

SAVING A CITY – A LESSON FROM HISTORY
THE CONSERVATION FUND
IN CHESTER
1970-2000



The High Cross was restored to its original location in front of St Peter's Church

Cyril M Morris
December 2020

SAVING A CITY – A LESSON FROM HISTORY

THE CONSERVATION FUND

IN CHESTER

1970-2000

CHESTER IN THE 1960's:

In the mid 1960's concern at the rate of redevelopment and the increasing loss of old buildings in historic towns led the Government to commission, jointly with local authorities, studies of four historic cities: Bath, Chester, Chichester and York. Donald Insall's comprehensive report *Chester: A Study in Conservation* was published in 1968. It drew attention to the shocking state of repair of many of Chester's historic buildings and warned that, without speedy action, the future of many individual buildings and the city's historic character would be lost forever. Yet the opportunity of rescue was there and clamouring for attention.

Fifty years later, this monograph is a cogent reminder that decay of the city's historic buildings was fundamental, widespread and accelerating. The basic problem was the disuse, underuse and misuse of buildings. The blight was spreading, affecting whole streets and areas: it discouraged both improvements and investment. In Bridgegate and other areas most buildings were viewed as 'beyond hope' and only fit for demolition. Gaps and clearance sites yawned, warning notices declared buildings unsafe and environmental standards were desperately low. Prominent key buildings were empty and neglected : the cost of repairs was higher than the value of the property.

When the City Council accepted the recommendations of the Insall Report in 1969, financial encouragement was realised to be a vital element for the success of a future Conservation Programme. It led, in 1970, to the establishment of a **Conservation Fund**.

THE FUND IS ESTABLISHED:

The authority for setting up the Fund was the Local Authorities (Historic Buildings) Act of 1962, amended by Section 58 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1968. In later years the authority was contained in Sections 57 and 58 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

The terms of reference for the Fund were intentionally very broad:

- **to encourage and facilitate the conservation of historic buildings;**
- **to enhance the appearance of Conservation Areas;**
- **to assist in the payment of fees or charges for providing specialist conservation services;**
- **to aid the work of Historic Building Trusts and**
- **to finance the publication of conservation reports or literature initiated by the Council.**

It was a great advantage that the Fund was free from the restrictions of conventional end-of-year accounting procedures. Grants were offered ahead of schemes commencing and there was no

requirement that they should be completed within the financial year of offer. Balances unallocated at the end of the financial year remained available from the Fund and were carried over to the next financial year. The Fund also accrued interest, a feature which became significant in the 1970's when double-digit inflation was rapidly increasing building costs. From the inception of the Conservation Fund, policies and procedures for grant-aid were continually updated and refined in close co-operation with the Historic Buildings Council for England (HBC) and, later, English Heritage. It was acknowledged that they represented one of the most effective and flexible systems in the country. A detailed explication of the criteria for grant-aid is included in Appendix G5 of the 1986 Conservation Review Study *Conservation in Chester*, published by Chester City Council in 1988.

IN THE BEGINNING:

Chester was the first local authority to establish such a fund. It formed part of the Council's revenue expenditure and was financed by the levying of a specific rate. In the initial 1970/71 financial year a rate of 2d was levied which produced £29,200. In recognition of the Council's commitment, the Department of the Environment (DoE) established a "Town Scheme", whereby grants from national funds matched the finance being raised locally. Today the £29,200 contribution may appear to be an insignificant sum but, based on the comparative UK Retail Prices Index, in 2020 it would have increased to approximately £450,000.

In order that Chester's conservation policies could be considered in the context of the whole city, the Council had designated, in 1969, a conservation area of 200 acres embracing the entire walled city and adjacent areas; the area contained over 600 buildings of special architectural or historic interest which are statutorily protected. Two further critical decisions followed the establishment of the conservation fund; Donald Insall was retained as consultant, initially to make specific recommendations for the Bridgegate area, but also to ensure continuity and collaboration with the City Council's staff. It was an appointment supported financially by the DoE and continued until 1987; and in April 1971 the City Council approved the appointment of a Conservation Officer, the first in the country, as an encouraging liaison between the local authority and property owners, architects and contractors.

SUPPORT FOR THE FUND:

The concept of a Conservation Fund was central to the success of the conservation programme. It had the support of all elected members and, notably, successive chairman of the Planning Committee, the Chester Civic Trust, the local press and the public. The fact that the additional tax was universally accepted surprised many official visitors from both the UK and Europe who came to study the city's conservation programme, particularly in 1975, when Chester was selected as one of the 50 towns in Europe to illustrate aspects of practical conservation in European Architectural Heritage Year. In later years it was inevitable that the amount of the annual levy was often hotly debated whenever budgets were considered by elected members. Despite the frequent financial constraints caused by the national economic situation and inflation, which increased to almost 18% in the mid 1970's, support for the fund remained constant. It is true to say that, without the availability of grant aid from both local and central government, many historic buildings in the city would inevitably have been lost.

THE CONSERVATION YEARS:



Gamul House before and after restoration.

Initially, the percentage of grant normally given towards the cost of repairs was 25% from the Council's Conservation Fund, together with an equivalent grant from central government. As the successful

conservation programme in Chester gathered momentum property values and the general confidence of the private sector increased; it became possible, by 1982, to reduce the combined grant from 50% to 40% and then to 30% from the 1986/87 financial year.

Between 1970 and 1974 the Council almost doubled the annual sum contributed to the Conservation Fund to £56,000 and, immediately after local government reorganisation in 1974, the contribution to the Fund was increased to £100,000. However, by 1977 the economic situation at that time left the Council unable to continue grant aid repair work at the previous level and the annual contribution was reduced to £60,000.

At about the same time the City Council and the DoE commissioned a review of the 1968 Insall Report: this was prepared by Donald Insall Associates and the conservation staff of the Council's Department of Technical Services and published in 1976. An accompanying report examined the condition of historic buildings in the new Council's rural area. Despite the effort of the early 1970's there were still 300 historic buildings in the city in need of repair and it was clear that more money would be needed in the future. In 1977 some of the Georgian buildings in Lower Bridge Street were so dangerous that they had to be demolished and, in the following year, one of the oldest buildings in Shipgate Street collapsed. In the Council's rural area, which had not been included in Insall's 1968 report, it was found that there were many historic buildings in need of urgent repairs. The two reports set out priority buildings for repair and, despite the economic situation, the Council agreed to increase the contribution to the Conservation Fund until, by 1979, £100,000 was once again available and a separate budget established to aid the repair of historic rural buildings.



Lower Bridge Street before restoration



Lower Bridge Street after restoration.

In March 1979, the City's Finance Committee was attempting to achieve a standstill in the Council's rate by reducing the estimates by £50,000, with substantial reductions proposed for conservation (£20,000), theatre and publicity. It prompted immediate representations from Chester Civic Trust and the local press. The Trust's secretary, Denys Goose, commented that *"In the past the Conservation Fund has been instrumental in restoring many of Chester's fine buildings. To reduce this work, especially during the City's 1900th anniversary, seems madness."* The Trust appealed to the Council to reconsider any *"ill advised economy"* and the local press, whose editors were always supportive of the conservation programme, were equally strident in their objections. The *Chester Courant* quoted Disraeli : *"Economy does not consist in the reckless reduction of estimates; on the contrary, such a course almost necessarily tends to increase expenditure."* The paper's editor took a similar view to that of Disraeli and the Civic Trust.: *"Postponement of repairs long overdue may be at best the prelude to greater expenditure and, at worst, the cause of irretrievable loss. As for the promotion of the City's historic image, if that is going to be allowed to crumble, then why bother at all about publicity?"* The interventions had the desired effect and the proposed reduction was abandoned.

By December 1979, some 200 buildings in Chester had been repaired with the encouragement of grant aid and their future was effectively secured. However, there were still others in the worst condition which remained unrepaired; inflation had reduced the effectiveness of the £100,000 contribution which, in 1979, could only match the original £29,000 put into the fund in 1970. A further survey identified 120 buildings known to need urgent repair, becoming now daily more costly as a result of continuing deterioration.

Twelve months later the debate in the previous year was being repeated and the Chairman of the Development and Planning Committee, Heber Fearnall, faced the biggest challenge of his political career when he proposed, very successfully, to double the annual contribution to the Conservation Fund to £200,000. It was a sum which, because of inflation, was equivalent to the £100,000 contributed to the fund in 1975. Once again the Chester Civic Trust and local press were strongly supportive, the *Chester*

Observer commenting that “A few years ago, with imaginations and energies stimulated by the visionary enthusiasm of Donald Insall, Chester plunged into the conservation market with a will which won a European accolade and a world wide reputation as a city which cared about its character.”

When the Council agreed to increase the contribution to £200,000, councillors also decided that they would aim to continue the levy at a similar level – at that time the equivalent of a penny rate – for three consecutive years. This was important as it secured a matching grant from the DoE under a three year Town Scheme grant agreement. Although it had been difficult for the Council to commit to a three year rolling programme, the advantages continued to be emphasised in a report to the Development and Planning Committee in 1982. The report stated that, since 1970, over 320 city and 115 rural historic buildings had been repaired with grant aid but that, although improved property values had enabled the levels of grant to be reduced and higher contributions were being made by owners, only £700 was left in the Town Scheme budget for the remaining nine months of that financial year. With no prospect of a supplementary estimate, nine outstanding applications had to be deferred; there was even a suggestion by the Finance Sub-Committee that the annual contribution should be reduced to £85,000, prompting the riposte that, in the previous year, the city’s contribution of £200,000 had been more than matched by the DoE which had made available £320,000 of Town Scheme and other grant funds. Together with the expenditure by owners over £1m of eligible repair work had been undertaken in the previous financial year, a huge contribution to the local economy.

Under the headline “*Conservation Fund is running low*” the *Chester Observer* expressed concern and a lengthy letter to the Council from Denys Doxat-Pratt and Denys Goose, on behalf of Chester Civic Trust, stressed that, far from being reduced, the City’s contribution to the Conservation Fund should be increased to £340,000 to catch up with the backlog of necessary work and to keep up with inflation!

A WIDE RANGE OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES:

Throughout the conservation programme a wide range of financial resources, in addition to the conservation levy, was effectively deployed. A separate budget was maintained for the Council’s own historic buildings, including the City Walls; in addition, grants for derelict land, General Improvement Areas, Housing Action Areas and Section 10 grants for environmental improvements, some in collaboration with Chester Civic Trust, all promoted a wide range of improvements ranging from re-cobbling historic streets to improving old houses at one time proposed for slum clearance.

Chester attained a reputation for having minor projects which could be taken “off the shelf” at short notice to take advantage of late offers of grant from the DoE towards the end of the financial year - “oven-ready” in contemporary terminology, although this does not seem an apposite description for many conservation projects! There were also occasional surprise additions to conservation finances, such as the 25,000 Deutschmarks (£5300, equivalent to approximately £20,000 in 2020) which came with the 1981 European Prize for the Preservation of Historic Monuments. It was a prize which attracted both interest in and support for the conservation programme, prompting the editor of the *Chester Observer* to write : “*The reality of the prize.....is surely much greater than a few marks. Prestige for one thing, and the valuable spin-off in additional tourist trade....a timely reminder that the past does not lie entirely behind us.*” The editor went on to congratulate “*the city fathers who, urged on by Donald Insall, established the City Conservation Fund in 1970, and their successors who fought to keep it in recent days*”. With such praise,

it was not surprising that the contribution of £200,000 per annum was maintained when the budget for 1982/83 was agreed and continued until 1986/87.



King's Buildings : Structural problems resolved



The Falcon Inn before and after restoration

NON-STOP REVIEW

Throughout the conservation programme there was a constant review and a reappraisal of individual projects and the Conservation Fund. The monthly, and later quarterly, meetings of the consultant and the city's conservation team, chaired by the Director of Technical Services and usually attended by a representative from the Historic Buildings Council for England (HBC), succeeded in 1984 by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England (English Heritage) as advisors to the DoE, played a

pivotal role in maintaining momentum. This was particularly important for buildings which presented major structural and financial problems such as The Falcon Inn, where the eventual solution was to establish a Trust in order to obtain grant-aid; and at Kings Buildings, where seemingly endless legal problems were eventually overcome. The diverse problems confronted and solved are graphically described in the accounts of two conservation projects: 90-92 Lower Bridge Street “An owner’s view of the conservation process” (Section 6 of *Conservation in Action : Chester’s Bridgegate*) and 2,3 and 4 King’s Buildings “It takes a long time” (Section C.3.1 of *Conservation in Chester*).

The 1986 Conservation Review Study

Ten years previously the 1976 Review Study had been a significant document which charted priorities and estimated financial requirements; it included a recommendation for a further decennial review in 1986. This was again undertaken by Donald Insall and the Director of Technical Services; it had the advantages of reviewing both the successes and failures of the conservation programme and, after twenty years of endeavour, defining future priorities and making recommendations for the future based on experience. It also anticipated the conclusion of Donald Insall’s consultancy in 1987 and the retirement of the Director of Technical Services in 1989.

Financial resources received particular attention in the report, entitled *Conservation in Chester : Conservation Review Study 1986* and published by Chester City Council in 1986. A continuing review of the Conservation Fund on a three year basis was recommended, rolled forward annually to assess the level of finance required. Based on the success of the conservation programme, a reduction in the contribution to the fund to approximately £140,000 per annum from 1989, the product of three-quarters of a penny rate, was recommended and later agreed by the City Council; it also forecast the end of the Town Scheme of grants when the three year agreement with central government ended in 1989. The study concluded with a list of seventy challenging recommendations for future objectives and actions under a series of headings : Resources (21 recommendations), Maintaining Progress (12), Initiatives (12), Development Opportunities (8), Environmental Improvements (9), Control Policies (7) and a further decennial review in 1996.

Although the publication was primarily intended for members of the City Council, a grant from North West Securities enabled it to be available both locally and nationally; Lord Montagu, the chairman of English Heritage, described it as “*the definitive story of the internationally acclaimed, award winning Chester Conservation Programme.....copies of which should be on the desk of every Conservation Officer and every Chief Officer with responsibility for conservation in the country.*”

INTO THE 90’s :

With the City’s heritage of historic buildings in better condition, the 1990’s saw a gradual reduction in the annual contribution to the conservation fund. When the contribution in 1992/93 was reduced from the £69,750 of the previous year to £50,000, the secretary of Chester Civic Trust, Sue Atkinson, expressed the Trust’s concerns to the Council. The response from the Council was that, at very short notice, they had to reduce their draft budget of £13.3m by £3.3m to avoid being charge-capped by the Government; the reduction in the contribution to the Conservation Fund was part of a package aimed at protecting front-line services and avoiding compulsory retirements.

It was fortuitous that a comprehensive 5-yearly review had meanwhile been undertaken by the Conservation Officer, Peter de Figueiredo, and was reported to the Development Committee in March 1992. It was a report that deserved to have had wider publicity than it achieved at the time, and was probably the last major report made to the Council on the City's conservation programme.

The report, entitled *Conservation in Action* (a title reminiscent of the Bridgegate report of 1982), enunciated the principles on which the conservation programme had depended for the previous 22 years - "*a unique combination of experience, information and resources*" - for which the Conservation Fund had proved invaluable. Since the conclusion of the consultant's appointment in 1987 the Council's conservation team had taken on the full range of work as part of the Environmental Planning Section which had close contact with the Local Plans, Landscape and Technical Support Groups. Representatives of English Heritage were still considered part of the Conservation Team and had continued to attend regular meetings to review progress.

The report praised the benefits to the conservation programme of the involvement and the encouragement of elected members and the public, making particular mention of the Conservation Area Advisory Committee, which represented wide interests in the City, and the Chester Civic Trust which throughout offered positive and often challenging views on environmental matters. The Heritage Centre had, since opening in 1975, provided a valuable portrait of the city's architecture and history and included a continuing display of recent conservation work. However, the interior had been remodelled and the management incorporated into the Museum Section of the Leisure Services Department and its exhibitions of the history and conservation of Chester had been discontinued, affecting the local public profile which conservation had previously enjoyed. Environmental education for local schools undertaken by the Heritage Centre Assistant who was a part-time member of the Conservation Team had also been terminated.

The award in 1989 of a second prestigious Europa Nostra Award for the conservation and enhancement of the City's heritage had been widely welcomed; it had generated an increased number of visitors from all over the world who wanted to see and learn how the City's conservation programme had been managed. The author is reminded of a letter received in 2015 from Roger Tilley (Chester – and Britain's-first Conservation Officer) in which he commented that the study tours held during European Architectural Heritage Year in 1975 "*were often like being with the United Nations.*"

Included in Peter de Figueiredo's report was an impressive review of progress since the 1986 report, including a re-assessment of problems and opportunities, specific recommendations for the following five years and progress reports on all of the 70 recommendations in the 1986 report. Importantly, it included recommendations for future contributions to and allocations of the Conservation Fund. Notable among the many items progressed since the previous report and financed from the Fund were guides aimed at improving design standards for the Rows and shopfronts. The recording of buildings which had undergone repair or alteration with grant aid, referred to in the 1986 report, had led to the Rows Research Project directed by Andrew Brown, then Chester's Conservation Officer, and a resurvey of listed buildings in the city by the County Council for the DoE. There was, however, a warning that restrictions on Council expenditure were expected to continue indefinitely and alternative funding was being sought (and achieved in the following year) from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

At the end of the decade, when the Council considered the budget for 1999/2000, a proposed contribution to the Conservation Fund of £65,000 was deleted, but with a promise of a review in the following year.

This was the first year since the fund was established in 1970 that the Council had not made an annual allocation to the Conservation Fund. It was acknowledged that the Fund remained a powerful catalyst to lever in additional monies for the benefit of the city and that, although some owners could now afford to fund their own repairs, grant aid could still be a significant factor in ensuring timely repairs of appropriate quality. Because the annual allocation to the fund had been suspended, the residue in the balance in the Fund was devoted to two Conservation Area Partnership Schemes with English Heritage.

Twelve months later, in November 1999, it was revealed in the local press that the Council's Resources Board was recommending a zero contribution for a second year in the 2000/01 financial year. Once again, this prompted an immediate reaction from Chester Civic Trust. The chairman, Stephen Langtree, wrote to the chairman and members of the Resources Board expressing the Trust's concern and emphasising that the Conservation Fund had, since its inception in 1970, "*significantly aided the conservation programme*" and had been "*crucial to the successful and comprehensive repair of countless historic buildings in the Chester District.*" The Trust had been led to believe that the suspension of the allocation for the previous year was only a temporary expedient and had "*confidently expected that the City Council would restore the contribution for subsequent years*". However, this was effectively the end to reliance on the Conservation Fund and the final phase of Chester's internationally acclaimed conservation programme.

The story of the City's successful Conservation Fund is one of a long-term commitment to action which defied inflation, economic crises and Treasury edicts. It should be recorded that Chester had the willing support of the Historic Buildings Council, particularly its chairman, Jennifer Jenkins (later Dame Jennifer and wife of Lord Jenkins of Hillhead) and of and its successor, English Heritage. The availability of grant was only one part of the complex process of conservation management. But it was a fundamental part, without which the essential process of building repair and regeneration would have been infinitely more difficult to achieve. Urban conservation cannot be achieved overnight; in Chester it was sustained over three rewarding decades by elected members and energetic public opinion. Chester's Conservation Fund was a hugely successful investment in the living heritage of a unique and exemplary City.

POSTSCRIPT 2020:

The completion of this monograph fulfils a promise made twenty years ago to record the history of the Conservation Fund and the essential part it played in the success of Chester's Conservation Programme. It has been achieved during, and in great measure due to, the pandemic "lockdown".

As confidence in Chester's conservation programme has increased, so have property values. The City is viewed as an attractive location offering a rewarding return for investment. However, in 2020 Chester faces new challenges; the pandemic has accelerated reliance on online shopping, with disastrous effects on all High Streets, reducing rents and deterring town centre investments.

But thanks to the energetic conservation programme and despite an uncertain economic climate, Chester's 2000 years legacy of historic buildings continues intact; it is not surprising that English Heritage has recently described Chester as "*one of the UK's most important historic towns*". Today, Chester's unique heritage and distinctive identity affords a shopping and visitor experience which can transcend any online offer.

The author is reminded that, twenty years ago, the pan-European LODIS project, led by Chester City Council, examined the link between local distinctiveness and economic competitiveness, engaging many organisations in the city, including Chester Civic Trust. Although a number of projects were realised, more could be achieved with commitment and financial backing. The recent news of the successful bid to become one of Historic England's High Street Heritage Action Zones presents an attractive opportunity for investment in the the Rows, achieving repairs and improvements, and raising design standards in an area with over 100 listed buildings in a complex pattern of ownerships and tenancies.

The lessons of history are clear: allocating financial resources combined with energetic and positive teamwork, regular inspections and timely repairs, and with the support and perseverance of elected representatives, amenity societies, businesses and the public, can demonstrate that Chester's conservation programme is still alive and active.

Cyril M Morris

December 2020

Bibliography:

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

Chester : Conservation Review Study 1976 : DW Insall and CM Morris, Chester City Council

Conservation in Action : Chester's Bridgegate : DW Insall and DoE Directorate of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings, HMSO 1982

Conservation in Chester 1986 : DW Insall and CM Morris, Chester City Council, 1988

The Rows of Chester : Andrew Brown, English Heritage 1999

Preservation and Progress : Peter de Figueiredo and Cyril Morris, Chester Civic Trust 2012

Acknowledgments:

In writing this monograph my grateful thanks are due to my friend and fellow nonagenarian, Sir Donald Insall, for his encouragement and valuable suggestions. As an Honorary Freeman of the City of Chester, Sir Donald's concern for the City's heritage continues undiminished by the passage of time.

Thanks also are due to Katie Harries of Donald Insall Associates Chester Office in relation to her assistance with the photographs featured and also to my son Richard Morris for contending with innumerable drafts and revisions to ensure the accuracy of this monograph.

Cover photograph of The High Cross by Ian Lawrence.

The Author

Cyril Morris was Director of Technical Services for Chester City Council from 1974 to 1989. He was a founding member and is now a Vice President of Chester Civic Trust. He is the author of several recent monographs which include a history of the former Cheshire Constabulary Headquarters, the Chester Heritage Centre and a biography of his grandfather, a former Sheriff and twice Mayor of Chester.

The information in this monograph may be freely used and copied, provided the source is acknowledged.