienced Conservation Officers who were, and were encouraged to be, pro-active. A vital component of the conservation programme, which received little publicity, was the quarterly meetings of the conservation team. Attended by Donald Insall and the author, together with a representative of the relevant government department, the meetings kept a constant check on progress. They were also able to request the attendance of other local authority officers, such as the City Solicitor or Treasurer, to advise on particular matters of concern. Minutes recorded decisions and actions to be taken. They led to 10 yearly reviews- in 1976 and 1986 – both jointly by the Consultant and City Council, which recorded achievements and, more importantly, set out priorities for the following ten years.

The story of Chester continues and it can be truly said that the only constant is change. To use a cricket analogy my view of conservation in the city in recent years has been from the boundary. Someone closer to the wicket would be more competent to analyse the changes which have occurred and their effect on the conservation area. Chester has not been immune from the national decline in retail outlets and the growth of on-line shopping. Restaurants and coffee shops have increased, former offices are being converted into apartments and hotels. Developers, attracted by the rapid growth in student numbers at the University, have built large blocks of small apartments with little or no requirement for car parking; some have been granted on appeal and their design quality criticised both in the national press and by Chester Civic Trust. But there have also been positive developments; the former Odeon Cinema was acquired by the Council and restored and extended to form a Cultural Centre comprising theatre, cinema and library. And the long awaited regeneration of the adjoining Northgate area is likely to commence within the next few years.

Some messages from the past resonate with Chester in 2019; in particular, the address given by Professor Graham Ashworth, the UK member of the jury which awarded the city its first of three European awards in the 1980’s “for outstanding services to the conservation of the architectural heritage”. Ashworth, also a past president of the RTPI, congratulated the city on launching its own 5-yearly Civic Awards for conservation a few years earlier, stressing that in the exercise of conservation exhortation and encouragement are important. Addressing the Councillors – the elected representatives – who had been so supportive of the conservation programme, he reminded them that when they retired from Council business or moved to higher things “the Gospel has to be preached again” to their successors. It proved to be an appropriate remark for him to make as, when we met in retirement many years later, he had become President of the Baptist Union !

Graham Ashworth’s second piece of advice was directed to the author as Director of Technical Services. Simply, he said, please do not let the standard slip, and he continued : “It is so easy (when

the pressures of the needs of economic development, when the developer is saying the city needs this investment, when the ratepayers need to get a good return) to lower the standards a little. The development control standards slip, the requirements are eased and the care and meticulous attention to detail go by the wayside and that which has been achieved can be eroded overnight”.

Both pieces of advice seem particularly apposite at this time. A further local government reorganisation in 2008 saw the creation of a unitary authority – Cheshire West and Chester – covering the western half of the County of Cheshire. And it is noticeable that there has been a decline, probably for many reasons, in the standards of design and maintenance of shop fronts, signage and hanging signs, all of which contribute to Chester’s unique identity and which are of paramount importance if the conservation area is to survive and prosper.

When Donald Insall’s report was launched he made this urgent plea : “ *We hope it will not just be a book on the shelf, but a living and continuing plan for Chester*” . Simply known in Chester as *The Insall Report*, it is still read and referred to and its methods and the city’s energetic example have been and continue to be widely influential.

For further information:

Chester : A Study in Conservation : Donald W Insall and Associates, HMSO 1968

Living Buildings : Donald Insall 2008 (2nd edition published recently)

Preservation and Progress ; The Story of Chester since 1960 : Peter de Figueiredo and Cyril Morris, Chester Civic Trust 2012

Leading the way – Celebrating Chester’s unique role in EAHY 1975 : Cyril Morris, Chester Civic Trust 2015

The Chester Historic Town Study and Conservation Action Programme : Sir Donald Insall CBE. An illustrated paper given to ASCHB Conference 2017