

4.5 E. St John's

Character Area Assessment

Location

The St John's area lies to the immediate east of the walled city, between Foregate Street to the north and the River Dee to the south. The area includes St. John's Church and Grosvenor Park.

Sub-Areas

The character area is broken down into the following sub-areas:

- **E1. The Groves West** – the riverside frontage west of Queens Bridge.
- **E2. The Groves East** – the riverside east of Queens Bridge.
- **E3. Grosvenor Park** – the Park itself.
- **E4. Roman Gardens** – the open landscaped area alongside the walls.
- **E5. Amphitheatre** – the historic site and surrounding buildings, including St John's Church.
- **E6. Union Street** – Vicar's Lane and Union Street.
- **E7. St John Street** – the street between Foregate Street and the Amphitheatre.
- **E8. Grosvenor Park Road/Bath Street** – two streets north of the Park.



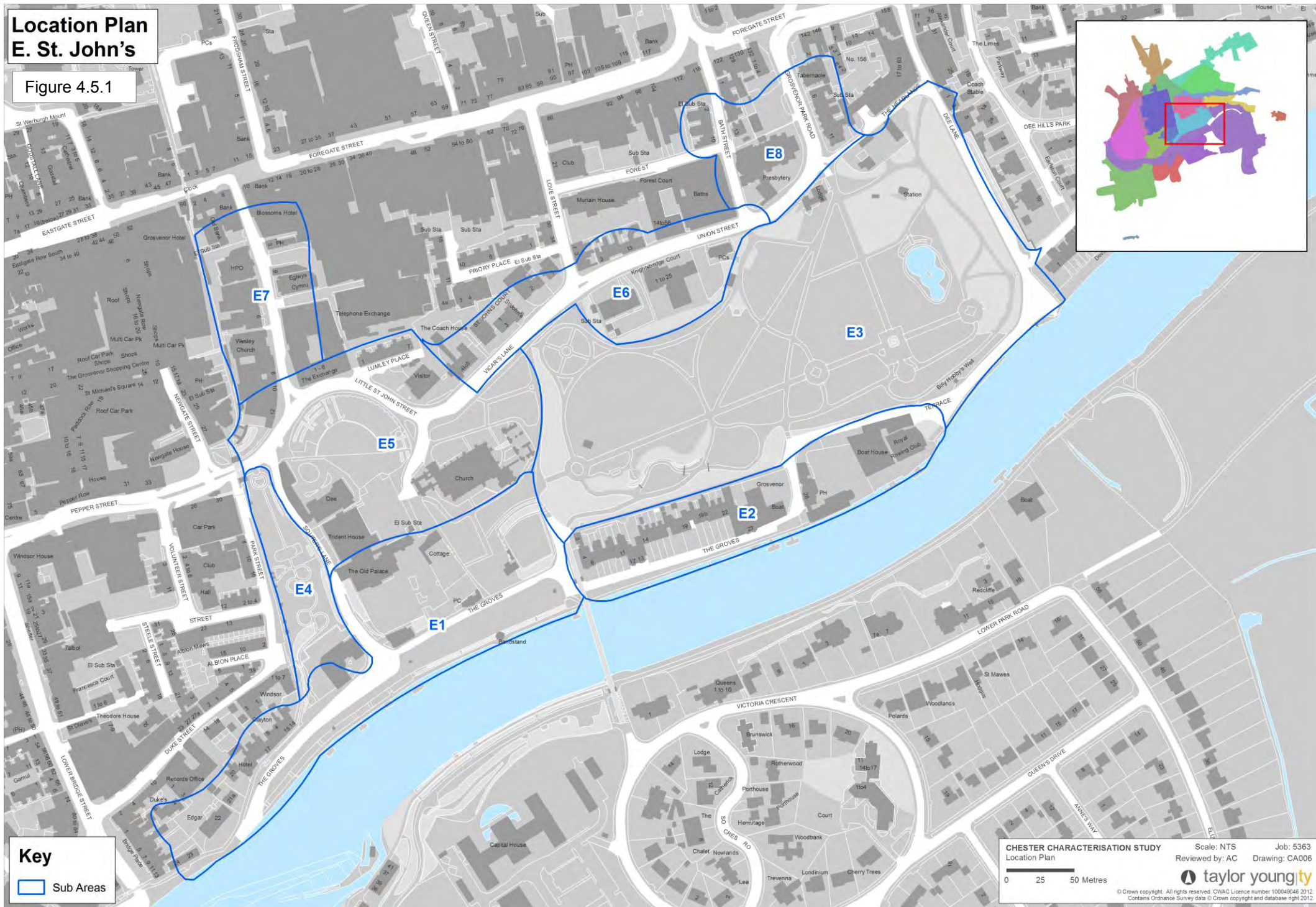
Grosvenor Park (E3)



The Groves East (E2)

Location Plan E. St. John's

Figure 4.5.1



Historical Development

Historic mapping shows that this area has changed very little in its street form over the last 500 years. The most historic feature is the Amphitheatre, which dates back to the Roman era. Braun's 1581 Plan shows St John's church lying outside the City Walls in its current position. Foregate Street and St John Street can be made out on this plan. By 1789 development on all of today's streets existed, including the riverside frontage. The area to the east of St John's remained as open fields until the late 19th century, when Grosvenor Park was created in this space. The site of the amphitheatre was previously built upon until it was rediscovered and restored in the 20th century. The only significant change in the street form was the introduction of the Grosvenor Park Road / amphitheatre route as a key traffic corridor, although this did largely follow existing historic streets.

Development only extended to the south of the River in the late 19th century. Queens Bridge, the Suspension Bridge joining The Groves with Queens Park was rebuilt in 1923 (replacing a structure from 1852) and steps lead from here up to St John's Church.

As this section will explain, the area has a long history, despite lying outside of the walls. The Romans, Saxons and Normans all founded important buildings here, although the area lay outside the walled city of their times. In the 18th and 19th centuries this area, overlooking the riverside, and later Grosvenor Park, was a popular location for the gentry to build houses (for example Dee House and St John's House – demolished to facilitate excavation of the amphitheatre; a walkway between these properties led directly down to the riverside. Today it retains the character of important uses serving the city from a location just outside the walls. In this way its history provides it with a special character.

The Amphitheatre

The first amphitheatre on this site was built soon after the establishment of the Roman fortress itself, sometime in the late 70s AD. From that time, it stayed in constant use until its final abandonment around the year 350 AD. There is evidence that it underwent numerous structural modifications and alterations during this long period.

According to the standard plan of Roman legionary fortresses, which was followed wherever possible, an amphitheatre was typically situated outside the walls, generally located close to the south-east corner. Chester follows this pattern.



Roman carving, recovered at Newgate in 1736

Of the 19 known amphitheatres in Britain, Chester's is one of only three known to have been developed as part of legionary fortresses. This 'military' type of amphitheatre, of which Chester's is the largest, had a greater arena area in proportion to its seating compared to those of civil settlements. They were mainly used for military training, but were also opened to the civilian population for 'recreations' (*spectacula*) such as bull baiting, cock fighting and mock hunts. Amphitheatres were also used for the public execution of criminals, both military and civilian, and for the celebration of state and religious special events. These latter would

have featured gladiatorial combat (*munera*). A relief carving on slate, found nearby in Newgate Street, showing a *retiarius*- a gladiator who fought with a trident and net, would seem to confirm that this type of activity went on here.

The Amphitheatre's massive exterior wall stood 40 feet (11.5 metres) above the Roman street level, around twice the average present height of the City Walls. The interior wall facing the arena stood twelve feet high and the arena itself measured 190 by 160 feet (58m by 49m).

In the centre of the amphitheatre arena a series of postholes set into narrow gullies (hidden from view) suggest the possible presence of a timber platform of some kind, possibly a scaffold. This structure may have been temporary, being erected only when required (it was this structure that encouraged the original assumption that the original amphitheatre had been timber-built).

What became of the amphitheatre after the withdrawal of the Legions is unknown. Later the site would doubtless have proved a valuable source of quality building stone and other materials, such as for the construction of nearby St John's Church. The alignment of medieval streets around the site show that the presence of the ruins long proved an obstacle to the development of the road system in this area. Little St John Street, for example, has for centuries followed its semi-circular course around the site.

The site of the amphitheatre seems to have long remained an open area where the citizens came to congregate, play and worship, becoming slowly filled in by natural erosion and its sometime use as a refuse dump. The arena was still visible as a shallow depression in the ground as late as 1710, when **Dee House** was built over the site.

On the plan below can be seen the open area in a detail from Alexander De Lavaux's 1745 map of Chester. Below it, Dee House, set in its

extensive gardens, is seen in the centre and labelled "Mr Comberback's". The curved road, following the ancient line of the outer wall of the amphitheatre, links St. John's Lane (now St. John Street) and Vicar's Lane (here called Church Lane).



Lavaux's Map, 1745

Within half a century, the northern half of the site had disappeared under houses and the remains of the monument beneath quickly became lost to memory. It disappeared so completely that in 1889 W. Thompson Watkin, in his influential 'Roman Cheshire' wrote, "*There remains the interesting question, where was the amphitheatre? A station or castrum of the dimensions of Deva would certainly have one*".

A classics teacher at the Chester King's School, WJ Williams, had long argued for the amphitheatre's existence. In June 1929, while examining a pit dug in the grounds of the Ursuline Convent, he observed massive pieces of masonry and immediately realised that this was indeed the site

of the vanished amphitheatre. The half-excavated Chester Amphitheatre was eventually opened to the public in August 1972. The public realm and interpretation at the Amphitheatre has recently been further enhanced and the site remains a valuable and well used educational resource.

Church of St John the Baptist

The sandstone Church of St John the Baptist is in fact the surviving portion of Chester's first cathedral. The old church's appearance is now very different: the tall Gothic tower collapsed in 1881 and the church was substantially rebuilt by John Douglas in the 1880s but earlier elements survive and St John's remains the best example of 11-12th century church architecture in Cheshire. To the immediate east are medieval ruins of the earlier structure.



Medieval ruins at St John's Church

It is recorded that the Saxon church that first stood on this site was founded by King Aethelred of Mercia in about the year 689 AD. A

later Aethelred, Earl of Mercia and husband of Aethelflaeda, daughter of Alfred the Great rebuilt and enlarged the church in the early 10th century, as part of their re-fortification of the City, which included the radical enlargement of its walls and establishing it as the centre of a long line of 'burhs' to protect the northern frontier of Mercia from the Danes.

Within a decade of the arrival of the Normans Peter de Leia, Bishop of Lichfield, head of a vast diocese comprising most of the former Saxon Kingdom of Mercia, transferred his See from Lichfield to Chester. This was the result of an order that Bishops should reside in the cities of greatest importance within their respective dioceses. In 1075, he proceeded to erect a great cathedral on the site occupied by Aethelred's humble church. The old Saxon building was cleared, a platform cleared and the church was laid out on the classic plan of Norman cathedrals.

Peter's successor was Robert de Limesey. He was less enthusiastic about the project and about the situation of Chester (on the Welsh border) in general and moved the See to Coventry. Hence in 1102 St John's lost its Cathedral status. Nevertheless, for several centuries after, the bishops continued to occasionally style themselves 'Bishop of Chester' and a palace was maintained near the unfinished church, immediately to the south of the present Bishop's Palace.

After the move, work on the great church was largely abandoned, the nave lying open to the sky for nearly a century until around 1190, and did not approach a state of completion until sometime in the late 13th century. Nearly four and a half centuries were to pass before the Norman Benedictine Abbey of St Werburgh would become Chester Cathedral instead.



St John's Church and the River Dee (painting from 1855)

St John's church later played an important role in the Civil War siege of the Chester in 1645, when it was the last Royalist outpost in the country. The Parliamentarians captured the Church and used its high tower as an observation post, siting an artillery battery in the churchyard which breached the City Walls.

Grosvenor Park

Evidence of quarrying during the Roman period has been found in the area of Grosvenor Park and The Groves. This could well have later provided sandstone for the construction of St John's church. Earthenware pipes have also been found across the park area, which once provided fresh water to the Roman fortress from Boughton. The wealth of Roman material found here in excavations in 2007 have led to suggestions that a separate military establishment could have existed here, before the

fortress was built, and that this was later part of the Roman settlement outside of the walls. Throughout the medieval period this area was probably used for agriculture under the control of St John's.

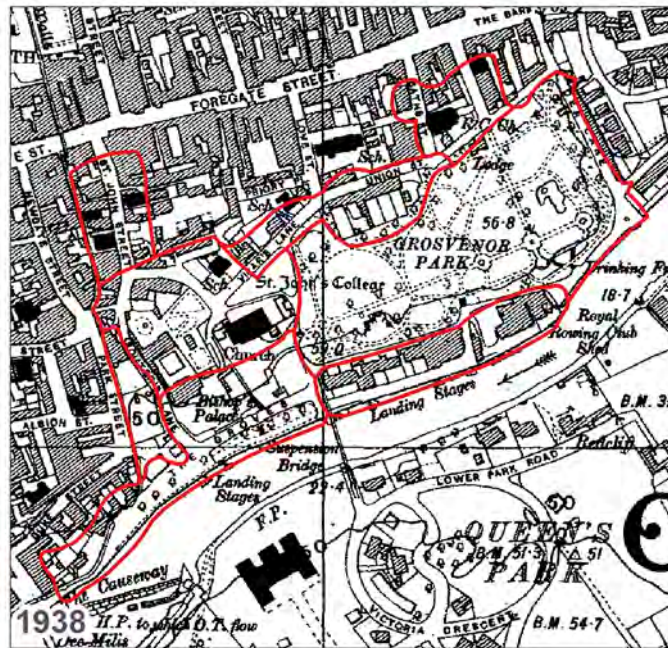
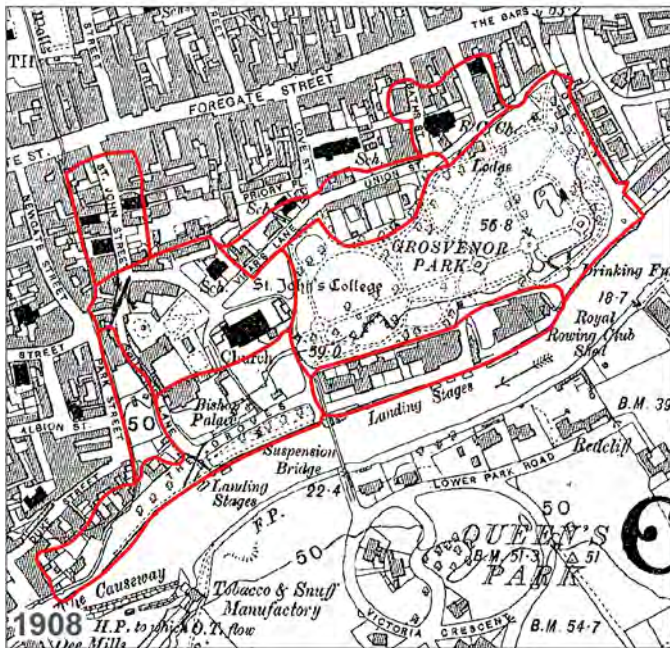
In 1864 agents for the Marquess of Westminster acquired land in this area with the aim of creating a park. River views were considered important. Grosvenor Park was laid out by Edward Kemp at the expense of the 2nd Marquis of Westminster in 1865-67. The Park was opened to the public in 1867. Various changes and additions have been made to the Park in the years since but it has kept its historic layout and provides a fine landscape with formal and more picturesque routes running through.



Kemp's 1864 Plan for the Park

Historical Development E. St. John's

Figure 4.5.2



Land-uses

Most of the area is in a recreation/cultural use. This includes Grosvenor Park, but also activities such as the boathouse and promenade on the riverside and the public baths on Union Street. The amphitheatre, visitor centre and Roman Gardens also fall into this category, as well as having an educational function. Other than this there is residential (as well as a cafés and public houses) on The Groves and residential north of the Park, and important institutional uses: St John's Church and St Werburgh's RC Church on Bath Street. St John Street has the role of a secondary City Centre street with a variety of finer grain City Centre uses and some still considerable footfall.

Urban Form

The urban form of the area is still derived from its historical development. Many buildings in the area were historically associated with the St John's Church, including the former school, Old Palace, Former Rectory and Church Hall on Vicar's Lane and the almshouses on Lumley Place. The Roman Gardens, Amphitheatre, St John's churchyard and Grosvenor Park in effect combine to create an east-west series of open spaces with a special importance in the cultural life of the City. This effect is heightened by the links to the River. The riverside sits at a lower level but there are well used links southward and views outward to the River, especially from the Park, which plays an important role in defining this pleasant, open character. The change in level creates a different and distinct environment at the riverside itself. This is also a special environment, with attractive buildings, views of the river and across it to fine buildings on the opposite side. Queens Park Bridge is a major feature that provides a special role in the area: linking it to the south bank, increasing its importance and use whilst retaining its quiet character. It is also an impressive landmark on The Groves, increasing its sense of place. In general this is a popular place where the people of Chester go to relax and enjoy themselves.

To the north of the Park development faces the open space across streets. This creates a strong frontage to the Park itself, and provides visual amenity to these buildings. There are some particularly fine residential buildings on Grosevnor Park Road and Bath Street. St Werburgh's Church provides a strong landmark as the road sweeps round past the Park. The City Walls provide a strong visual feature to the east, especially as the land falls away at the Roman gardens. Newgate is a strong visual gateway to the walled city.

In general, buildings (other than those that sit within their own grounds) front the back of pavement. On Vicars Lane buildings are larger and set back within plots. Most buildings are three storeys in height. Buildings on the riverside are often a more domestic two storeys and the buildings facing the amphitheatre are typically four storeys (or equivalent). In general the buildings relate well to the open spaces, providing good frontages and enclosure. The character is somewhat different on St John Street. This serves as a link to the area from the retail core and its character is more that of a city centre street: narrower and more enclosed, with taller development and more regular continuous frontages.



St. John Street

Figure Ground
E. St. John's

Figure 4.5.3



Key
Sub Areas

CHESTER CHARACTERISATION STUDY
Figure Ground - E. St. John's
Scale: NTS Job: 5363
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Townscape Character

As the stylesheet on the following page reveals, there is a variety of building styles in the area but vernacular revival and neo-gothic styles dominate, especially in the area north of the Park. This includes Vernacular Revival black-and-white buildings, such as the park lodges and the boathouse, and brick and stone built houses with cupolas, mullions and medieval detailing. These latter buildings take their cue from the St John's and St Werburgh's. There are some very fine examples of this type of housing, very richly detailed and original, especially the listed terraces of 6-11 Grosvenor Park Road (unusual in that John Douglas acted as both architect and speculative developer) and 1-13 Bath Street. There are some good examples of the black-and-white Vernacular Revival style on Vicar's Lane and Love Street, particularly well detailed, and examples of other styles too, often associated with St John's, for example the Dutch stylings of the Visitor's Centre (formerly St John's school) and a good early examples of the Arts & Crafts style in the almshouses for retired clergy at Lumley Place (c.1870).



Chester Visitor's Centre (former St John's School)



Lumley Place almshouses

In other parts of the area, notably The Groves and around the amphitheatre traditional Georgian and Regency styles are prevalent. St John Street has more of a mixed character, including the traditional Victorian Blossoms hotel frontage, a neo-Gothic Welsh Chapel and the Edwardian Post Office.

Landscape Character

As described earlier, the area is blessed with several strong landscapes which together define its character. This includes the formal environment of the Park where formal tree planting has created mature boulevards; St John's churchyard which provides more informal amenity to the surrounding street and the riverside, which has its own charm, with an ambient and slightly nostalgic holiday feel, with its kiosk, benches and promenades.



The Groves West (E1)

Then there is the amphitheatre, which is of course of great historical importance but one has to look rather closely to discover this. The public realm here is recently improved and tasteful but the experience and overall environment is somewhat underwhelming. The views and enclosure by surrounding buildings reinforce the circular character of the space, and the Newgate adds to the aesthetic experience. The level of traffic on Little St John Street, although it moves slowly, still detracts from the overall character.

The Roman Gardens are a rather more under-appreciated asset. More isolated, yet consequently more peaceful, these terraced landscaped spaces provide a positive environment to display the Roman relics on display here and to appreciate the City Walls and the Gardens are well used, both to educate children and more informally for picnics and walks. However, there is scope for improvement in displaying the relics more imaginatively and with greater interpretation. Also, the approach to the Gardens from the Groves is rather hidden and unattractive and could be enhanced.



The Amphitheatre and Newgate (E5)



Roman Gardens (E4)

Setting of the Walls – Roman Gardens: While the ‘Roman Gardens’ are a modern feature, they provide a good opportunity to see a length of full-height wall from outside the defences, for once not crowded by development. This open space is well-designed and planted and it is essential to understanding the Walls in that their full scale and imposing height can be appreciated, not overwhelmed by the scale of later buildings. It is also a valuable green route to the River Dee from the city centre. The setting of the walls from the opposite (river) side are also important. Currently the low rise restaurant (currently Hickory’s Smokehouse) at the Groves here provides a positive setting by allowing views of the taller walls behind.



View of the Walls from Roman Gardens

Setting of the Amphitheatre and St. John’s Church: This area has for centuries been subject to extensive change. From its origins as a major amphitheatre set just outside the Roman Fortress, the site has been, and is still to a lesser extent, occupied by Georgian, Victorian and 20th Century developments including Dee House, the chapel of the former convent and the modern Courts. St John’s House was removed in the mid 20th

Century. Post Roman development covered the site and it is extraordinary that the presence of the amphitheatre was for a long period completely forgotten.

Little St John Street now sweeps around the visible footprint of the northern half of the amphitheatre, lined by substantial buildings which enclose the space. There is a delightful listed terrace at Lumley Place to the north-east and to the north-west is the Newgate, behind the visible remains of the Roman tower base. To the south, the shell of Dee house and the chapel provide an interesting backdrop, while to the south-east, the fine St John’s church sits amongst trees screening Grosvenor Park beyond. The setting of the remains of the amphitheatre has been enhanced since a recent major archaeological research project and a trompe-l’œil on the wall in front of Dee House, along with sandstone forms accentuating the plan of the Roman structure create a good deal of interest.

The group of open spaces including the Roman Gardens, Amphitheatre, Grosvenor Park and the riverside are together a major contribution to the urban character of the city.



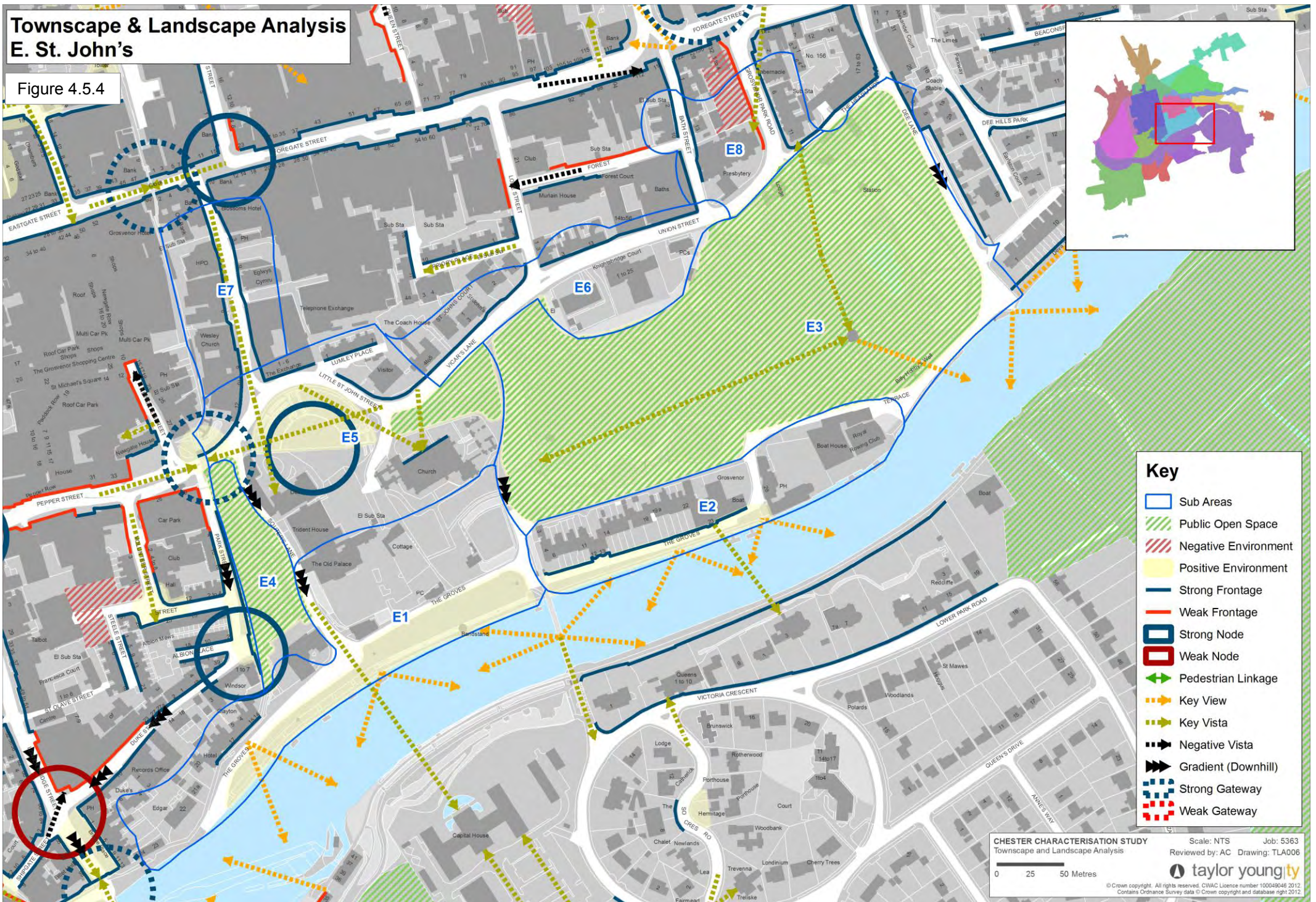
View across the Amphitheatre from the Newgate

E. St John's: Typical Materials and Details



Townscape & Landscape Analysis E. St. John's

Figure 4.5.4



Key

- Sub Areas
- Public Open Space
- Negative Environment
- Positive Environment
- Strong Frontage
- Weak Frontage
- Strong Node
- Weak Node
- ↔ Pedestrian Linkage
- ➔ Key View
- ➔ Key Vista
- ➔ Negative Vista
- ➔ Gradient (Downhill)
- Strong Gateway
- Weak Gateway

Designated Heritage Assets

As one may expect, there are many designated heritage assets in this character area. All of the area is within the City Centre Conservation Area, lying just within its eastern extent. There are Listed Buildings, Scheduled Monuments and a Registered Parks and Gardens (Grosvenor Park) in the area.

The Scheduled Monuments are:

- **The City Walls and Newgate**
- **The Amphitheatre** (including the un-excavated half)
- **St John's Church** – the ruined base of the north-west tower and the medieval ruins to the east

Grosvenor Park is Grade II listed in the National Register of Historic Parks and Gardens and the park keeper's lodge, the first known example of black-and-white vernacular revival by John Douglas, is Grade II listed.

There are a large number of listed buildings across the area, the most significant of which are:

- **St John's Church** (Grade I)



- **The Amphitheatre** excavated remains (Grade I)
- **The Old Palace** (Grade II*, 1751)
- **6-11 Grosvenor Park Road** townhouses (Grade II*, 1872)
- **Former Rectory, Vicar's Lane** (Grade II*, 1751)
- The **City Walls** and the **South-East Angle Tower** (Grade I)
- The **Anchorite Cell, The Groves** (Grade II*, 1363)



There are also several Article 4 Directions in place, notably the riverside buildings on The Groves (east), 3-13 Union Street, 2-10 Bath Street and the rectory of St Werburgh's. These are all included as Buildings of Townscape Merit below.

Buildings and Structures of Townscape Merit

Eleven un-listed Buildings and Structures of Townscape Merit have been identified:

- **E2a: Queens Bridge**- 1920s suspension bridge, a major landmark.



- **E2b: Italianate terrace**, The Groves – interesting terrace, between listed buildings, has wider group value.



- **E2c: Early Victorian terrace**, The Groves – Georgian style houses, between listed buildings, has wider group value.



- **E2d. Rowing Club Boathouse**, The Groves - black-and-white style building with strong community associations.



- **E6a: Victorian domestic group**, 3-13 Union Street – good group of cottages with Article 4 Directions.
- **E6b: Half-timbered corner building**, Love Street – strong example of Vernacular Revival style on prominent corner.

- **E6c : Vernacular Revival villa**, Vicar’s Lane – excellent stand-alone building in good condition.



- **E8a: Late Victorian terrace**, 2-10 Bath Street – excellent grand residential terrace, with stone dressings, quite unusual.



- **E7a: Post Office**, St John Street – Edwardian landmark, somewhat compromised but still in original use.
- **E7b: Marlborough Arms**, St John Street – Victorian Vernacular Revival pub, good original shop-front.
- **E7c: Blossoms Hotel**, St John Street – Victorian hotel frontage is a dominant building on St John Street.

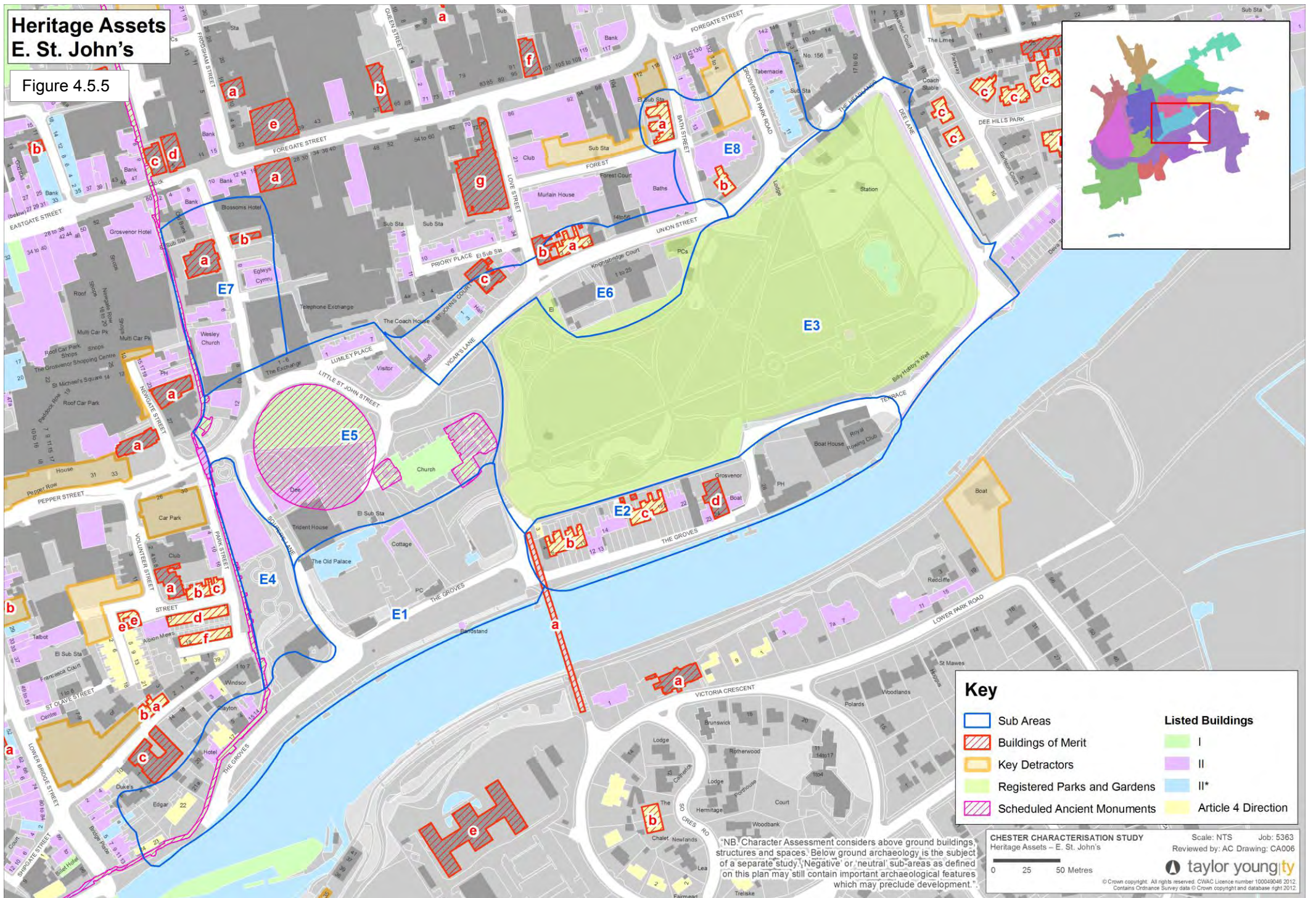


- **E8b: St Werburgh’s Rectory**, Grosvenor Park Road – good Arts & Crafts house.



Heritage Assets E. St. John's

Figure 4.5.5



Key	
	Sub Areas
	Buildings of Merit
	Key Detractors
	Registered Parks and Gardens
	Scheduled Ancient Monuments
	Listed Buildings I
	Listed Buildings II
	Listed Buildings II*
	Article 4 Direction

CHESTER CHARACTERISATION STUDY
Heritage Assets – E. St. John's

Scale: NTS
Reviewed by: AC Drawing: CA006

Job: 5363

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"NB. Character Assessment considers above ground buildings, structures and spaces. Below ground archaeology is the subject of a separate study. 'Negative' or 'neutral' sub-areas as defined on this plan may still contain important archaeological features which may preclude development."

Key Detractors

The only key detractor identified in this area is the vacant land (formerly a petrol filling station), and rear of adjacent buildings on the junction of Grosvenor Park Road and Foregate Street, extending toward St Werburgh's Church. This is a prominent corner at the entry to this character area and affects the setting of listed buildings on this street. At present it is an eyesore.

Summary: Character Assessment

In summary the character assessment for the sub-areas is as follows:

- **E1. The Groves West: Critical** – an attractive riverside setting
- **E2. The Groves East: Critical** – strong riverside frontage
- **E3. Grosvenor Park: Critical** – a city-wide asset
- **E4. Roman Gardens: Critical** – an important setting by the walls and containing valuable Roman relics
- **E5. Amphitheatre: Critical** – a site of national historic importance
- **E6. Union Street: Positive** – a residential street with many interesting buildings of merit
- **E7. St John Street: Positive** – an historic street with many buildings of merit
- **E8. Grosvenor Park Road/Bath Street: Critical** – a gateway to the area with fine listed townhouses by John Douglas

Character Statement:

“The St John’s area has played an important role in the City’s history and this is evident in the area today. It also includes the pleasant riverside setting of The Groves and the excellent Grosvenor Park. The Roman Gardens and Amphitheatre include many valuable relics. Fine listed buildings overlooking the open spaces from the north. This is an area to relax and to learn about Chester’s history. “

Management and Policy Recommendations

The area retains a strong character. Listed buildings are in good condition and Article 4 Directions are generally well observed, especially on The Groves. Grosvenor Park remains a well maintained asset that provides a strong setting to surrounding building, as does the riverside. Dee House remains a priority for improvement and the Amphitheatre could make a stronger statement overall.

Capacity to Accommodate Change

The rich history of the area and the abundance of listed buildings means that there is limited opportunity for this area to accommodate major change. There are a few development opportunity sites and those that exist will typically affecting the setting of listed buildings. Most opportunities are likely to be for infill development. The predominant land-use of the area is unlikely to change. The Park and riverside mean that it remains as a desirable location for residential and its location is likely to continue as edge-of-centre, east of the walls and south of Foregate Street.

Design Principles for New Development

When new infill development occurs on the former petrol station site on Grosvenor Road it should:

- define the entrance to Grosvenor Park Road with a building that addresses the corner with stature and interest.
- addresses Grosvenor Park Road with a similar set back to that established by the buildings on the opposite side of the road.
- respects and complements the setting of St Werburgh's church
- pick up some of the themes established in the materials, proportions and detailing of St Werburgh's church and/or in Douglas' townhouses opposite.
- be of a height that will not detract from the other listed buildings on this street. A taller element may be appropriate at the corner with Foregate Street.



Character Assessment E. St. John's

Figure 4.5.6

