

**Michael Plane, a member of Chester Civic Trust Council for the past two years, records his impressions of Cardiff and Chichester and provides some personal views on their relevance to Chester .....**

### **A TALE OF THREE CITIES – A SHORT PERSONAL ACCOUNT!**

Over recent weekends I have had occasion to visit three cities. Each one has faced the same issues and problems over recent years, and managed the solutions in different ways.

The three cities coincidentally all begin with the letter 'C' – Cardiff, Chester and Chichester.

Cardiff – historic capital of Wales, county town of Glamorgan. University city. The population of the city itself is recorded at just over 345,000, and the wider urban zone is home to 860,000. Cardiff is the most popular visitor destination in Wales with visitor numbers in excess of 18m pa.

Chester – historic county town of Cheshire. University city. The population of the city itself is 120,000, and of the new Cheshire West and Chester administrative area 328,000. 8 million visitors per year visit the city, supporting one in ten jobs and generating £800m pa.

Chichester – historic Cathedral & University city. The population is considerably smaller at just over 23,000. 800,000 visitors spent 3.15million nights in the city. The total number of visitors to the city totals around 6.3m pa.

I visited Chichester first, to visit friends and to attend the Cathedrals Group Universities Choir Festival. I was immediately impressed with how unified and co-ordinated the city centre was. Paving was well maintained and consistent. Repairs and maintenance had been undertaken carefully and with appropriate materials. There was clearly a degree of planning control over shop-front design and a palette of colours used which both co-ordinated with the natural materials of the buildings, but also with each other. The Co-Operative, Santander and Vodafone all had white painted frontages with their corporate-styling limited to the physical lettering of their signage. This seems to be being introduced across the city centre as opportunity arises, and creates a sense of a managed shopping centre as achieved in the under-cover and outlet retail environments. On-street parking was managed carefully but was not excluded from the central core, and leisure uses carefully integrated into the street-scene. There was a sense of peace, order and of a city that was loved and in which the residents took great pride. Despite competition from Portsmouth (including major outlet village offer at Gunwharf Quays), the retail offer appeared successful and vibrant, with a mix of distinctive local retail, national chains and designer brands. Very few units sit vacant.

Cardiff has seen a significant renaissance over the last 20 years. The redevelopment of the waterfront, cultural offer at the Millennium Centre, sporting offer at Cardiff Arms Park, and location of the Welsh Assembly in the city have all contributed to creating a vibrant, cosmopolitan, European city centre. All the major national chains are present, in purpose built and adapted Victorian premises. What was most interesting to me was the vibrancy of the Arcades and Market. The city has numerous glazed Victorian arcades accessed off the main shopping streets. These arcades have limited visibility from the high street, and host numerous small retail, restaurant and bar premises – mostly occupied by local traders. The really interesting thing to me was that these arcades are all managed environments, with carefully selected tenant mix, collectively providing a distinctive draw and generating footfall. There was a consistency in finishes – paving/flooring, lighting, and decoration, again giving a

sense of the environments created in purpose-built modern outlet centres. Very, very few units were vacant. What a contrast to our own Rows, but surely worth learning from.

Chester – our own beautiful, historic and unique city. So much going for it – location looking out to the Clwydian hills, the riverside, the walls walk and of course the Rows. The city is a foreign visitor's vision of a perfect English city. However, times have become hard for our once great city. We have plunged down the retail rankings and competition has become stiff from our neighbouring big-city rivals – themselves revitalised - Liverpool's Liverpool One, Manchester's City Centre and Trafford Centre, and of course Cheshire Oaks, Broughton Retail Park and the revitalised Wrexham town centre facilities closer to home.

I was encouraged to read of the appointment of a new 'town centre manager' for Chester and of the proposal to create a Business Improvement District in the city centre area. This is to be funded through a proposed levy of a 1% charge on top of Business Rates for those who occupy premises with a Rateable Value in excess of £18,000. As others have said, in order to be truly successful this initiative needs to engage with all stakeholders – in particular those who own the freehold interests in our city centre buildings. They need to begin to see that the future of their balance sheet investment will be better secured by directly engaging with the wider city in which their investments are situated, and that this generates footfall and value. Their prolonged disinterest in anything other than the bottom line is harming our city, and in turn their own investment return. With complex, corporate and pension-fund ownerships this will be a significant challenge.

Our beautiful Rows need to become vibrant, appealing and attractive to visitors and locals – I would encourage all those involved in considering the future of the city to walk the Rows with a truly open mind and with open eyes – the cracked and uneven, poor quality paving, poor cleaning regimes (look up above you at the cobwebs and the grime!), antisocial behaviour, and high levels of vacancy are all self-perpetuating, and relatively easy to resolve if all the stakeholders can be brought together for the benefit of their investments.

We need to be able to offer the visitor a wider range of evening activities – perhaps following the European model – with shops and boutiques open to attract them to leave their hotel and B&B rooms and to create wealth and vibrancy. Cheshire Oaks is open into the evening and provides options for both visitors and locals who are unable to get into the city centre, as they commute and work long hours during the week, to browse and spend, dine and relax at their leisure. Visitors can drive in easily and park, for free, close to the shops they wish to access. Unless they wish to buy groceries in Chester city centre, they currently have not got the option of enjoying the ability to choose Chester over Cheshire Oaks should they wish to shop after work. Our city centre can become busy and vibrant, and as successful as the outlet villages, but the authorities, landlords and tenants of city centre premises need to look closely at what makes those venues successful, and take them on at their own game.

We all love Chester – which is why we are involved in organisations such as the Civic Trust – and long for it to become as successful and as vibrant as it once was, and to cease the spread of vacancy on our high streets and Rows. Lets work together to influence those who have the ability to make the changes to turn the tide!

Michael Plane BSc (Hons) MRICS