

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Chester Civic Trust Awards 2023

Members of the Chester Civic Trust (CCT) have excelled this year with a total of 92 nominations. 49 Bad/Ugly nominations were submitted together with 43 Good nominations. All categories included an interesting mix of nominations; once again it was good to see some from outside the City. There were 2 nominated projects which the Judges declined to consider this year. The first is the retail/leisure part of the Northgate Development; so many of the units are empty or being fitted out that it still looks unfinished. The second is Chester Zoo's Nature Recovery Corridor where work is still ongoing. We expect both these projects will be ready for consideration next year and expect nominations to be submitted.

This year we will start with the **Bad and Ugly** nominations. Sadly, the vast majority of these are for dilapidations and the lack of maintenance/repair. The Judges have divided these into 3 categories. As usual CCT members have taken the time to explain their nominations and much of the comments below are in their words.

The first category is the '*Hardy Perennials*' these are the buildings which are nominated year after year as Bad or Ugly. We make no apology for including them again and hope that at least some of them can be removed from this list soon.

The Flat Sheds and Dry Dock/Graving Dock in the Canal Basin

They are both Listed, Grade II and are an important part of Chester's mid C19 canal complex.

The Flat Sheds were formerly used for building flat (broad) canal boats and later as a fish warehouse. In separate private ownership to the adjacent boatyard building, it has been vacant and neglected for years and is now in serious disrepair. The building retains its original framed structure behind the breeze-block exterior, cast iron columns supporting lattice girders. Blue brick infill survives at the northern corners of the building. This is a building with a wide range of potential uses in an area with a lively and imaginative community but sadly it stands as a sad and decaying element within Chester Canalside scene.

One of the oldest working dry docks in the country, this building is fenced off and in a declining state of repair. Until quite recently it was in full commercial use for boat maintenance, it has obvious roofing defects and has fallen into redundancy. Once a vibrant attraction for Canalside visitors and a useful facility for the boating fraternity it seems in dire need of structural repair and re-slating.



Flat Shed



Dry Dock

St Olaves and the former Quicks Building, Lower Bridge Street

The elevated front yard/ forecourt of the church has been propped-up for years making it both Bad and Ugly. The scaffolding and supports holding up the sandstone retaining wall devalue the site, as well as detract from the rich heritage and variety of architecture on Lower Bridge Street.

The former Quicks building, referred to in Pevsner's Guide as 'a nasty 1960s block', has been nominated because of the ongoing empty and neglected state of this large (out-of-scale) building. It has a massive footprint and elevation and, consequently, a large negative impact as a vacant and deteriorating edifice. This deserves to be flagged-up as Bad and Ugly until the building's present state is resolved. In an ideal world this would be a site to develop some sympathetic 21st Century architecture that adds to Chester's architectural heritage.



St Olaves



Quicks

Dee House

This has been a controversial site for many, many years, but we believe it deserves to be flagged-up again as Bad and Ugly until its present derelict and unsightly state (and the impasse over its fate) is resolved. With lack of agreement and resources, a solution may not be easy, but it is clearly a mess. The building is an eye-sore in a pivotal location. It is highly visible from important attractions including the City Walls, Roman Gardens and Amphitheatre as well as from the Inner Ring Road, a major route through the city. Goodness knows what tourists think about it! It detracts from Chester being an historic city, attractive because of its heritage.



Dee House

Off The Wall, Pepper Street

The shoddy state of the building has recently been addressed in some measure as part of its refurbishment. While the lower building appears to have had a new roof, the higher part of the premises (especially its roof area) remains an eye-sore with some broken panes, some boarded-up windows, some windows covered by loose flapping fabric and with vegetation growing out of areas of the brickwork. It is likely that the gutters and downpipes on this part of the building are still leaking. This building occupies an important location. The proximity of such a dilapidated structure must adversely impact visitor's impression of Chester and enjoyment of walking on the City Walls. Not repairing the whole building properly seems a missed opportunity.



Off The Wall

Our second category is the **City Walls**, another regular visitor to these awards.

Collapsed Section of the City Wall

The lack of progress with the repair and restatement of this section of the wall is very disappointing. Surely this work could have commenced by now.



Collapsed City Wall and Hoarding

The Recorder's Steps

The support structure under The Recorder's Steps has been in place for an inexcusable number of years now. The state of the Walls either side of the steps is also deplorable. This can't impress the thousands of tourists that promenade along the Groves every summer.



The Recorder's Steps



Rufus Court



St Martin's Gate

Scaffolding Support

This scaffolding has been in place behind Rufus Court for so long that they could almost be a heritage feature in its own right! It must be not far off 20 years since this was first erected, and it is an eyesore for anyone walking along the Walls towards the Northgate.

St Martin's Gate

The steps here have been propped-up for many years providing an image of neglect and lack of maintenance. St Martin's Gate is a key feature on the Inner Ring Road and on the City Walls and therefore occupies a prominent location with people passing both in vehicles and on foot. Furthermore, the sweep of these steps approximates the rounded north-eastern angle of the Roman fortress, which is otherwise marked out in the pavement below the stairs but hidden by the security fencing, scaffolding and supports. The gate (opened in 1966) could also be considered as an important (and, arguably, elegant) example of Chester's mid-20th Century architecture and part of Chester's transport history and the evolution of the City Walls.

The third category is **New Nominations** for buildings desperately in need of repair and maintenance.

Diocesan House, Raymond Street

One half of this substantial building was built by Thomas Telford as the Canal Tavern for use by passengers to and from Liverpool via the new Ellesmere Canal; not to be confused with today's Telford's Warehouse, next door. By contrast the other, slightly later half was used as the offices of

the Ellesmere Canal Company. Both elements are Listed, at Grade II. They have been vacant and neglected for some years, but their condition is now visibly declining, to the point where a new use is becoming urgent. The building would appear to be eminently convertible to new uses.



Diocesan House

Facade of Lecture Theatre of Independent Church and adjacent Garden, Queens Place

The relocated façade for of the Lecture Theatre is sadly in need of cleaning and repair. The adjacent garden area has also been badly neglected. The façade and garden used to form a pleasant end to Queen's Place and screens off the adjacent Tesco service yard. It can be glimpsed from the canal towpath.



Façade and Garden

Artillery Store and Adjacent Area, Chester Castle

This building and its adjacent area are immediately next to the City Walls, a key Chester attraction. People using the wall walkway are confronted by the unsightly derelict state of the former Artillery Store and neighbouring structures together with the overgrown and unkempt land in front of them. The Artillery Store is a 19th century sandstone building which in more recent times had been used as a store for Cheshire County Council. While resource and ownership issues could be among the constraints to improve this site, it could be developed through imaginative adaptive reuse and landscaping including possibly opening this area onto the City Walls.



Artillery Store

Finally in this section is the **New Market Car Park** which received 7 nominations as either Bad or Ugly.

Comments in the nomination forms included the following:

- Possibly the best, most prominent site in Chester with wonderful views over to the North Wales hills and they put a car park on it!
- We should be trying to discourage people from driving into the centre of the City and using 'greener' forms of transport or even 'Park and Ride'. The inner ring road has very high pollution levels in places and this development will inevitably encourage more cars on to it.
- It is overbearing and dominant.
- The new car park is totally out of scale for Chester and the massing is excessive. It is far too high by at least two floors.
- There has been no attempt to blend in with the slope by indenting higher decks, it wipes out all vistas from one of the best sites for viewing the Welsh hills in Chester.
- The materials used are alien to the City.

Whilst Judges in general agreed with these views they also noted that it had been nominated in the Good section of these awards as an easy to use car park (by far the best in Chester) and for the provision of a large number of charging stations. They also commented that its location is very convenient for Storyhouse but lamented the lack of a joined-up transport strategy for the City.

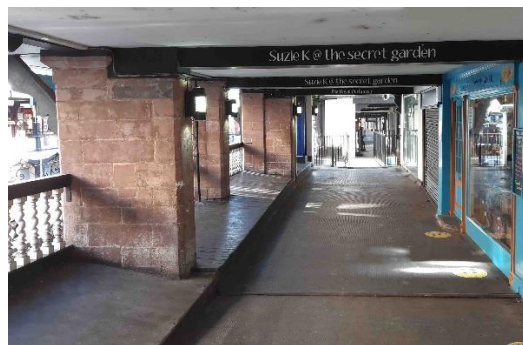


New Market Car Park

Moving on, the Judges enjoyed looking at the Good nominations and agreed to award a Chair's Special Award, 4 Awards and 2 Commendations.

The Chair's Special Award goes to The Regeneration of The Rows

The regeneration of The Rows during 2022 is a tribute to the partnership of all involved, whether it be the Council, the Architects, BID, or the owners of the cafes, bars and shops. The work sympathetically undertaken by the Contractors includes the careful repair and redecoration of Chester's unique historic asset with much improved lighting colour and levels. Bearing in mind the Bad/Ugly dilapidations mentioned above it is great to see some restorative maintenance being done on these important assets; long may it continue.



The Rows

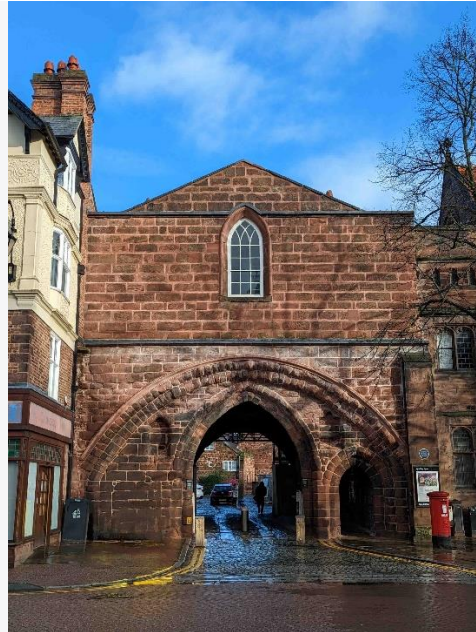
The Awards go to the following buildings.

The Abbey Gateway

This medieval structure overlooking Town Hall Square and providing access to Abbey Square is grade 1 listed. However, in recent years it has looked very neglected and in poor repair with, for example, weeds growing out of its distinctive red sandstone masonry. Over 2022 it has been repaired and restored befitting its historic significance and prime location. Hopefully such maintenance sets an example to encourage work on other buildings across the city.



Before



After

Abbey Gateway

The Former Post Office Building, St John Street

Armstrong Partnership have created over 14,000 square feet of studio and office space spanning four floors. They stripped out the building, which involved peeling back decades of alterations and taking the building back to a blank canvas which consisted of original brick, steel and timber elements. Within the building new spaces have been created to help the business grow by encouraging the team to work as one, whilst also being sympathetic to the history of the property. The Judges particularly liked the sympathetic restoration of the street façade and the new walls, railings and steps. It is good to see a city centre building brought back into use when so many are empty and deteriorating.



Former Post Office, now Armstrong Partnership Building

Blacon Parade and adjacent Housing

This project consists of the refurbishment of existing dwellings, new build family homes and 1 and 2 bedroom sheltered housing apartments. The existing parade was refurbished, and a new Primary Care Centre and Pharmacy was constructed. There is also a Community Development Centre with Library and a Business Enterprise Building to aid the growth of new local businesses. A new play area, paved areas and road are also provided.

The Judges particularly liked the design of the new housing.



Blacon Parade and Housing

We were pleased to see several nominations in the new section Environment/Climate Change. From these the Judges chose 'It Shouldn't be in the Dee' to receive an Award. They also want to mention the solar panels on the Cathedral roof and the green, sustainable policy of Hoole Food Market.



We just had to include this photo of blessing the solar panels



Hoole Food Market

It Shouldn't Be in the Dee

The Welsh Dee Trust is an environmental charity seeking to restore waters across the Dee Catchment. Despite its name, this covers both Wales and England. Over 2022 the Trust has been particularly active on the River Dee (and the brooks and streams draining into it) around Chester through its 'It shouldn't Be in the Dee' initiative. This includes volunteer-based litter picks and citizen science pollution monitoring plus educational events. Citizen science pollution monitoring has included measuring phosphate levels and micro-plastic pollution, with volunteer training sessions held in Caldý Nature Park and the Countess Country Park. The micro-plastics monitoring is supported by laboratory testing at the University of Chester and feeds into a postgraduate research

programme. The litter picking has included 25 sessions along the river from Eccleston to Saltney. Locations include Cop Park, the Cop in Saltney, the muddy banks next to Castle Drive, Finchett's Gutter and Edgar's Field Park. There have also been paddleboarding sessions to access rubbish floating in the river and otherwise hard to reach areas along the channel margins. Across all these litter picks, 140 individuals collected a total of 265 bags of litter. The initiative is highlighting the issue of water pollution and littering around Chester. It's interesting to note how many members of the public say 'well done' when they pass a litter-picking session.



It Shouldn't Be in the Dee Volunteers

The 2 Commendations are:

It is good to see nominations for new small businesses within the City Centre. These included Huxley's Coffee Shop, The Naughty Badgers Coffee House and Bistro, The Neighbourhood Bakery and The Cheese Wedge.

Sadly, we can give only one commendation, and this goes to the **Art House Café, Bridge Street**

This is a welcome independent addition to the centre of town, providing both an extremely pleasant café and various art and craft workshops. Workshops include letterpress printing using traditional equipment. The establishment is based in Cowper House (with its 1664 timber-framed frontage), which has been very tastefully refurbished. The 14th century rib-vaulted undercroft (in the 20th Century referred to as 'Booklands Crypt') has become an attractive main space for workshops and includes a large collection of woodblocks for printing. Traditional printing machines are also on display and used in workshops. Therefore, it is very much more than a café by also offering things to see and do. The main café is at Row level and has access to the Row walkway thus helping to open-up what has been an underutilised section of Chester's unique Rows system.



Art House Cafe

Chester Cathedral Pilgrims Porch

The new doors installed inside the historic main doors to the west front of the cathedral are not only interesting but also allow visitors to the city to see the view of the cathedral nave, inviting them into the building. The view is particularly stunning at night when there is an event on in the cathedral. Sadly, the doors are not open to the general public and some Judges found them over fussy. The floor finish between the glass doors and the main West door seems out of keeping. Despite this Judges were happy to give this project a Commendation.



The Pilgrim's Porch



In addition to myself the Judges this year were Steve Wright, Graham and Sarah Catlin, Sue Denly, Eileen Willshaw and Michael Scammell. They all have my thanks for their time and commitment visiting and providing insightful comments on the nominations.

Peter Hadfield