



LIVING OVER THE ROWS

A Development Handbook

GAS

CHESTER GREAT AND SMALL

Proud to be part of

Chester
OneCity
Plan



CONTENTS

Foreword	1
Introduction	2
A Bit of History	3
The Opportunity	4
The How-To	11
The Proof	13
The Policy Stuff	17



BRIDGE STREET

Gabor
SHOES
MO 21 MO

Gabor
SHOES
MO 21 MO

POWELLS
JEWELLERS

Lotus Diamond

remember
Jewellery

HSAMUEL

PAINTED

FOREWORD

By Andy Farrall – Chair, Chester One City Plan Making Group

Chester is one of the world's most distinctive cities and The Rows, its galleried medieval streets, are at its heart.

The Rows have evolved continuously over 700 years and remain the glorious chaotic mixture of uses and architectural styles today.

The Rows are an enduring feature of this ancient city – evolving through time, finding new uses, being converted and reconverted, declining and regenerating. The Rows remain at the heart of Chester's city life and they are now becoming much sought after as wonderful places to live – they are Chester's greatest opportunity – hidden in plain sight.

The upper floors of The Rows are now reverting back to their original residential origins – beautiful and eclectic places to live right in the centre of a vibrant and creative city.

Chester's partners have reviewed its One City Plan (OCP) and have identified the reimagination of the City Centre through enhanced city centre living as one of the Plan's key priority actions – and reusing upper floors of The Rows for new homes being a key way to achieve this. The regeneration of The Rows also support investment into the City's historic fabric and the reimaging of Chester's High Street – both priority actions in the OCP.

This 'How to Guide' has been produced by a collaboration of developers, designers and professionals who have successfully converted and refurbished Row buildings into new living space and the Council supports this initiative. This guide is here to help, advise and support other investors and developers who will consider doing the same. It picks out key opportunities and issues and provides guidance to successfully tackle these. It also stresses that creativity, flexibility and imagination are key to bringing the best out of these wonderful buildings. Case studies of successful project bring these guidelines to life.

This guide has been 'commissioned' as a One City Plan (OCP) project and I offer the full support of the OCP partnership team delivery network in this priority endeavour.



INTRODUCTION

This is a 'how to do it guide' aimed at supporting potential investors and developers in reusing and converting the upper floors of Chester's historic Row buildings to mixed and residential use.

It has been developed by designers and developers who have actually successfully converted these buildings into unique and sought after homes right in the heart of one of the most attractive and desirable historic cities in Europe. The message is that such conversions are easy – the key is to use this guide, take advice, work with the officers of the Council and above all to do the right thing.

At first glance investors may feel that converting a Row building would be both hard and expensive. However, it need not be – this guide will help you and there are many local professionals who are keen and willing to support you. The reimagining of The Rows for residential use is a priority within the Council's Chester One City Plan – so the council will be positive, flexible and supportive.

This may seem like a bold statement, but it is true. We would encourage the reader to consider the case studies we have provided here as proof that these spaces are very convertible, desirable and above all, if delivered properly, are well supported. All of the case studies have accompanying planning permission references so you can see full details of the submissions, design reasoning, heritage considerations and layout drawings by visiting the CW&C Planning Portal.



A BIT OF HISTORY

The Rows are a range of unique and beautiful structures radiating from the Chester Cross at the very heart of the city along its principal Roman Streets. They are over 700 years old and commonly consist of street level semi basement crypts, a Row level open gallery and former living accommodation above. Many were medieval traders' premises - where they lived and traded, and others were grand homes in the important, fashionable and prosperous City of Chester - one of the country's leading port cities.

Some were fashionable homes that their occupants built to impress and so they contain many fine large grand rooms together with galleries and staircases. They are a beautiful eclectic mix of styles - many remaining truly medieval in their form, but many remodelled as elegant Georgian, Edwardian and Victorian homes - many a mix of everything.

Although the form of The Rows is medieval the buildings themselves have evolved through time. Many alterations and extensions from different periods - indeed, the 1970's brought us, on Watergate Street, a run of complete, then, contemporary reimagining of Rows buildings. Many of the Row galleries have disappeared from Lower Bridge Street - however, their form can still be recognised and are awaiting rediscovery.

The Rows are an enduring feature of this ancient city - evolving through time, finding new uses, being converted and reconverted, declining and regenerating. They are now going through a new round of evolution - reverting to their original residential and mixed-use beginnings.

The Rows remain at the heart of Chester's city life and they are now becoming much sought after and wonderful places to live - they are Chester's greatest opportunity - hidden in plain sight.

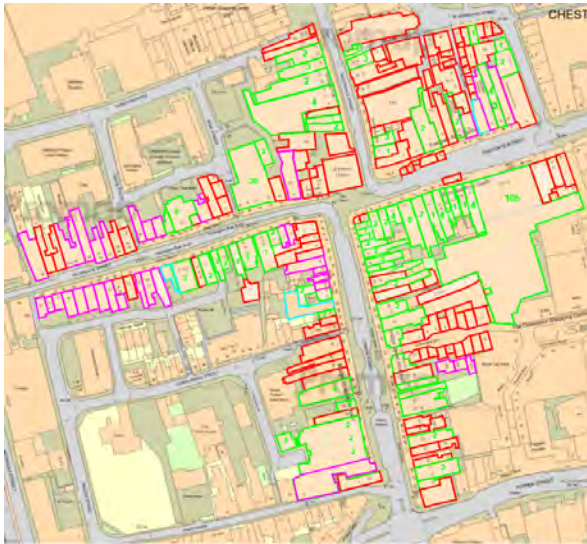


THE OPPORTUNITY

A TYPICAL CHESTER ROWS BUILDING – AS EXISTING

Here is an illustration from the pioneering 'Red Book' CHESTER – A STUDY IN CONSERVATION written by Donald Insall Associates in 1968 and published by Central Government. It sets the scene for the widely renowned and influential conservation led regeneration of Chester.

What it does show is that there are no two identical Rows Buildings in Chester, but it does illustrate some of their unique features – there is nowhere else in the world with such a complete active first floor level pedestrian walkway.



KEY:
Pink – Residential Apartments
Green – Suitable for Upper Floor Conversion
Blue – Under Development for Residential Conversion
Red – Not Suitable for Conversion

THE ROW – a street facing first floor, public walkway with access into commercial properties and residential accommodations. Each section is 'owned' by the building it runs through and the Rows are managed, lit, cleaned and kept safe by the Council.

The key elements of Rows buildings are:

- Stall Boards and Balustrade – between the Rows and the street.
- Row stairs - dotted along the streets, a variety of public access steps.
- Street level trading – a wide variety of shops, cafes, sometimes with early stone vaulting, sometimes lower than street level with stepped access along the Stall Boards.
- Rear level at Rows level – generally the rear of Rows properties is above street level at the same level as the Row.
- An inner staircase – normally there is a staircase within the centre of the building lit from above.
- Principal Rooms – street facing and immediately above the Rows.
- Rooms at First Floor, Rear and Second Floor – with historic plan forms and sometimes historic features, mainly at first floor.
- Many buildings also have an assortment of ad-hoc lean-to and outrigger structures to the rear which house services and sometimes outside amenity.



Most properties have well proportioned level rooms as they were ... dwellings

They have unique and highly sought after features such as original fire places

Stairs are often 'grand' in nature and will light with natural light

Many have traditional truss and rafter roofs making using the roof volume a prime opportunity for extra floor area



Extract from Chester A Study in Conservation

A TYPICAL ROWS BUILDING – THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Each Rows building has its own character, idiosyncrasies and heritage sensitivities. The first step is always UNDERSTAND what you have. There is plenty of help around for this e.g. just ask this report's authors.

Armed with the knowledge of what is special and significant about the building – get creative!

Remember it is not IF? – it is HOW.

Even Grade I Listed buildings need to change in every generation to survive and thrive.

Interventions can have a positive heritage impact, for example a new Rows frontage, removing modern interventions.

Some themes are explained in the sketch drawing opposite.

HISTORIC FABRIC

Most buildings are listed, Grade I, II* or II and all are in the Conservation Area. New interventions must work around the significant, well researched historic elements and spaces in each building, but remember these are the element that will add the most value for the future user

ACCESS

Often a new door will be needed at Row level along with a corridor to reach the inner staircase and the rooms above which are awaiting new lives. It has been done before and only the late 20th century, early 21st century focus on Retail frontages and front of shop commercial value prevented earlier initiatives such as Living above the Shop from succeeding. Things are different now.

SHOP FRONT

Most Rows shop fronts are quite mundane and can and should be improved. There is a new shop front design guide that has been prepared for and published by the Council – see Appendix. The opportunity exists therefore to give an attractive front door for the accommodation upstairs at the same time as improving the retail/café offer onto the Rows. There is a typical before and after sketch on the following pages.

ROWS LEVEL COMMERCIAL

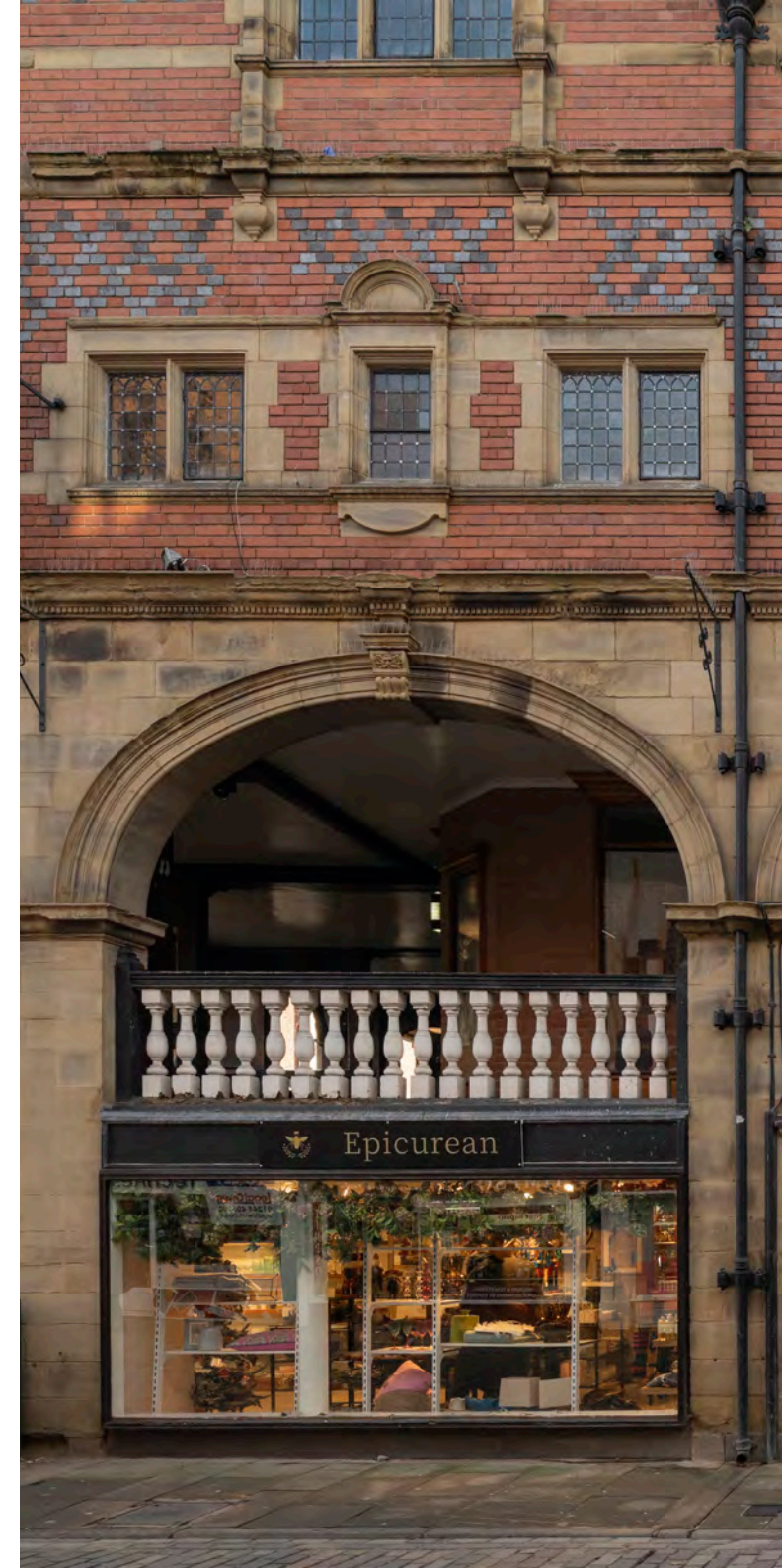
The shop/café may or may not require access to the rear of the property and there is normally an easy route around the stairwell.

STREET LEVEL SHOP

There are buildings that have stairs running down to street level but in most cases, these are now redundant. It is easy to secure, retain historic fabric and fireproof the division from street to low level.

THE STAIR

Most Rows building have interesting staircases that can be made even more attractive by careful repositioning of partitions, repair, redecoration and lighting.



FIRE SAFETY & MEANS OF ESCAPE

Many buildings have ad-hoc means of escape routes into or above neighbouring properties and these can remain, together with modern detection and protection systems including smoke venting of the stair and upgrading historic doors for fire resistances.

This is a key area to investigate as these are often single stair building but as the case studies show suitable roof top ventilation and modern detection and suppression systems can easily meet the requirements.

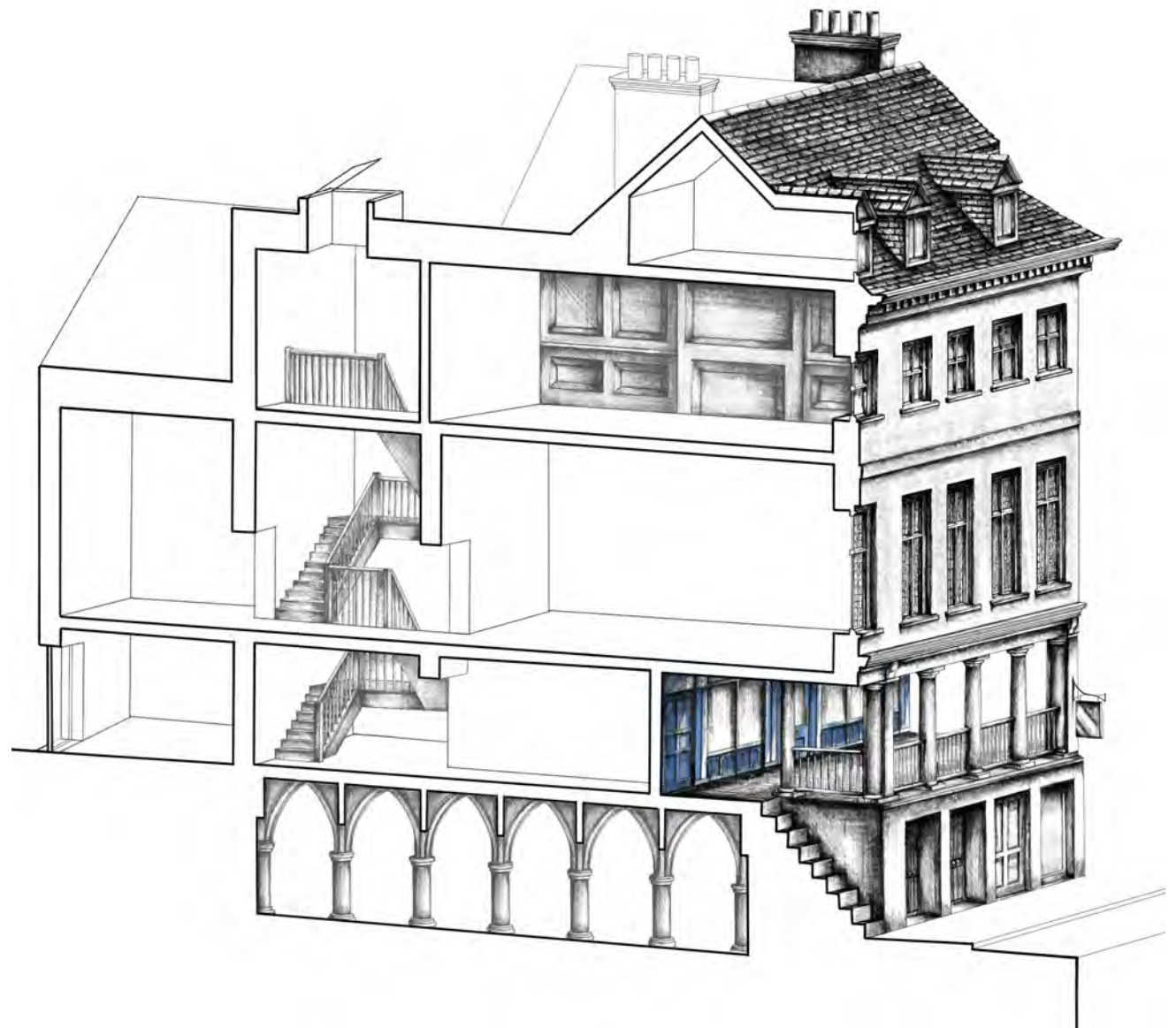
AT THE BACK

There is opportunity for more radical change at the rear of the buildings, including extensions, roof terraces, winter gardens and further access from the Rows level back of the building. It is hard to be definitive about this as each building is different, but it has been done before – just check out the case studies attached for some creative solutions.

ROOF

Most Rows buildings have slate roofs, in varying levels of repair. Gaining access for a new rear roof terrace can have the benefit of gaining access for maintenance – something that is near impossible in many buildings at the present time.

Many have traditional truss and rafter roofs making use of roof volume a prime opportunity to add extra floor area and value.



BIN COLLECTION

New residential will need space for bins, and most have existing collection points. Attractive bin stores will be essential to ensure that shared outdoor areas are free from clutter and mess.

CAR PARKING & BIKE PARKING

There is sometimes space for a car at the rear, but current policy will not require a new car parking space to be provided in the City Centre.

Chester is rapidly becoming a cycling city for city centre residents in particular who may not want to own a car. Provisions of attractive secure cycle storage at the rear of the properties will be important.

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY

A CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) payment will be required if any new residential units are created. There is opportunity to seek exemption.

BUILDING REGULATIONS AND LISTED BUILDING CONSENT

There is nearly always a need to show that building improvements are enacted as much as possible within the boundaries of Listed Building legislation. Secondary glazing not replacement of historic windows, roof insulation, floor upgrading for soundproofing are all relatively straight forward. One key principle is don't make anything worse than it is now and improve all aspects as much as possible.

SHARED COURTYARDS AND LANES

Many Rows buildings have upper or lower lanes from Row level or from the street. Many have shared rear service areas - some unused for this purpose. The opportunity should be taken to create Attractive sharedcourtyards and enhanced lane links - enhancing the usability of the buildings and creating wonderful secluded outdoor spaces for residents and businesses to enjoy.

Incorporating well designed cycle and bin storage areas into these spaces would further enhance the attractiveness to Rows buildings for residents as well as removing unsightly adhoc refuse bin clutter.

SERVICING

Again, starting with what you already have, the means of heating, plumbing, wiring and ventilation are all achievable, but maybe not to the equivalent level achieved, e.g. in thermal performance, in a new build house.

However there are many great solutions such as underfloor heating system design for historic properties, high performance low visual impact secondary glazing, recycled breathable insulation, WiFi linked fire detection systems electric fuelless water heating and many specialist paint solutions for fire protecting period timber and construction.



BATHROOMS AND KITCHENS

Subdivision of rooms, most likely at the rear of the building should avoid the more historic and attractive rooms and always leave the original plan form legible in some way e.g. honest modern partitions and leaving formal cornices and skirtings in-situ.

An attractive solution to providing these services, bathrooms and kitchens could well be achieved via the construction of a rear extension that would house these more intrusive activities without adversely affecting the historic buildings fabric or layout.





Rows Shopfront Existing



Rows Shopfront Proposed

THE HOW-TO

The most successful, more rewarding, most time-efficient and cost-efficient way of getting your project on site is to follow this roadmap.

- 1. UNDERSTAND** – get a historic building report for your building. There may be one in existence already and there is plenty of detailed research to reinforce the findings of a site inspection and analysis. This will be needed for a Listed Building consent anyway and much better for it to inform the detail of what you need to achieve than to try to justify it later.
- 2. EXISTING STATUS** – An accurate measured survey may already exist and commissioning an early set of plans, sections and elevations will prove invaluable.
- 3. CONCEPT** – Get a couple of ideas down on paper to assess viability and possibility. It is always good to have more than one solution so that ideas can be discussed with the Council's Conservation team and the right balance found between investment value and heritage value.
- 4. CONSULT** – The local Planning and/or Conservation team offers to give early advice, for larger schemes possibly think about a pre-app/paid for consultation. You will hear their “red, amber and green” signals firsthand on what is likely to be acceptable and thus experience a smoother ride through the planning process.
- 5. PLANNING APPLICATION** – Watch out for ecology, bats, bio-diversity net again and other sometimes conflicting policies and take advice, e.g. from the authors of this report, on what will be needed and get it organized early in the process. Bat surveys for instance can only be made at certain times of the year and lots of our heritage assets have this external details which make for great roosting places.
- 6. BUY THE RISK** – It can be worth the investment to make some early opening up to investigate e.g. structural condition and capacity of building elements. Check with the Conservation Officers first as major 'holes' could need separate Listed Building Consent but sensible opening up should be quite acceptable.
- 7. GET IT RIGHT** – Having fully 'oven ready' planning documentation from day one will save time and money. Seeking early specialist advice will not only mitigate risk/cost and save time but our experience is that you can add significant value to your project or bid that others will not see or have the experience to predict.

A Priority for Action – The One City Plan

In 2022 Chester's One City Plan (OCP) was reviewed and updated. This forms the framework for the reimagined place. Led by Cheshire West & Chester Council and developed in partnership the delivery of the One City Plan is a truly collaborative process with 5 key partner-led Working Groups.

This 'How to guide' is a key priority in the delivery of the OCP – and directly contributes to three of the OCP's 45 Actions:

- Getting more people living in the City Centre
- Investment in the City's historic fabric
- Reimagining the High Street.

Other essential policy references together with previous studies of The Rows are outlined in the Appendix.

Collaboration

The OCP is built upon collaboration. This guide has been developed by developers, investors and designers in collaboration with the Council to offer their insight and help to others seeking to invest in The Rows.

This is key – in seeking to invest in The Rows three points are important to make:

- Seek advice from local professionals who have successfully done it – they are willing to help and support you. It is not IF but HOW.
- Work collaboratively and positively with the Council's officers – they are committed to the imaginative reuse and conversion of Row buildings to mixed and residential use – they will help and guide you. Listen to what they have to say.

Imagination and Creativity

The key to reimagining Row buildings is imagination and creativity. Although their broad form is largely intact, iconic and easily recognisable; individual buildings are a glorious and eclectic layering of history – from their medieval origins to more modern interpretations. Many, although they may appear medieval, are, in fact largely Victorian structures. The more successful conversions have sought to imaginatively rediscover this layering of history as part of the design of new accommodation to create wonderful and unique living space that have genuine commercial value.

THE PROOF

Project Name: 19 Eastgate Row, Chester

Project Description: Conversion and change of use – 5 apartments

This proposal would return the long vacant upper floors to active re-use which is recognised as the best way to secure the upkeep and maintenance of listed buildings and reflects the original purpose of this upper part of the building...It is considered that the proposals have demonstrated special regard to the desirability of preserving the grade II listed building, its setting and features of special architecture or historic interest which it possesses.

Planning Reference: 21/00703/FUL & 21/00704/LBC



Project Name: 14-20 Watergate Street, Chester

Project Description: Change of use / conversion / extension to / part-demolition of for mixed-use development incorporating retail (Use Class A1) / residential (26 apartments - as amended) (Use Class C3) / food and beverage (Use Class A3)

As with any development proposed within a Conservation Area, the issue of quality of building standard and materials used is paramount in the consideration of such a proposal and its implementation on the ground.

Planning Reference: 16/00580/FU



Project Name: 11 Lower Bridge Street, Chester

Project Description: Change of use of existing offices and erection of rear extension to create 4 no. apartments on the 2nd and 3rd floors and creation of apartment on 4th floor. Retention of retail/coffee shop on ground and basement floors with 1st floor storage area and row level shop area and frontage

The proposed residential use reflects the original purpose of this upper part of the building. The traditional shop front is more appropriate for the Row level unit than the existing incongruous bay window. The proposal would encourage the public to access the Row which previously appeared as a semi-private place and its significance and contribution to the historic character of Chester under appreciated. This will be rectified by this proposal.

Planning Reference: 23/01395/FUL & 23/01396/LBC



Project Name: 22 Bridge Street, Chester

Project Description: Proposed conversion of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th floors of 22 Bridge Street. Proposed creation of 2 apartments and 8 hotel rooms. The refurbishment and upgrading of the Commonhall Street Social terraced area including the demolition of existing toilet block and storage areas to the rear and increasing of the height of the cellar room roof. Retention and refurbishment of the existing stand-alone ground floor shop. Proposed communal bin store in rear alleyway serving adjacent properties.

An opportunity exists for future re-development within the area to enhance the existing historic assets, enabling the development of a true sense of place. Building upon the unique historic environment within the Commonhall area, adjacent to the historic core, will provide an attractive environment that will persuade people to choose Commonhall Street as their preferred location for both their living and working needs.

Planning Reference: 23/03215/FUL & 23/03216/LB



THE POLICY STUFF

Do you need planning permission?

GDPO - use of permitted development rights for conversion to residential. Subject to limitations.

Class MA (Class E to Class C3)

Make **prior approval** application (56-days determination period)

Planning Application (& Listed Building consent where applicable).

Engage with the LPA through:

- Pre-application advice request
- Planning performance agreement (PPA)
- Historic England local planning advice service

CWAC are open for business – use the tools available to engage with them

Key material considerations

- Heritage conservation & adaptation
- Acoustics
- Access
- Parking
- Vacant Building Credit
- CIL (consider exemptions)
- Ecology (consider BNG de-minimis exemption)
- Public realm
- Waste
- Natural light
- Building Control
- Building Safety Act

If a Listed Building

or; **external changes** proposed

or; **Article 4** restrictions apply

Need to apply for **planning permission** (and **listed building consent** if listed building)

Principal Planning Policy

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
- Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)
- CWAC Local Plan (Part 1)
- CWAC Local Plan (Part 2)
- Supplementary Planning Documents
- Chester One City Plan
- Conservation Area Appraisals

Local Design Guidance

- Chester Rows Conservation Management Plan
- Chester Rows Design Guide
<https://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/asset-library/2022-Chester-Rows-Design-Guide.pdf>
- Chester Rows Gazetteer
<http://chester.westcheshiregrowth.co.uk/resources/>
- Chester Rows Heritage Action Zone Upper Floors Study
<http://chester.westcheshiregrowth.co.uk/projects/heritage-action-zone/rows-upper-floors/>

Seek **local professional help** from those with tried & tested experience.

- Cassidy + Ashton
- Donald Insall Associates
- Openhome

We hope you found this outline guide useful and that it has generated a passion and interest / desire to invest in Chester's amazing heritage and create unique and desirable homes for the future residents of the City which will play a part in its ever-evolving history and way of life. The document aims to foster a can-do attitude to investment in our great City – it is not about solving all the problems now but in creating an inspirational framework for the renaissance of Chester's great heritage as we move back to a city for residents. As you will now see there is no one size fits all solution here, the City's historic fabric is so rich and diverse – but there is a tried and tested framework for success which you can make your own and allow you to deliver something truly unique to the cities future residents. We are here to help, we are passionate about our City and passionate about creating lasting, creative an unique solutions.





Tony Barton - Donald Insall Associates
Tony.Barton@insall-architects.co.uk

Guy Evans - Cassidy + Ashton
guyevans@cassidyashton.co.uk

Tony Swindells - Openhome
tony@openhome.uk

Andy Farrall
andyfarrallimited@gmail.com

Donald Insall Associates
Chartered Architects and Historic Building Consultants

Cassidy+Ashton C+A
www.cassidyashton.co.uk
Architecture + Building Surveying + Town Planning

openhome

ANDY FARRALL LIMITED
GROWTH - REGENERATION - URBAN DESIGN - DEVELOPMENT - GOVERNMENT - STRATEGIC ADVICE