

5.3 J. The Roodee

Character Area Assessment

Location

This character area is located towards the western edge of the study area. It comprises a green wedge, between City Walls Road and Nuns Road in the east, and the railway line in the west. The site encompasses the whole of Chester Racecourse, commonly known as the Roodee. To the north, the area extends beyond New Crane Street, taking in Queen's school playing fields. The River Dee encloses the area to the south.

Sub-Areas

The area is divided into four sub-areas.

- **J1: The Racecourse** – the 65 acre racecourse site and viewing stands, located on the northern bank of the River Dee and directly abutting the city walls along its eastern edge.
- **J2: Watergate Square/New Crane Street** – the 150 metre stretch of New Crane Street between Watergate and the railway.
- **J3: City Walls Road** – a triangular parcel of land that includes sections of the City Wall and Queen's school playing fields.
- **J4: The Railway** – the viaduct and railway bridge across the Dee, linking the Racecourse with Curzon Park.



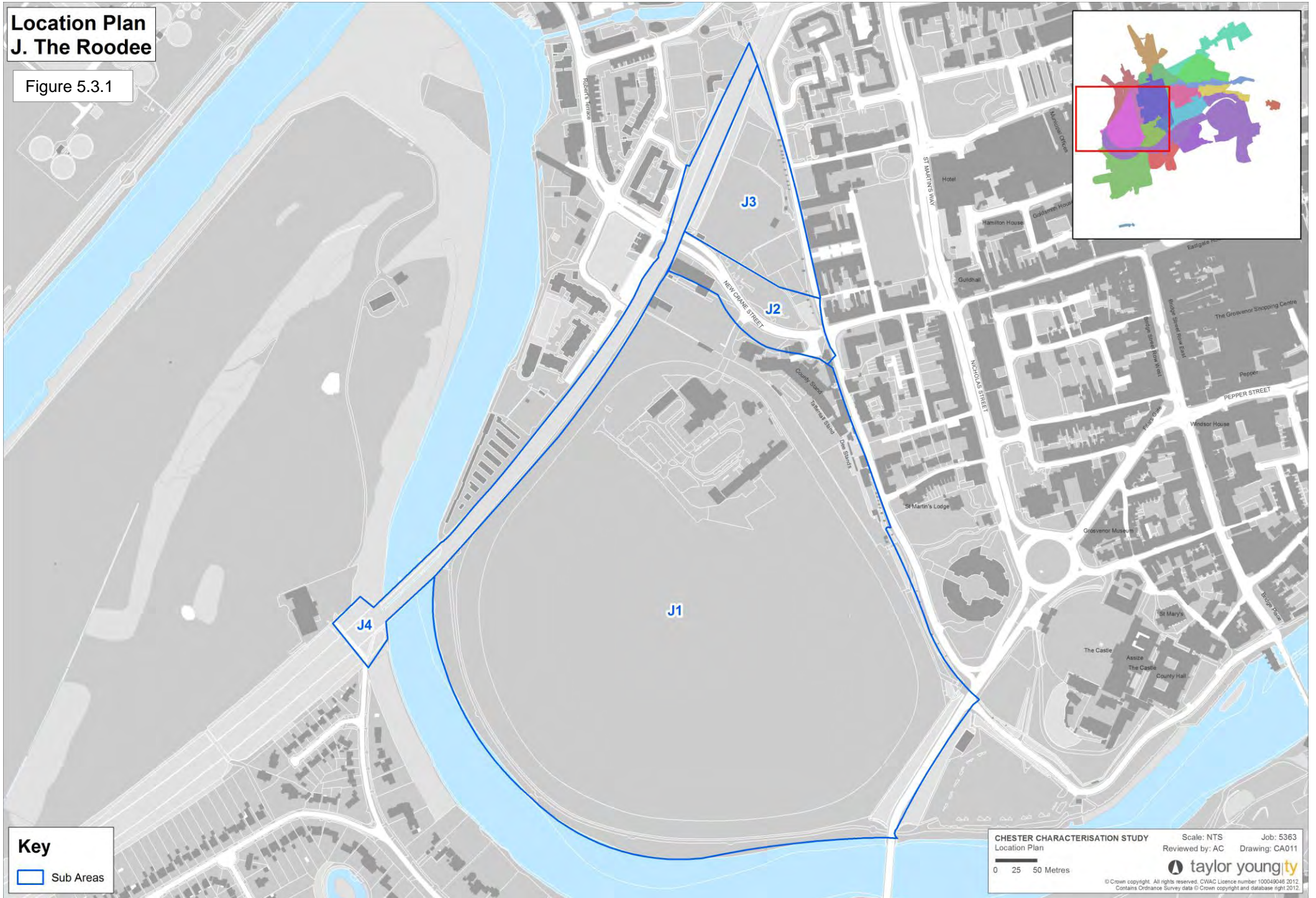
J2. View of New Crane Street from City Walls Road




J1. Viewing stand at The Roodee

Location Plan J. The Roodee

Figure 5.3.1



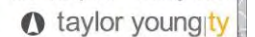
Key

 Sub Areas

CHESTER CHARACTERISATION STUDY
Location Plan

Scale: NTS
Reviewed by: AC
Job: 5363
Drawing: CA011

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Historical Development

In Anglo-Saxon times, the River Dee covered the whole of the racecourse area, with the exception of a small raised mound upon which stood a stone cross or 'Rood', (Roodee means literally 'The Island of the Cross'), the stump of which is still visible today, close to the eastern-walled side. At the foot of the City Wall by Nun's Road is some substantial masonry thought to have been part of the Roman quay wall.

As the Dee continued to silt up, the area of permanently dry land increased. The area became a valued recreational resource and was also used for animal pasture. The racecourse has been the venue for many popular events – in 1441, rival gaolers from the Castle and Northgate gathered here for a mass fight. The site was also home to the famous and bloody Goteddsday (Shrove Tuesday) football match which was banned in 1533 for being too violent. Other public events held here include the Royal Agricultural Show of 1858, the 1903 Buffalo Bill and Geronimo Wild West Show, circuses, military reviews and Lord Mayor's Parades. The site was formerly the home of the original Chester Midsummer Watch Parade, temporarily banned by Oliver Cromwell but finally abolished in 1677.

The first recorded race was held on February 9, 1539 (now the name of the racecourse restaurant), making it the oldest racecourse still in use in the UK. At this time, the racecourse was just an open field, with the first grandstand finished in 1817 and rebuilt in 1899-1900, and was replaced in 1985 after being destroyed by a fire.

Historical maps reveal that the area has changed relatively little over the last 200 years, retaining its predominantly green character and open feel.

Early maps show the historical street pattern of New Crane Street, Crane Street and Paradise Row aligned roughly east to west, dissecting the site and providing the critical link between the city core and the Old Port. Residential development once formed a continuous frontage along both

sides of Crane Street which historically had a linear form, providing a more direct link between the city centre, Wartergate, and Crane Wharf than exists today. The historic New Crane Street and Paradise Row display a more open character, with development along one-side only and overlooking green areas to the north and south respectively. At this time, Queen's school playing fields are shown as pasture and it is not until 1908 that a formal park layout is revealed. Chester Royal Infirmary (built in 1761) and The Linen Hall (1778) are prominent buildings on early maps of the area.

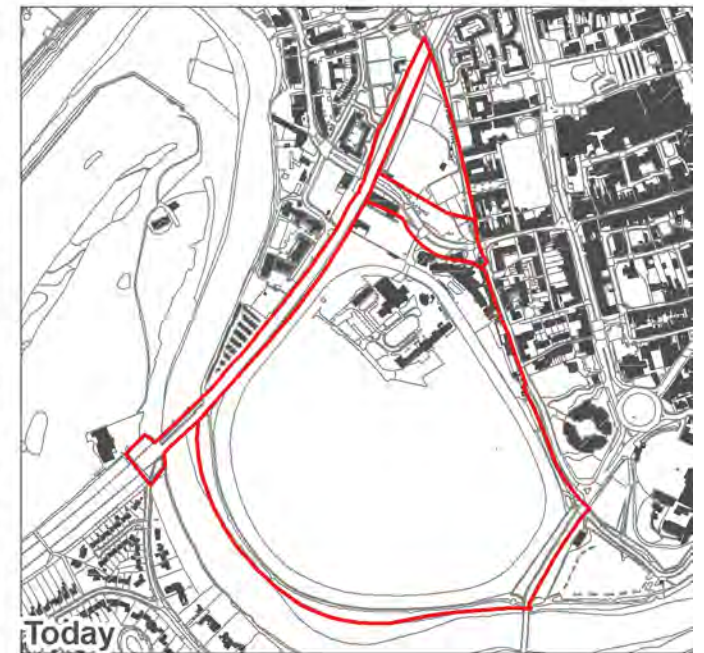
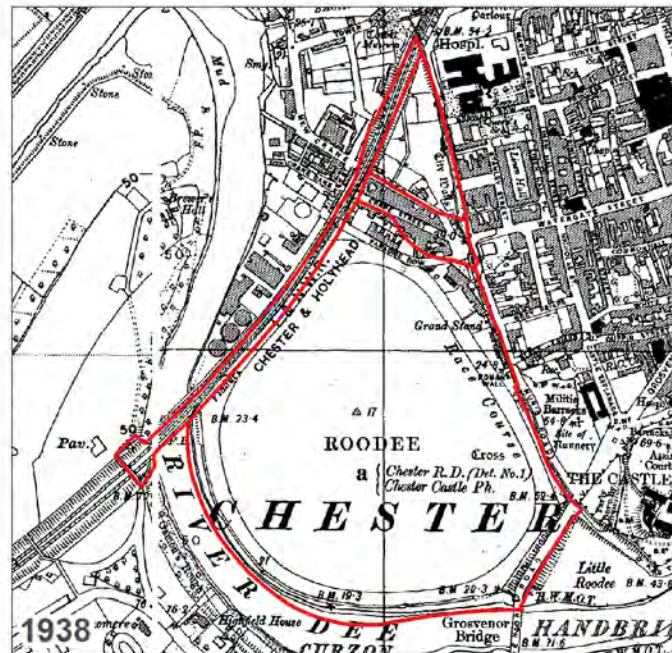
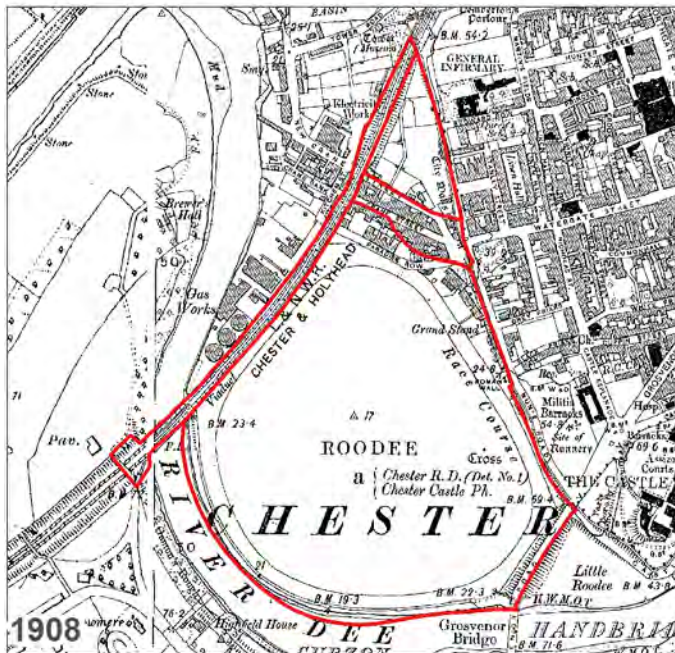
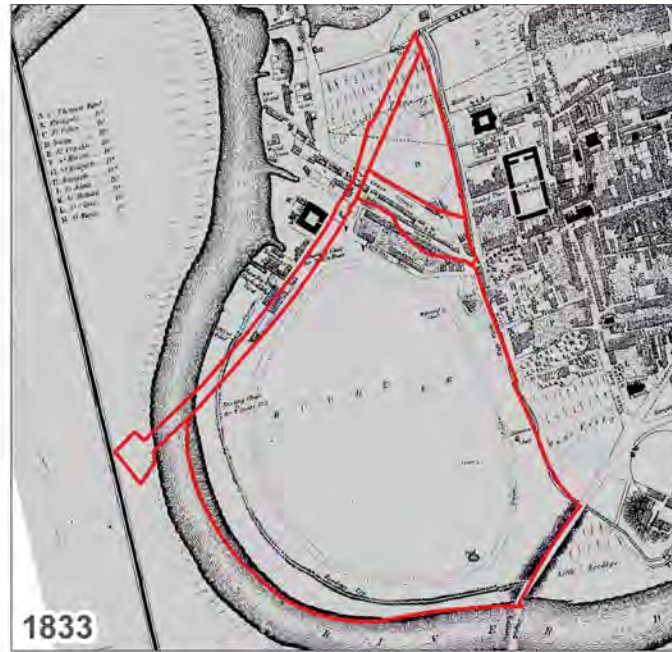
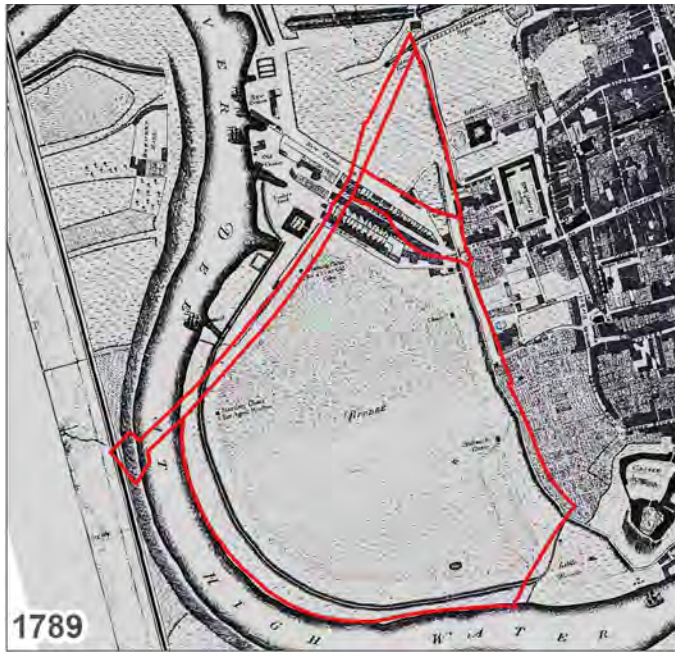
The Chester to Holyhead line was constructed in 1846-1848. Grosvenor Road and Grosvenor Bridge itself were completed in 1832. Both of these feats of Victorian engineering had a large impact on this area, leaving it as low ground lying between these two higher level linear features.



View of The Roodee from Curzon Park

Historical Development J. The Roodee

Figure 5.3.2



The most significant change affecting the internal character of this area has been the reconstruction and realignment of New Crane Street, creating a single east-west route through the area and obliterating the historic pattern of streets, Watergate Square remaining at the entry onto the former Paradise Row.



Crane Street looking east towards Watergate (prior to realignment)

Land-uses

The predominant land-use across the area is open space, associated with the both the Racecourse and Queen's school playing field.

Within Queen's School there are two small buildings, though neither are of significant architectural value. The first is a two storey pavilion type building and the second is a single storey red brick building with black and white detailing on the front and side gables. The latter building is located in the south-west corner of the site, with frontage onto New Crane Street.

Car parking to serve the racecourse is concentrated either side of New Crane Street. This includes a pay and display car park providing 128 spaces directly opposite the main racecourse entrance.

Leisure uses within the area include a 4 storey hotel development (Holiday Inn Express) along New Crane Street, the Watergate Inn and the restaurant, bar and conferencing facilities associated with the racecourse.

The area includes a single, large residential property situated at Watergate Square which backs onto the City walls. This is an attractive, Victorian property in a Vernacular Revival style but it is not of major significance.

A small number of vehicle repair garages operate from the railway viaduct arches accessed via Kitchen Street. Some of the arches are also used by the Race Company, although most remain unused.



The Railway Viaduct Arches

The pedestrian environment along New Crane Street is poor, with exposure to heavy traffic, pollution and noise. Crossing can also be difficult. In contrast, City Walls Road provides a pleasant environment. Traffic is light and the street has a green, open feel, with enclosure along the eastern side provided by large, attractive properties set in extensive grounds well back from pavement edge.

Urban Form

The area as a whole lacks a coherent urban form, comprising as it does two large areas of open space. The area's boundaries however, are well defined by the presence of the river in the south, the railway to the west and the City walls to the east.

The topography is generally flat, and the area as a whole lies at a lower level to the historic core. City Walls Road occupies an elevated position, providing green views across Queen's Park and glimpsed views of the railway arches in the distance. Queen's School and the Royal Infirmary building have a strong presence along City Walls Road. They follow a consistent building line, along with new housing development to the north, being set well back from the pavements edge in generous, attractively landscaped grounds. Combined with the open views across Queen's Park to the west, City Walls Road provides a pleasant, quiet and attractive environment. Moving south along City Walls Road, the character becomes more urban, with a series of 3 and 4 storey buildings forming a hard edge along the back of pavement. The character once again becomes more open as City Walls Road turns into Nuns Road. The scale of buildings diminishes (mainly two storey) and the urban grain becomes looser.



View from City Walls



Watergate

Along New Crane Street, the built form is particularly poor, with buildings failing to address the street in any meaningful way. The Watergate Inn faces out onto the square, presenting its side elevation to New Crane Street. The Racecourse buildings too turn their backs to the street and are set well back behind a low boundary wall with railings and an area of car parking. The new hotel development presents a more attractive frontage with a raised decked seating area animating the street. Car parking dominates along the northern edge of the street, although tree planting along the site's boundary has helped to soften the impact. The street widens to four lanes beyond the entrance to the racecourse making crossing difficult when traffic is heavy.

From Nuns Road, there are attractive long distance views across the Roodee towards the tree-lined river bank, crowned by the large villas of Curzon Park on the southern side of the river. Both Chester Royal Infirmary and Queen's School are visible from New Crane Street, appearing above the high on the horizon above the City Walls. Other noteworthy views include the view of the railway arches across the racecourse from New Crane Street, the view of the castle from Grosvenor Road and the view of Watergate from both City Walls Road and New Crane Street, although Norroy House - the four storey office block on Watergate Street, compromises the setting of this key gateway feature.



Poor frontage along New Crane Street

Urban Form J. The Roodee

Figure 5.3.3



Key
Sub Areas

Townscape Character

Most of the buildings within this character area are located along New Crane Street and are associated with the racecourse. The building style is typically modern and contemporary, exemplified by the hotel development and the racecourse buildings themselves which are built of red brick and red roof tiles with a traditional pitched roof. There are a few older properties around Watergate Square but their influence on the overall character of the area is negligible.

Along City Walls Road and Nuns Road, a broad mix of building styles and ages exists, ranging from the Georgian townhouses of Stanley Place to the neo-gothic themes of Queen's School. Although falling beyond the boundaries of this area, they nevertheless play a key role in defining its character and feel, framing views out of the site and defining the quality of its adjoining streets. The run of Georgian terraces along Nuns Road are worthy of note here, as they appear prominently above the City walls when viewed from within the racecourse enclosure.

Landscape Character

This area has a strong landscape setting provided by the racecourse and Queen's School playing fields, giving the area an open and natural feel. The playing fields appear well maintained and there are decorative cast iron gates along City Walls Road, behind which are located steps leading down into the park. The interface between the playing fields and New Crane Street could be improved, for example by improving the entrance gates.

The riverside walk also extends through the site along the northern bank of the Dee, providing a pleasant and accessible pedestrian route.

The quality of the public realm is mixed. City Walls Road benefits from paving stones, traditional street lamps and a large number of mature trees, creating a pleasant pedestrian environment. The City Wall itself

rises approximately up to one metre above the pavement and provides the street with a strong visual character and continuity of appearance.

In contrast, surfacing materials along New Crane Street are poor, consisting of tarmac for pavements and concrete kerbs. Railings are the predominant boundary treatment here and planting along the north side helps to soften the impact of the car park. Planting of central reservation would improve the quality of this street considerably.



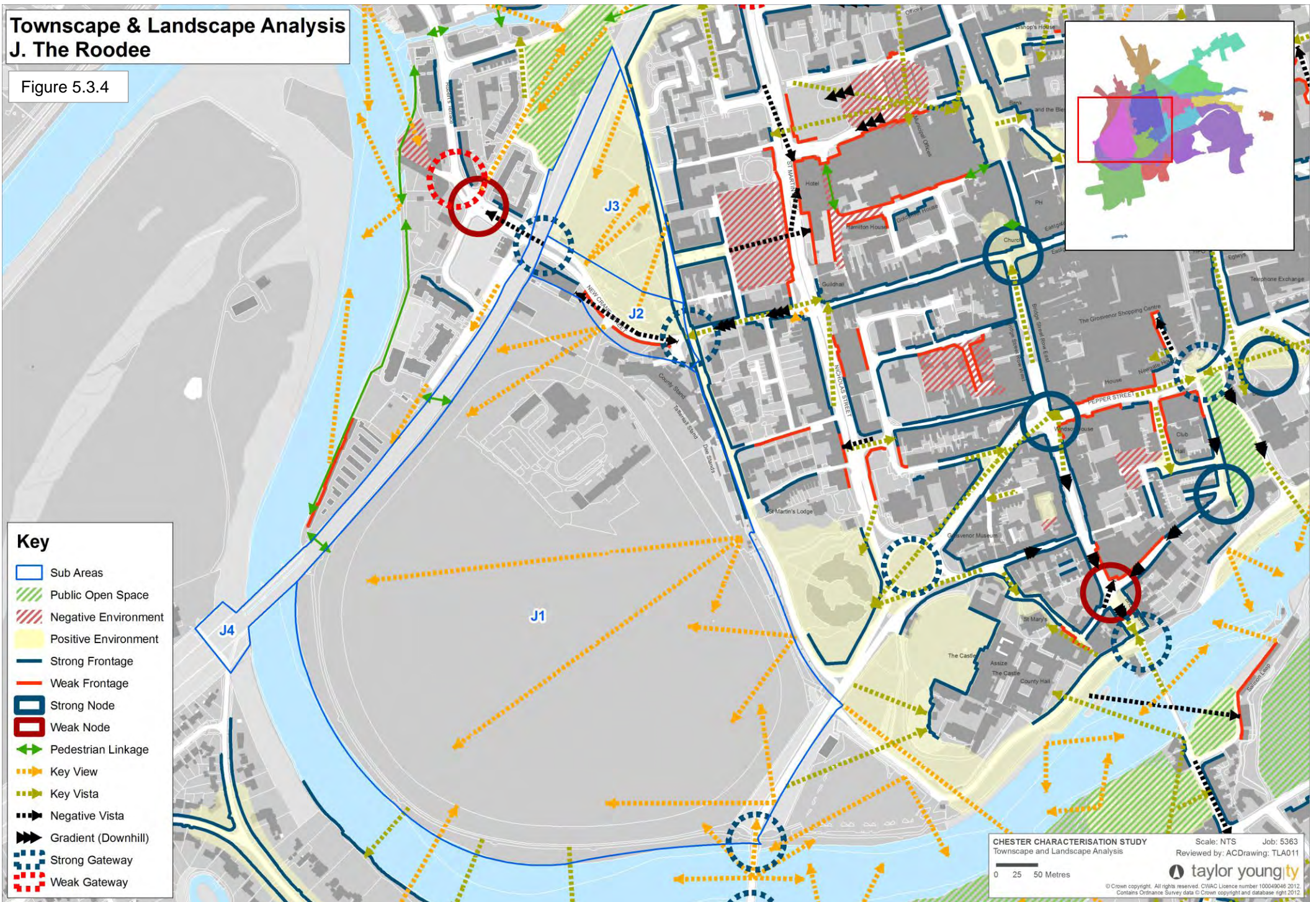
City Walls Road

J. The Roodee: Typical Materials and Details



Townscape & Landscape Analysis J. The Roodee

Figure 5.3.4



Designated Heritage Assets

The entire character area falls within the City conservation area. However, apart from the City Walls, the area contains no listed buildings or Scheduled Monuments. Its heritage significance derives from open form of the historic racecourse and by the setting it provides for the City Walls, which run along the area's eastern edge.

Buildings and Structures of Townscape Merit

No buildings were identified as having strong townscape merit within this particular character area. The railway viaduct and bridge was identified as a structure of merit.

- **J4a. Railway viaduct and bridge** – impressive Victorian engineering structure and dominant visual landmark.



Key Detractors

The dominance of car parking along New Crane Street is considered a key detractor as it provides poor street enclosure, is visually unattractive, and contributes little to creating a strong sense of place.



Car parking along New Crane Street

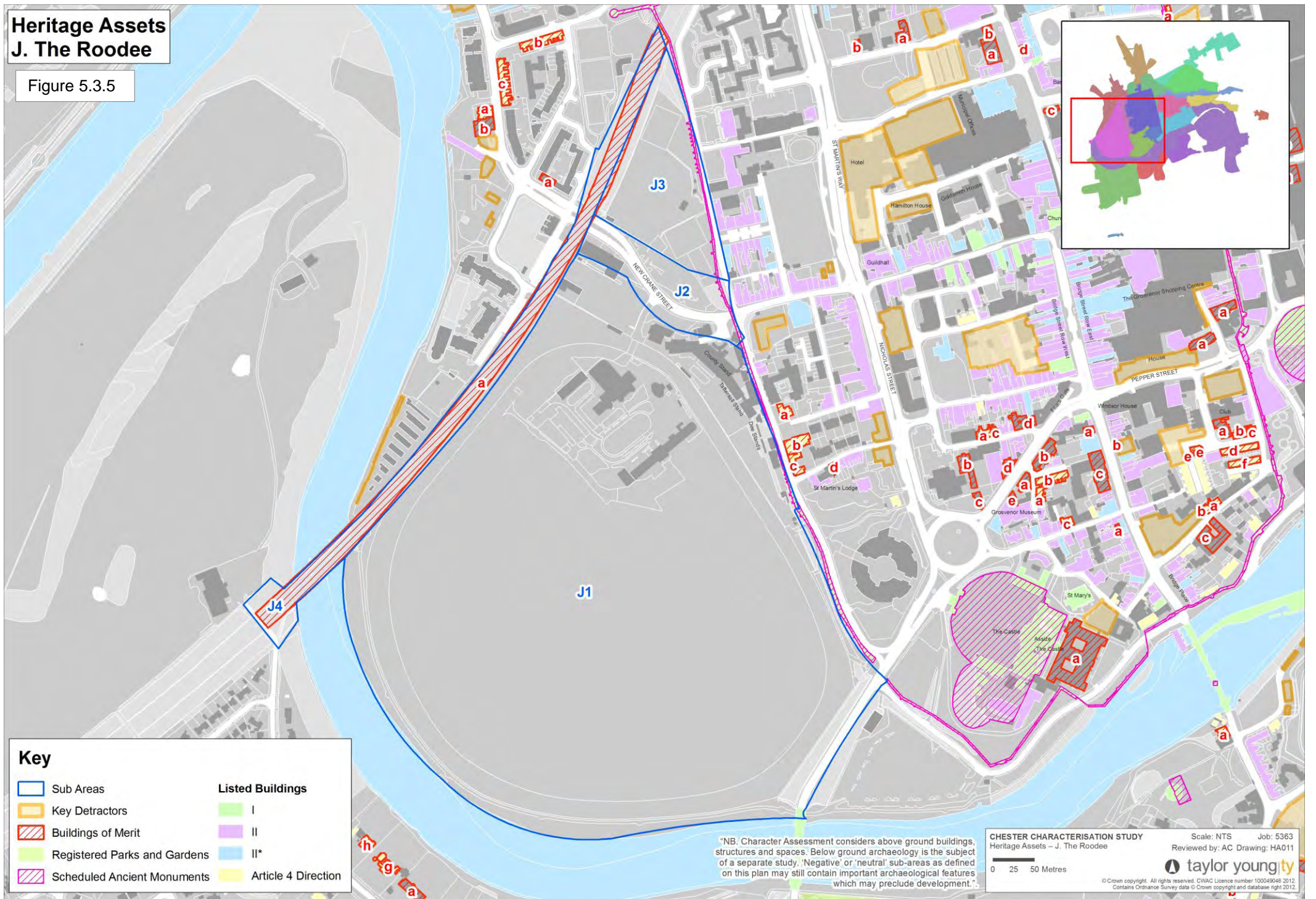
Other detracting features which have an impact on the area fall outside of its boundaries: the office supplies building at the corner of New Crane Bank and New Crane Street forms a poor termination to the street vista and Norroy House, the four storey government office block on Watergate Street appears behind Watergate and the City Walls and compromises their settings.



Detractor: Norroy House

Heritage Assets J. The Roodee

Figure 5.3.5



Key

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

*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.

CHESTER CHARACTERISATION STUDY
Heritage Assets – J. The Roodee

Scale: NTS Job: 5363
Reviewed by: AC Drawing: HA011

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Summary: Character Assessment

In summary, this character area plays an important role in supporting the character of Chester. The historic Roodee, the oldest surviving racecourse in the UK, is a major attraction, its 65 acre course occupying a prominent location on the banks of the Dee and within easy walking distance of the city centre. The City walls are also essential to the character of this area, providing attractive open views across the racecourse and towards the River. The walls also define key views out of the site, providing a sense of enclosure to the site. The Watergate acts as an attractive gateway into the area although its setting is compromised by insensitive development.

The impact of the car is detrimental to the area, with areas of car parking dominating the street scene along New Crane Street. The racecourse buildings themselves do little to enhance the area, presenting a poor frontage onto the street and are architecturally uninteresting. Lying at a lower level than the surrounding area, the built form in adjoining character areas has a strong visual impact, with development along City Walls Road and Nun's Road being particularly prominent on the skyline.

Character Assessment is shown on Figure 4.1.6 and explained below:

- **J1. The Racecourse: Critical** – a major destination with a long and interesting history
- **J2. Watergate Square/New Crane Street: Critical** – the gateway into the racecourse and setting for Watergate
- **J3. City Walls Road: Critical** – a pleasant street abutting the City walls and providing attractive views towards Watergate and across Queen's Park
- **J4. The Railway: Neutral** – a strong visual feature and an underused resource.



Railway Arch (J4)

Character Statement

“The Roodee character area is critical to the heritage of Chester as a whole. Its character is defined by its open form within the loop of the River Dee and the continuation of its historic use as a racecourse. Its green setting, long vistas, and relationship with the City Walls and Watergate are also crucial. The railway viaduct also has a strong visual presence.”

Management and Policy Recommendations

Most of this area falls under the ownership and management of Chester Racecourse, as such it is well managed. In an area of few buildings there are no major changes to conservation policy recommended. Continued good upkeep of the railway viaduct and open space in J3 will be important.

Capacity to Accommodate Change

Significant new development has occurred in recent years on New Crane Street but this has not compromised conservation character. Any future development in this area is likely to occur on New Crane Street. The openness and integrity of the Racecourse and the open space in J3 is important.

Design Principles for New Development

If any new development occurs in this area it must be directed by the following key principles:

- Maintain the open feel of the area.
- Maintain the openness and integrity of the Racecourse and the open space in J3.
- Maintain views to, and the setting of, the City Walls.
- Maintain views to, and the setting of, the Railway Viaduct.



The Racecourse

Character Assessment J. The Roodee

Figure 5.3.6



Key

- Sub Areas
- Critical
- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

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CHESTER CHARACTERISATION STUDY
Character Assessment

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