

Putting medieval Chester back on the map

A new multi-disciplinary project, Mapping Medieval Chester, begins this autumn to explore the urban landscape of medieval Chester

THIS project, which brings together literary studies, geography, archaeology and history, will use the medium of ‘mapping’ to discover how different communities lived and interacted with each other. The study will focus on Chester and the identities of its inhabitants between c 1200 and 1500.

One of the main aims of the project is to consider how different communities used the city’s physical space and how features such as crossroads, gates and the city walls were important in helping them to develop their own sense of place and identity. In order to do this, geographical and literary mappings of the medieval city using cartographic and written sources will be integrated to see how they relate to each other.

The project also seeks to analyse how Chester’s urban landscape was interpreted by those writing about the city and its environment during the Middle Ages. This will involve editing and translating a number of important but largely neglected texts in English, Welsh and Latin, including Welsh poetry relating to Chester; sections from Henry Bradshaw’s *Life of St Werburge* and, for the first time, a parallel text and translation of Lucian’s twelfth-century Latin manuscript *In Praise of Chester*.

Information technology will be playing a large part in the project: for example, a geographical information system will be used and developed in order to create a multi-layered interactive digital map of Chester as it was in c 1500.



The church played an important part in the life of Chester’s community in the Middle Ages. This reconstruction painting shows the Dominican Friary, on the western side of the city, one of Chester’s six medieval religious houses, as it might have appeared in the fifteenth century. The Dominicans were the first friars to establish themselves at Chester, founding their house c 1236.
(Painting by Tim Morgan)

Members of the team came to Chester in September to begin their research and fieldwork and to discuss some of the developments in medieval archaeology in the city. Their first task was to carry out a global positioning satellite survey (GPS) of the city. To do this they needed a base station on a prominent building. They therefore spent two days taking accurate location readings of medieval sites in Chester from the top of the cathedral tower. This data will then be used to geo-reference the ancient maps of Chester. This means that computers are used to bend and fit ancient maps so that the landmarks are in their correct position. Maps of different dates can then be overlain and the development of the landscape from the Middle Ages can be traced.

The project aims to reach a range of audiences including local historians, school groups and anyone interested in investigating Britain’s medieval history. It is also expected that by linking literary and carto-

graphic sources in digital format, access and public interest in Chester’s medieval past, and in medieval urban studies generally, will be increased.

As well as the production of academic papers there will be a conference at the University of Wales, Swansea in 2009, and it is hoped that there will be a number of events in Chester, including readings from transcribed texts, living history with medieval characters, a GPS demonstration and a display of photographs of medieval buildings.

The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and is being carried out by teams from Swansea University, Queen’s University Belfast and The Centre for Computing in Humanities at King’s College, London. Simon Ward of Chester Archaeology and Sue Hughes of the Grosvenor Museum are on the advisory committee.

Chester's early manuscripts: Lucian and Bradshaw

Texts prepared by the monks of Chester's religious houses are invaluable to our understanding of what life was like in the medieval city.

Lucian, a monk at St Werburgh's Abbey in the twelfth century, was one of the few members of the monastery we know by name. In his manuscript *Liber Luciani de Laude Cestrie*, produced in 1194, he gives an account of Chester's history and geographical location and a long description of the four town gates and their patron saints. He recounts that the river was abounding with fish and describes a fine harbour attracting merchants and ships from Aquitaine, Spain, Ireland and Germany. He suggests that the monks were proud of their city and that the citizens were wealthy, with good woods, pastures

and beasts, and mentions a flourishing market in the centre of the city.

He also gives an account of the roads and the neighbourhood outside the town, noting that some visitors were more welcome than others! He describes the abbey itself as an important meeting place for scholars, pilgrims and travellers from a wide area.

Henry Bradshaw, a scribe monk for St Werburgh's Abbey and thought to be a native of Chester, was the author of a poem on the life of St Werburgh, published in 1521. Bradshaw claimed to have written the poem for merchants and lay people. His description of the inhabitants of the city and county palatine of Chester comes towards the end of the 789 verses!

Mapping the character of places: some examples from the Roman empire

We all know that different parts of towns inspire different feelings: they may feel relaxing, busy, threatening or awe-inspiring. We also know that places have distinct characters that may last generations.

For a couple of decades now, archaeologists have been trying to move beyond the architectural study of ancient buildings and towns, to work out how they worked economically and socially. A lot of work has been done on the Roman city of Pompeii, destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. Residential streets were marked by widely spaced doorways and the road surfaces show little sign of wear: they would probably have had a quiet feel. By contrast in commercial streets, shop- and house-doors were close together, the walls were covered by graffiti (often advertisements or election slogans), and the roads were deeply rutted by heavy traffic. On the other hand, in the central, oldest part of the city, and the forum, the narrow streets again show little wear and were apparently pedestrianised.

Again, in the imperial capital, the *Forum Romanum* was an open, almost uncontrolled area that developed over centuries and was home to all sorts of activities – commercial, religious and political – and was for a long time overlooked by the houses of the elite. By contrast, the later *fora*, for example those built by the dictator Julius Caesar and the emperor Trajan, were architecturally more unified but were enclosed, walled areas: the difference is between a public market square and a private shopping centre. The *via sacra* between the *Forum Romanum* and the Colosseum long served as a processional way used to celebrate imperial triumphs.

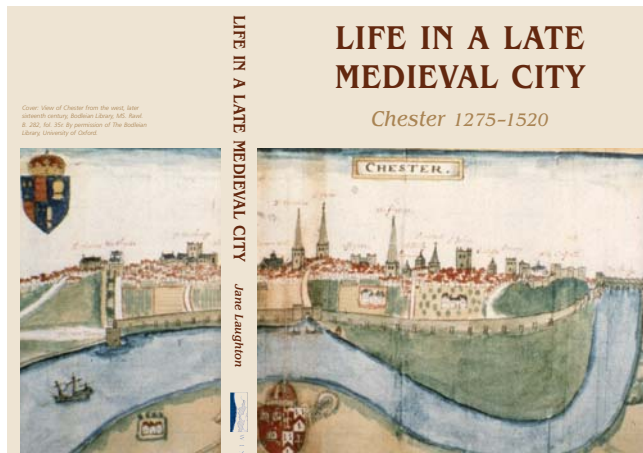
The potential for exploring the same approach at Chester at all times in its history is obvious.

Peter Carrington

Publication news

Life in a late medieval city

Published in October, *Life in a late medieval city Chester 1275–1520* by Jane Laughton is an important contribution to the study of medieval urban history. The author uses a wide range of sources, written and archaeological, to reveal a city with its own distinctive character. The book presents a fascinating insight into the social relationships of the ordinary townspeople such as John Daa, a butcher who was arrested in 1407 on suspicion of purchasing herring from the French allies of Glyn Dwr; and the smith John Smith who paid for ale with two horseshoes in 1489. The picture that emerges of Chester – administrative centre, ecclesiastical capital and garrison town – is of a lively community that responded to social and economic change with enthusiasm and enterprise.



View of Chester from the west. Bodleian Library MS



A late medieval gold ring with a garnet setting, found in Chester in 2007

Life in a late medieval city Chester 1275–1520 by Jane Laughton. 264pp, b/w & colour illus. Published by Windgather Press, an imprint of Oxbow Books 2008. Paperback £20, available from the Grosvenor Museum shop.



Chester City Walls update

As reported in the last newsletter (June 2008) a section of the inner face of the City Walls south of the East Gate had collapsed. Since June, although there may not be much to see on the ground, work has been progressing steadily on developing a programme of recording and repair.

The first stage has been to erect emergency propping to support the walls in the immediate vicinity of the collapse. This has been a complex engineering problem due to the restricted space. The ground by the walls is obviously archaeologically sensitive so the anchors for the props had to be carefully sited. They were driven into the ground and secured to the props by steel cables. Until this stage has been completed, it is not safe to enter the collapse area to examine its causes and the extent of remedial work that may be required.

At the same time, the Archaeological Service has initiated a programme of research and recording. The outer face of the wall at this point exhibits a great variety of masonry styles, the result of patching and repair over a long period of time. The earliest masonry is thought to be medieval, and the later work probably dates to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This sequence is being analysed by plotting and examining the masonry on the site and by studying early maps. On the inner face, where the collapse occurred, the masonry is also thought to be medieval and comprises well cut blocks in regular courses. However, immediately adjacent to the collapse, the style changes to a much more irregular build with stones and bricks which is probably later patching.

Another element of the recording has been a laser scan of the wall, which is providing us with a highly accurate stone-by-stone survey of both sides of this stretch of the wall. This will be invaluable for interpreting the masonry and informing the process of disassembly and reconstruction.

Simon Ward

We are grateful to AOC Archaeology Group who carried out the laser scanning

District news

Looking for Claverton: an update

VOLUNTEERS from the Chester Archaeological Society have made significant progress with their fieldwork project to locate the site of the lost village of Claverton.

It is believed that the remains of this long-lost medieval village are to be found just south of Handbridge, Chester, on the west side of Roman Watling Street, connecting Chester and Wroxeter. The area under investigation consists of woodland and open fields. Medieval plough marks, or ridge and furrow, are visible both in the woodland and in the open space. In addition, there is evidence of an ancient trackway, and, within the woodland, various features which may suggest house platforms.

Since 2006 when the project began, the society's volunteers have acquired the equipment and experience necessary to survey the area using a variety of non-intrusive techniques. In 2008 Phase 1 of the project was completed, which has included a full contour and resistivity survey of an open field described as 'Playing Field' on the Ordnance Survey map.

For the contour survey the area was divided into 30-metre squares and levels were taken at 1m intervals. These were then plotted, and a computer program used to draw the necessary contours. The resistivity survey involved dividing the area into 20-metre squares and taking resistance readings at 1m intervals.

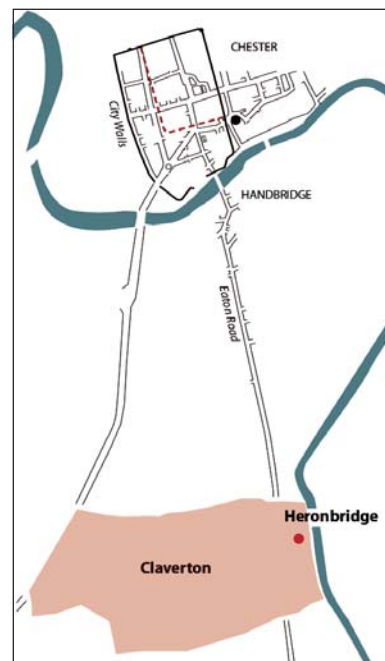
Phase 2 of the project continued with the contour and resistivity surveys in the dense woodland and especially around various anomalies. This proved particularly difficult due to the number of trees, lack of daylight, and dangerous undergrowth. Only a small area has been surveyed to date and

the results are still awaiting processing.

In addition to the field surveys, searches of existing archives in the Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies collections are being carried out. The society will be returning to the site in November.

Phil Miles

Fieldwork Co-ordinator, Chester Archaeological Society



Location map of Claverton



Surveying the woodland (photo: P Miles)



What's happening to the amphitheatre?

It is now two years since excavations in the amphitheatre came to an end and all the excavated areas have been backfilled. This has been done to protect the exposed remains – poorly preserved fragments of wall, soft surfaces and other archaeological deposits – from the weather. Ways of enhancing and presenting the site and adjoining areas, such as Dee House and St John's church – are the subject of continuing detailed discussions between Chester City Council and English Heritage.

In the meantime, Chester Archaeology and English Heritage staff are now busy analysing the mountain of finds and site records. Some objects, such as coins and other metal finds, will need cleaning and conservation before they can be properly identified. This work will last a couple of years. At the moment it is planned that the results should be published in two volumes – the first dealing with the amphitheatre in Roman times and its gradual decay and robbing in the Saxon period, and the second with the history of the site as part of an ecclesiastical enclave centred on St John's church and later as an extramural suburb containing the houses of some of the local gentry.

The talks given at the Chester Amphitheatre Conference are being published by Archaeopress, who produce British Archaeological Reports. We will let you know when this appears and how to obtain a copy.

Peter Carrington

Society news

Chester Archaeological Society

Volume 80 of the society's journal has recently been published and includes papers on Treboeth, the results of a preliminary investigation of industrial activity in Handbridge; the results of a documentary study and field surveys at Burton Point in Wirral, on the remains of what is thought to be an Iron Age promontory hillfort; the discovery of a late first-early sec-

ond century Roman industrial building in City Road, Chester; and a study of the nineteenth-century Chester King and Constitution Club.

Lecture programme

The society's programme of talks is now underway. All lectures are held in the lecture theatre at the Grosvenor Museum. Non-members are welcome on payment of an admission fee of £3.

Wednesday 12 November 7.30pm

Bersham

Stephen Greuter from Wrexham Museum

Saturday 6 December 2.30pm

Police Headquarters site in Chester
Leigh Dodd from Earthworks Archaeology

Saturday 10 January 2.30pm

Medieval finds from Meols
Geoff Egan from The Museum of London

Wednesday 4 February 7.30pm

Fishing for Vikings in the gene pool of old Merseyside
Professor Stephen Harding from The University of Nottingham

Museum news

Welcome

... to Elizabeth Royles, who took up the post of Keeper of Early History at the Grosvenor Museum in September.

Elizabeth went to the University of Leicester where she took a BA in Ancient History and Archaeology, specialising in Roman and medieval city archaeology. After a season working for the University of Valencia Archaeology Department, she returned to Leicester to undertake a postgraduate diploma in Museum Studies.

Elizabeth went on to work for English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Office where she catalogued their historic image collection before moving on to a series of local authority jobs with Derbyshire County Council, Kettering Borough Council, Coventry City Council and most recently with Sefton MBC where she

worked as Museums and Galleries Officer.

She has a wide range of experience in devising exhibitions, displays and education programmes as well as care of collections and conservation work. She has also worked on a number of excavations including Iron Age hilltop settlements in Spain, Roman sites off the Old Kent Road in London and an Anglo-Saxon site on Lindisfarne. Her special interests are the archaeology of Roman and medieval Britain, the Civil War and heritage interpretation.

Elizabeth can be contacted on (01244) 402025. E-mail: e.royles@chester.gov.uk

A large-print version of this newsletter is available. Please phone (01244) 402023 or fax (01244) 347522

The Past Uncovered

is produced by the City Council's Archaeology, Design and Conservation Services to keep you in touch with discoveries in Chester and the surrounding area. It appears three times a year, in February, June and October. Copies can be obtained from the Grosvenor Museum and other City Council venues or by post direct from Chester Archaeology. If you have any comments or questions, or would like to contribute, please get in touch with Gillian Dunn at Chester Archaeology, 27 Grosvenor Street, Chester CH1 2DD. ☎ (01244) 402023.

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