

4.8 L. Gorse Stacks

Character Area Assessment

Location

The Gorse Stacks Area is located just outside the north-east corner of the City Walls. Today it is dominated by the St. Oswald's Way stretch of the inner ring road. The Shropshire Union Canal also passes through this area. The railway line crosses diagonally to the immediate north of the area. This character area is therefore well defined as being the area between the City Walls and the railway to the north, carrying important infrastructure: the dual carriageway and the Canal. Upper Northgate Street bisects the area but is not itself within this Character Area. The Gorse Stacks area forms a gateway to the City and affects the setting of the historic core.

Sub-Areas

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

- **L1. Northgate/Cow Lane Bridge** –the area immediately adjacent to the City Walls and including the Canal, including the Iceland store.
- **L2. Gorse Stacks** – the eastern extent of George Street and the area to the south of the St. Oswald's Way roundabout.
- **L3. Kaleyards** – the open area between the City Walls and the rear of properties on Frodsham Street to the east.
- **L4. George Street/Delamere Street** – the main part of the interior of the block between the Canal and St. Oswald's Way.

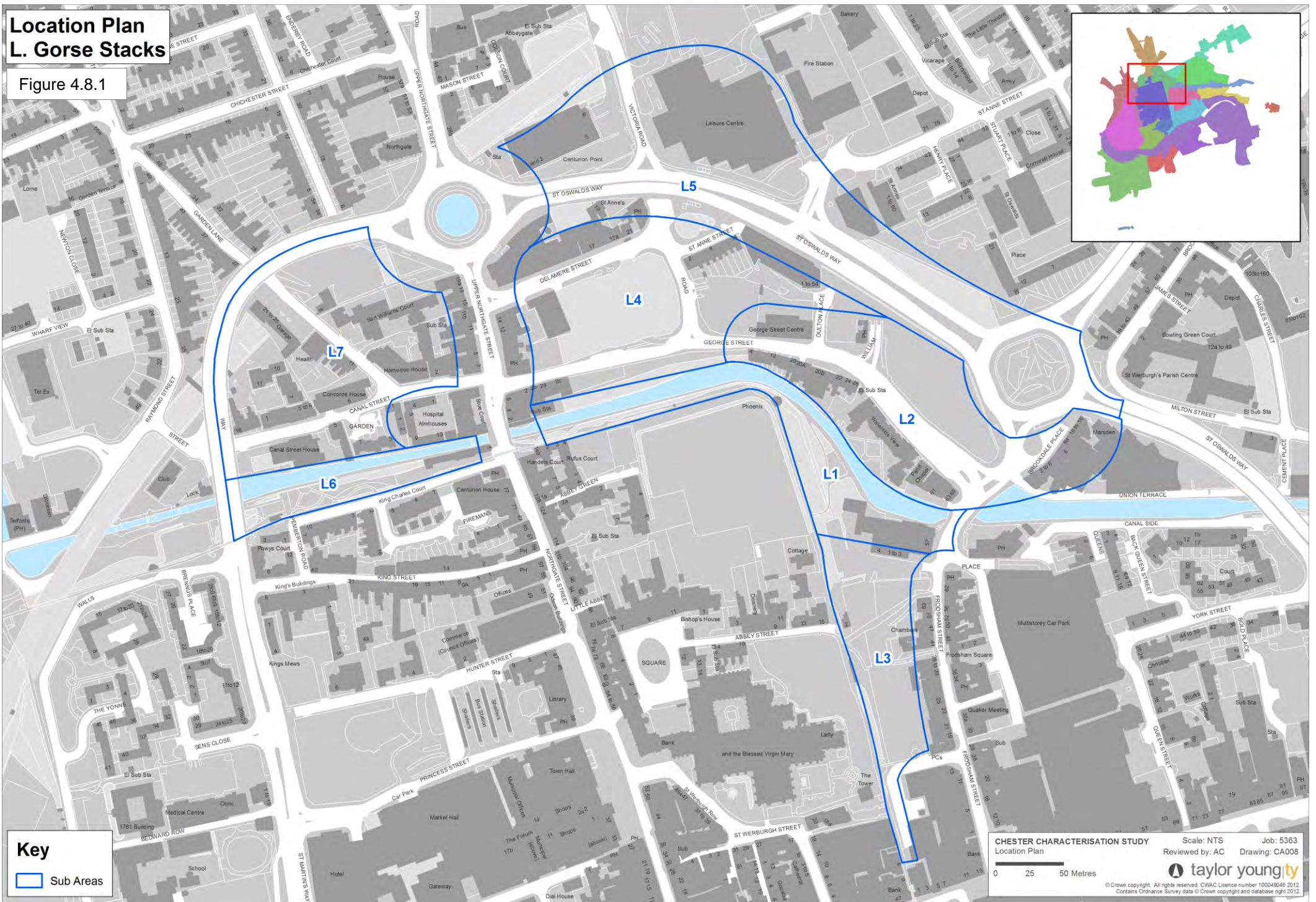
- **L5. St Oswald's Way** – The dual carriageway itself, between the two roundabouts and plots to the north including Northgate Arena.
- **L6. Northgate Canal Cutting** – The section of the canal west of Northgate Street.
- **L7. Canal Street/Garden Lane** - These street extend westwards and north-westwards from Upper Northgate Street, under the inner ring road and away from the inner core.



Gorse Stacks sub-area (L2)

Location Plan L. Gorse Stacks

Figure 4.8.1



Key
Sub Areas

CHESTER CHARACTERISATION STUDY
Location Plan
Scale: NTS
Job: 5363
Reviewed by: AC
Drawing: CA008
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Historical Development

The name of Gorse Stacks originated from it being the location where kindling was safely stored and supplied to the City. In subsequent years Gorse Stacks became a very important part of the City. It hosted the cattle market and included key transport hubs such as the Northgate railway station and Delamere Street bus station. It was also the point at which several key radial routes arrived at the historic core: Victoria Road; Garden Lane; the Canal and Canal Street; and Frodsham Street/Brook Street/Hoole Lane. The whole area between these routes was once occupied by dense streets and lanes lined with Victorian housing.

The Kaleyards area has an important history. Lying just outside the eastern city wall, this open land has had a continuous history of being undeveloped; remarkable given its inner urban location. The Roman fortress imposed a 'clear zone' around its entire perimeter in order to improve its defence (depriving attackers of cover from archers on the walls). The Kaleyards site, lying within this zone, was used as a parade ground by the Romans, a place where the whole Legion could be assembled. In the medieval era the site remained open as a 'jousting croft' and was used for fairs and markets as well as martial entertainments. Contemporary sources (such as Lucian the Monk) reveal that these events attracted large crowds, some of whom would watch the events from the city walls. It was also used for archery practice and marks can still be seen on the walls here where archers sharpened their arrows. Later the area was used as vegetable gardens by the monks of Chester Abbey (giving it its current name). In the mid nineteenth century the Kaleyards area was once considered as the location for Chester's railway station. Today the site remains free of buildings and is used as a car park.

Braun's 1581 Map reveals Northgate to be lined with buildings as it extended north of the Walls. This map also shows the existing ravine to

the north of the city walls. This would have formed an important part of the City's defences.



Braun's Map of Chester, 1581

Northgate Street leads out of the city core, immediately to the north of the Northgate itself, it crosses an early major intervention in the city – the Shropshire Union Canal (built as the Chester Canal in 1779, encouraged by Georgian merchants). The deep cutting, through sandstone, skirting the Roman wall at this point, led the canal to meet the River Dee via Northgate Locks, cut through solid rock.

The streets of Garden Lane, George Street, Gorse Stacks and Hoole Way are all present by 1789, although these are little more than routes across fields, with little development fronting them. A significant addition in the late 18th century was the Chester Canal, which was completed by 1779 in

this area, along its present alignment. The canal runs alongside, and just outside the northern city wall. To the west of Northgate, on the City Walls, is a distinctive square tower with steps leading to a platform on the top. This is known as Morgan's Mount, named after Captain Edward Morgan, a Royalist officer in charge of an important battery of guns, said to have been stationed on top of the tower during the Civil War. This cutting also contains a bridge known locally as 'the Bridge of Sighs', due to the fact that this is where prisoners crossed from the City Gaol in Northgate to their execution.

Chester Cattle Market was located in the Y-shaped intersection between George Street and Gorse Stacks. For centuries, livestock were driven in from the surrounding countryside to be sold here. The market remained an active and vibrant part of the Newtown area until it was demolished to make way for the Inner Ring Road in the 1960s.

By 1833 the form had changed relatively little, although there is development in the streets north of George Street, and east of Victoria Street, south of present day St. Anne Street. Otherwise this area remains predominantly agricultural fields.

The situation by the end of the nineteenth century had changed dramatically, with the wider trends of industrialisation, population explosion and urbanisation resulting in this whole area being completely covered in dense Victorian terraced housing, arranged tightly on linear streets and housing workers from the two railway stations, the Royal Mail and the old Chester Cattle Market. This area now becomes known as 'Newtown'. St. Anne's Street and Delamere Street have joined those previously mentioned streets as the main arteries through the area.

Chester Northgate Station, located on previously open land on Victoria Road was opened in 1875. It was a terminus for the Cheshire Lines Committee and Great Central Railway and was the City Centre's second station, with trains to Manchester, the Wirral and North Wales. By the

1960s Chester Northgate passenger numbers were declining and the station closed on October 6, 1969. Northgate Arena, the main leisure centre for the Chester area, was built in the 1970s on the site of the old Chester Northgate railway station.

Newtown, Boughton and Hoole were responsible for providing the vast majority of workers and therefore in turn, the vast amount of Chester's wealth production throughout the Industrial Revolution, beginning in the late 18th century.



Northgate Station, 1960s

From the late 18th century, when the Chester Canal was finished, through to the late 1950s, when the last canalside flour mill closed, Newtown had been increasing in size and importance to the Chester economy. The area supported a thriving community of artisans and working class families who lived mainly in "two-up-two-down" terraced housing with no bathroom and an outside toilet.

The Canal was the motorway of its day and narrowboats carried produce and supplies to and from North Wales (Coal, Slate, Gypsum or Lead Ore). Finished lead (for roofing, water pipes/ and sewerage) produced in the huge leadworks factory in Edgerton Street in Newtown was exported across the country. Grain arrived from Cheshire farmland and was processed in the large granaries on the banks of the canal at Newtown and Boughton; and salt, (for preserving food such as fish and meat), came in from Northwich.



The Cattle Market, 1950s

From the latter half of the 20th century the Gorse Stacks area has changed significantly: major land-uses have disappeared, radial routes have been bisected and de-graded by the inner ring road and the fine grain street pattern has been replaced by large floorplate uses and open sites. More than anywhere else in this Characterisation Study, this is an area in which the historic character and importance has been lost by recent interventions and is evident today only in fragmentary form

The area changed radically again in the 1960/70s. As in many parts of the country, the area occupied by Victorian terraced housing was cleared and replaced with tower blocks. This redevelopment also accommodated the construction of the Inner Ring Road. Newtown had now lost its two major functions with the disappearance of Northgate Station and the Cattle Market. Its historic street form and urban form was cleared in wholesale and only remnants of earlier eras now survive.

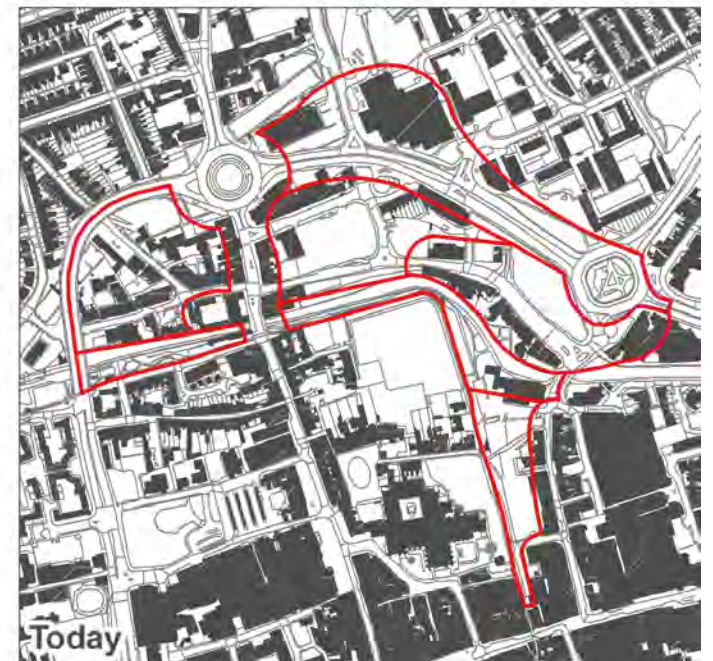
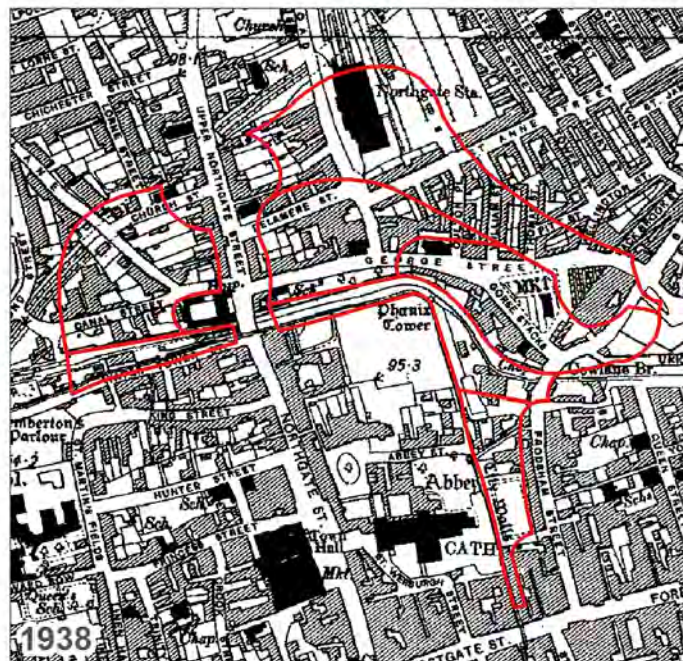
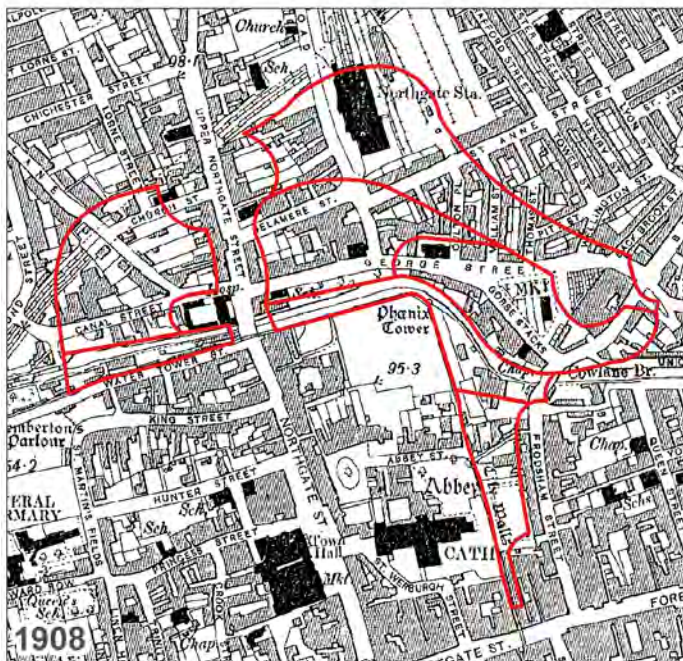
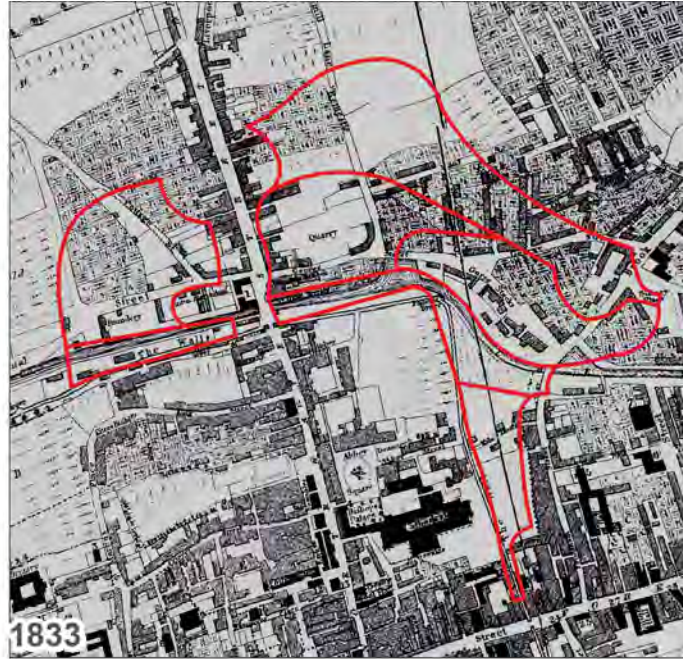
St Oswald's Way virtually dissects the old Newtown in half, and runs almost exactly along the route of what was Back Brook Street. There are still some surviving buildings which used to form part of the bottom end of the street (the top end being the Cattle Market end) - notably, number 24 Back Brook Street. In addition, the backs of the old vegetable and butchers shops can still be seen.

The Fountains Roundabout (linking St. Oswald's Way to Northgate) is another important legacy of the Inner Ring Road scheme as it forms an important gateway to the City Centre from the north. This was described by the press at the time of its opening in 1967 as "Chester's most notable non-place"- it was laid out with attractive lawns, flowerbeds and fountains, but allowed no safe pedestrian access. The eminent architectural critic Nikolas Pevsner commented, "The roundabout with its well-intentioned fountain destroys the street continuity, and indeed the town scale".

In summary, this is an area that has undergone radical transformation twice and consequently has had three very different urban forms: the pre-industrial organic street form; the dense Victorian, industrial regular street form, which was overlaid onto the pre-industrial streets; and the broken 1960s form of tower blocks, modern floorplates and the Inner Ring Road. Today this latter form clearly dominates but there are important survivals of the earlier eras, such as the individual buildings and streets (or sections of streets) such as George Street and Garden Lane.

Historical Development L. Gorse Stacks

Figure 4.8.2



Land-uses

Land-uses today are generally secondary edge-of-centre uses as typically found around an inner ring road in a city of Chester's size. This includes secondary retail on George Street and extending south to include the Iceland store on the opposite side of the Canal. Beyond this is the Kaleyards car park. The Delamere Street area is principally in residential use. North of St Oswald's Way is a modern retail warehouse and the Northgate Arena leisure centre. Canal Street and Garden Lane have a mix of secondary town centre and residential uses. Further east are the 1970s social housing units (just outside this Character Area). The Northgate canal cutting area has no buildings within it and is used for informal recreation. Previously the Delamere Street area has had an employment use, although this is now in transition. Vacant sites and development sites (such as the former bus station) offers the opportunity for new uses. There has been some new residential development on Gorse Stacks. The new Travelodge adds a new hotel use to this area.

Urban Form

The urban form of this area is largely represented by the 'shatter zone' effect of 1960s clearance and redevelopment. Large footprint uses, such as retail warehouses, Northgate Arena and residential towers, sit within open and ill-defined space. Through it all passes the Inner Ring Road, serving to divide the area to its north from the central core. This form represents a strong break from the traditional character of central Chester. This is most noticeable in the disappearance of the northern arm of the Y-shape junction which once held the Cattle Market and was of historic importance. Canal Street and Garden Lane represent a transition between these two styles - exhibiting a mix of back of pavement and larger floorplates and development set back from the pavement, changing as one travels away from the town centre.

There are, however, important survivals from earlier eras. Principally these can be seen on George Street and Gorse Stacks. Here some of the better two-storey Victorian and Georgian houses survive, alongside some small institutional buildings, forming a continuous frontage on the southern side of the street. Views to the Phoenix Tower here also provides a visual connection with the historic core.

At the western end of George Street is an attractive Victorian frontage, which includes the former Northgate bakery. On St Anne Street a row of Victorian terraces houses survive. There is also a strong, more dominant three-storey Victorian/Georgian (though much altered) frontage to the east of St Oswald's Way roundabout (on Brookdale Place). Here the historic form fortuitously curves around the roundabout and, for once, seems to match the form of the 1960s interventions. The large open car park on George Street, opposite, is a poor response to this prominent gateway.

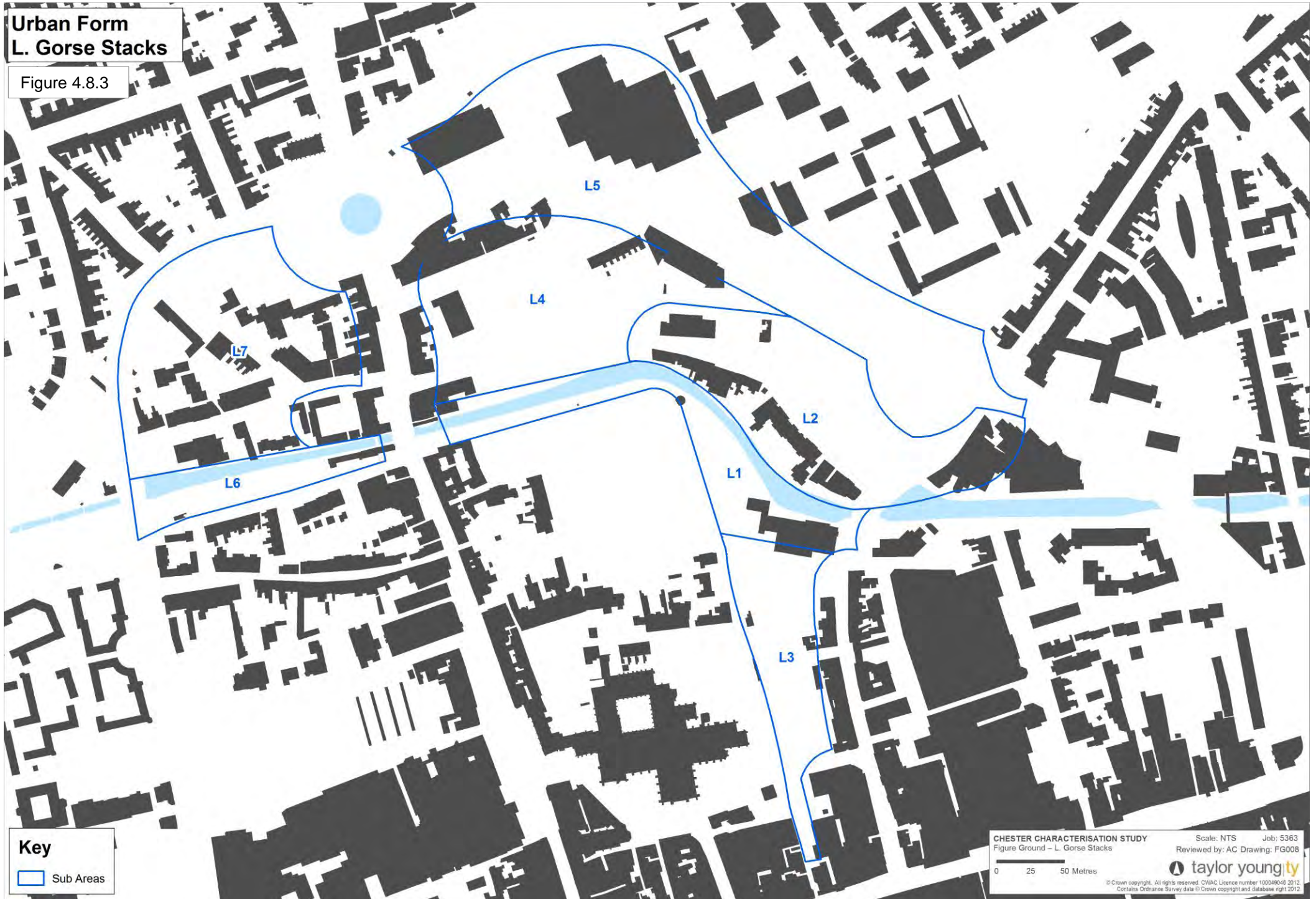


Western end of George Street

Other parts of the area occupy the space between the City Walls and development, some of these are well landscaped, others are just car parks. This includes the canal corridor to the north and the Kaleyards car park site to the rear of Frodsham Street.

Urban Form
L. Gorse Stacks

Figure 4.8.3



Key
□ Sub Areas

There are significant large development sites in this area, providing an opportunity to restore a more appropriate development form. There has also been recent completed development, notably the new Travelodge and new office and residential buildings. These have mixed success in interpreting Chester traditional vernacular with contemporary materials and stylings.

Townscape Character

Due to the radical changes in development that this area has experienced over time, and continues to experience, the townscape character is very mixed, with no one prevailing character. There is a mix of the following styles:

- Traditional two-storey Victorian terraced cottages
- Victorian neo-Gothic institutional buildings
- A few small Georgian houses and shops – two and three storey
- Some nondescript Victorian public houses and industrial buildings
- Some more interesting Victorian buildings: the Northgate Bakery and the frontage to Brookdale Place for example
- Interwar office buildings (i.e. Concorde House on Canal Street)
- Modern brick buildings, typical of their type and era, i.e. Northgate Arena and the Iceland store.
- Recent contemporary buildings of white render, dark brick and glazing, i.e. the Travelodge

In summary it is a mix between older, back-of-pavement styles of domestic scale, some of which have lost their context due to surrounding demolition, and modern detached buildings of greater

scale that sit within their own plots. Brick is the dominant material throughout, with less white render and timber facing than is typical elsewhere in Chester.



Properties on George Street (Phoenix Tower behind)



Modern residential development

Landscape Character

There are a surprising number of public open spaces in the area, although many of these are rather inaccessible and not visible, thereby limiting their contribution to the wider character. These include the interior of the two roundabouts and the canal corridor, which is in a deep cutting for much of its length here. The Hoole Way roundabout is a closed space so contributes little to the surrounding area and although the space itself is generally pleasant it is never peaceful due to the surrounding traffic. The fountains roundabout with its water and open aspect contributes more positively to surrounding character. Elsewhere the public realm in the area is rather poor, dominated by road signage and functional street furniture.



Canal corridor (east of Northgate)

The canal corridor is mixed in quality, providing a pleasant walk and strong setting for the Walls but leaving one feeling rather isolated and potentially unsafe due to the steep changes in level and its consequent hidden nature. It is at its best west of Northgate Street, where views of

the Bridge of Sighs adds character, although the underpass under the Inner Ring Road at the western edge is a particularly unpleasant stretch. The vegetation of the canal corridor does also provide a greening of the George Street frontage, which is generally a positive effect.



*Left: The Bridge of Sighs and canal corridor (west of Northgate)
Right: Steep changes in level provide accessibility challenges*

Setting of the Walls – Northgate Canal Cutting: Perhaps the most dramatic setting for the city Walls in their entire length is provided by the cutting to the north of Deans Field. This is said to follow the line of the Roman ditch, but at a lower level, adding apparent height to the Walls and this is one of the few places where the original Roman masonry, with its heavy cornice, can be seen clearly. The deep chasm cut through sandstone to allow the canal to drop to the level of the Dee creates views both from the towpath and through trees from the opposite side of the

canal on George Street. Northgate Bridge closes the vista at the western end – as well as providing dramatic views of the Walls in both directions - and the curve of George Street and the Phoenix Tower close it to the east. Within the City Walls, the Deans Field is a private open space, but walkers on the Walls can appreciate the monument in a green setting seen over the wide grassed area to one side, while looking down at the canal far below.

Setting of the Walls – Kaleyards: The City Walls at this location rise above an undistinguished car park to the rear of retail premises on Frodsham Street. A short grass slope and trees partly mask glimpses of the Cathedral Bell Tower and the Cathedral itself. A flight of steps rises to the southern end, spanning over important Roman remains while to the north, the historic Kaleyards Gate connects Abbey Street to Frodsham Street and once gave the monks access to their vegetable gardens. The poor rear elevation of the Frodsham Street premises and the tarmacadam car park provide a low quality setting for the City Walls here, with views for those walking the walls providing nothing of delight. The presence of a pigeon feeding station and rear service yards, apparently sited without any thought for their historic location, further detracts from the setting of such an important ancient monument.

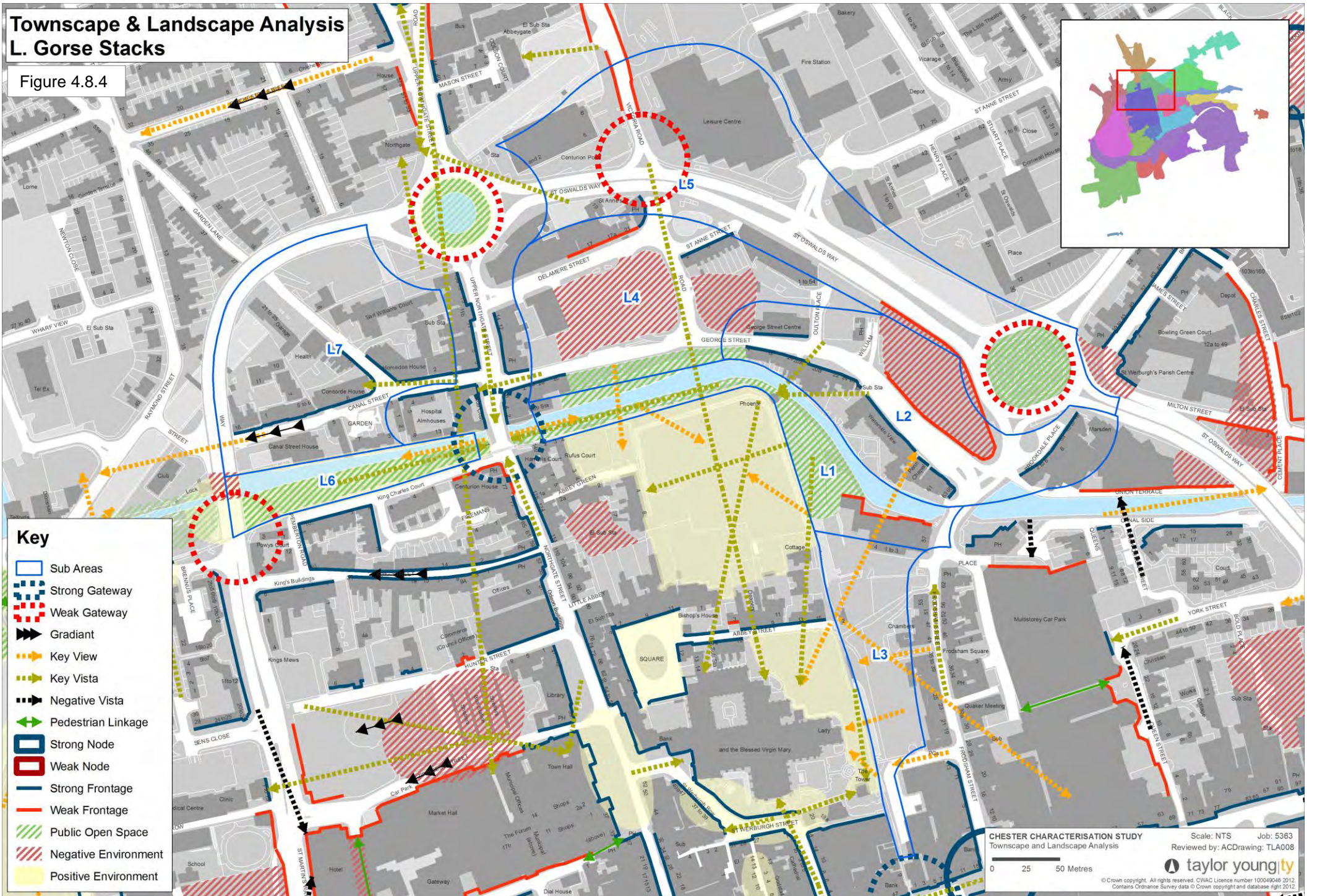
The openness of the Kaleyards site does allow a view of the full eastern range of the Cathedral (when the trees are not in leaf). It is important that this open view is maintained.



City Walls at Northgate Canal Cutting

Townscape & Landscape Analysis L. Gorse Stacks

Figure 4.8.4



Designated Heritage Assets

The part of the area south of the Inner Ring Road is within the City Centre Conservation Area. The area north of this is not within any Conservation Area.

In comparison to the other Character Areas surveyed there are relatively few listed buildings here. Those that are all mostly lie on George Street and Gorse Stacks and are all Grade II. No. 5 Canal Street is also Grade II listed.

The City Walls and the Phoenix Tower are Grade I listed and classed as Scheduled Monuments.

There is also one Article 4 Direction, on 22 George Street.

Buildings and Structures of Townscape Merit

Six un-listed Buildings of Townscape Merit have been identified.

- **L2a: George Street Centre-** Edwardian institutional building.



- **L2b. George Street Chapel –** Victorian Neo-Gothic style.



- **L2c. 22 George Street (The Manse),** interesting Italianate detailing (already subject to Article 4 Direction).



- **L2d. 20B Penri Chapel, Gorse Stacks** – another neo-Gothic Chapel.



- **L3a. 20B Victorian Cottage, Kaleyard Gates** – Georgian townhouse which appears to have earlier elements.



- **L2f. Karai Lounge, Brookdale Place** Georgian building (part of larger though much altered group) with distinctive double height glazing; a local landmark at a prominent location.



Key Detractors

There are a relatively high number of key detractors in the area. These include large scale buildings that are highly visible and inappropriate to local character: namely the residential towers north of St. Oswald's Way that overlook the area and the Iceland store, which detracts from the adjacent canalside environment.

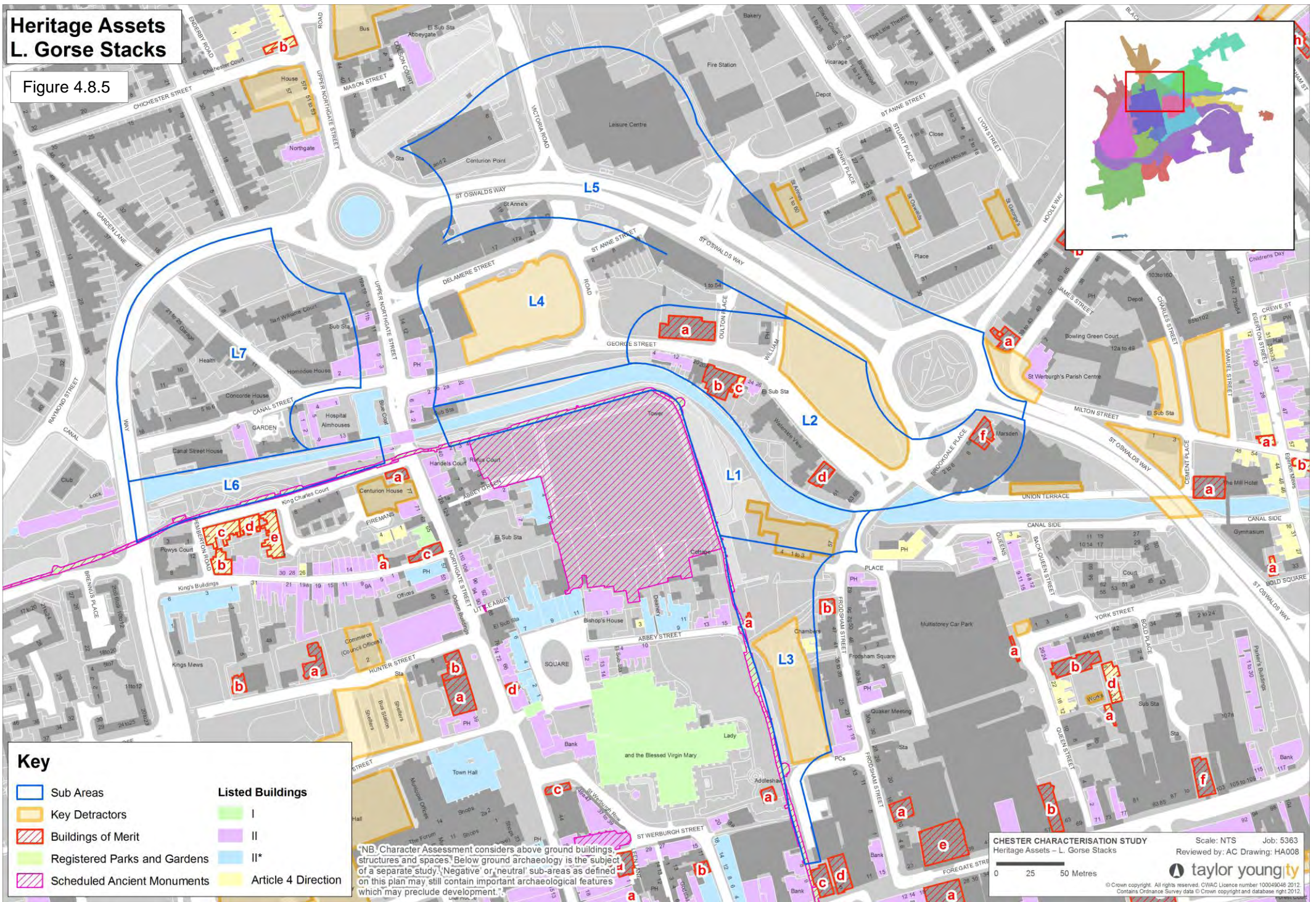
Then there are the visible cleared spaces (generally used for car parks) where there should be built form (of appropriate quality) in order to better define the urban form. In this category is the land between Delamere Street and George Street (which is a development site at the time of writing so this will be remedied), the car park on the roundabout at Gorse Stacks and the Kaleyards car park. This latter site is sensitive as it is directly adjacent to the walls, affecting their setting, and is highly visible from them. There also appears to be issues here with pigeons and anti-social behaviour.



Kaleyards Car Park dovecote

Heritage Assets L. Gorse Stacks

Figure 4.8.5



Key

- | | |
|---|---|
|  Sub Areas |  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.'

Summary: Character Assessment

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

- **L1. Northgate/Cow Lane Bridge: Positive** – a historically significant cutting with the Canal and the City Walls but compromised by modern development.
- **L2. Gorse Stacks: Neutral** – some listed and townscape buildings but the overall character has been compromised by clearance, new development and the Inner Ring Road.
- **L3. Kaleyards: Positive** – an important area – being the site of the former Roman parade ground and including the City Walls but it is presently in need of enhancement.
- **L4. George Street/Delamere Street: Neutral** – Includes some remnant townscape buildings but the overall character has been lost by clearance and redevelopment.
- **L5. St Oswald's Way: Negative** – the character is dominated by the dual carriageway and modernist building which could be in any town.
- **L6. Northgate Canal Cutting: Critical** – a historically significant cutting with the Canal and the City Walls.
- **L7. Canal Street/Garden Lane: Neutral** - a mixed area lying just outside the historic core with few buildings of significance.



L1. Modern development on the canalside

Character Statement:

“The Gorse Stacks area was once a densely developed and important part of the City. This character is the area’s history rather than its present but there are several buildings that serve as reminders of earlier eras. The Shropshire Union Canal provides a strong remaining link to that past and a striking setting for the adjacent City Walls . “

Management and Policy Recommendations

Given the extent to which the area has been altered, and its original character lost, it has to be questioned whether the existing Conservation Area boundary is appropriate or whether it should be contracted. The key features of the area are undoubtedly the City Walls and the canal. There are also some buildings of note on the southern side of George Street. North of George Street there is probably insufficient buildings of merit to warrant Conservation Area status as the urban form here has been irrevocably altered. Consequently, George Street may make a more appropriate northern boundary than St. Oswald's Way. Upper Northgate Street south of the Inner Ring Road, however, should remain wholly within the Conservation Area.

The Buildings of Merit identified should be protected by further Article 4 Directions and/or included in a Local List.

Capacity to Accommodate Change

This is one of the areas in Chester with the highest capacity for change, and one in which development is likely to improve local character if appropriately designed. Development has recently been completed and, at the time of writing, new schemes are on site. Restoring frontage to blocks will reinforce links to the character that this area had in the past. The key issues are to respect the setting of the City Walls and the canalside.

Design Principles for New Development

New development on vacant sites offers the opportunity to restore the earlier urban form, or something approximate to it, by developing back-of-pavement development with near continuous frontages. There should also be variety and interest in the elevations. Two to three storeys will generally be most appropriate.

The Kaleyards site is remarkable in having a continuous history of being undeveloped. This should be respected when considering proposals affecting the site, especially in relation to potential archaeological impacts and in maintaining an open and attractive setting to the Walls. It is also important that the site maintains views and a strong setting for the Cathedral. The environment and pedestrian experience within this site does need to be improved. The site also offers good potential for interpretation facilities interpretation of the City Walls – it is one of the most accessible and interesting stretches, with a portion of Roman, medieval and later work and buttresses plus the base of the Medieval tower and the Kaleyard gate. One opportunity could be to display the base of the medieval tower under the steps up to the Walls.

The opportunity should also be taken to improve the rear aspect of properties on Frodsham Street, which currently create a poor impression when viewed from the Walls. This could include extension and remodelling. Properties on Frodsham Street have narrow plot widths. This is a historic characteristic that should remain reflected in the frontage character, whilst also finding ways to accommodate modern retail floorplates.

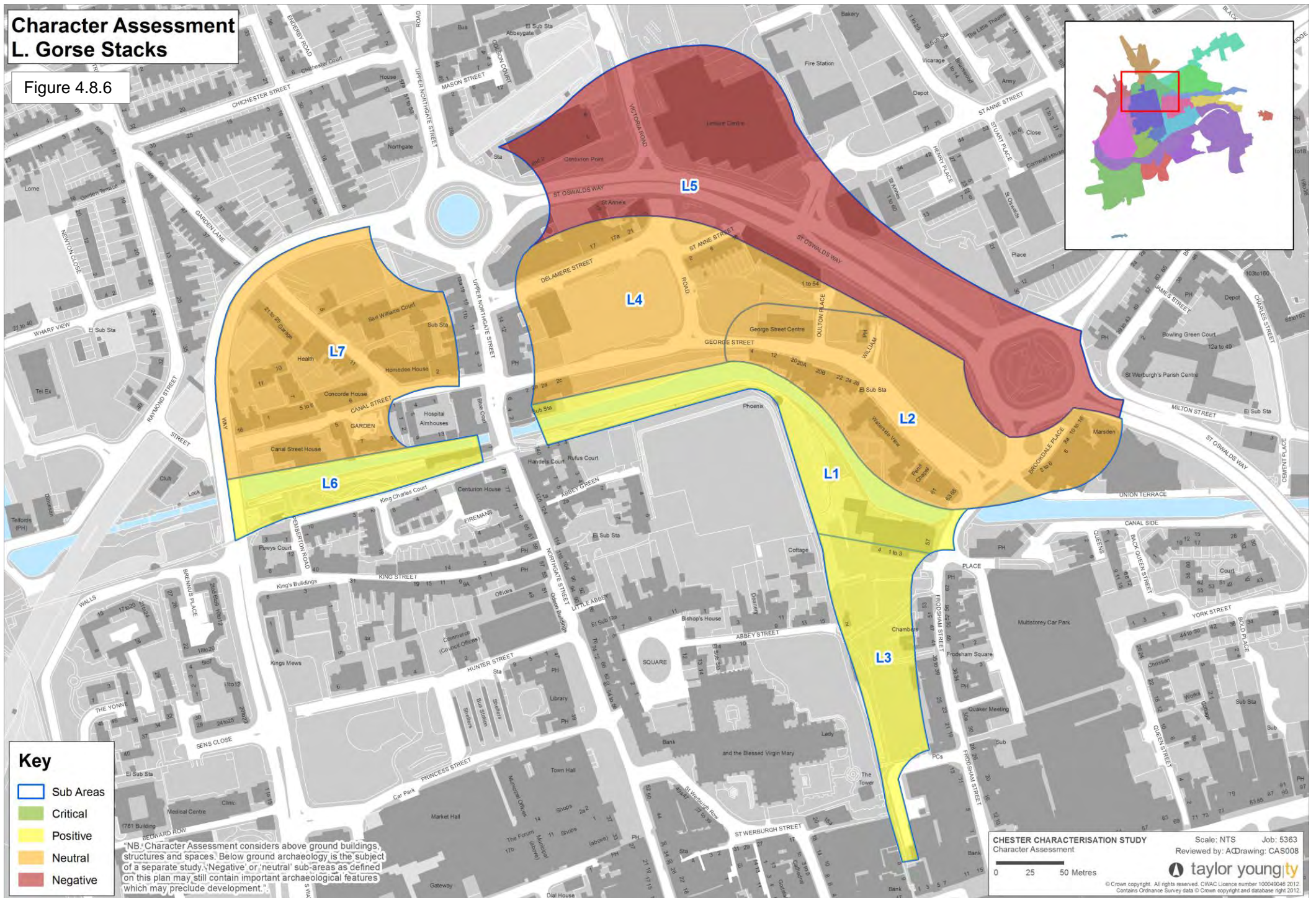
In summary, the Gorse Stacks area is in urgent need of regeneration and enhancement, within a comprehensive overview that looks back to its history and the surviving character buildings and features.



Kaleyards car park and the City Walls

Character Assessment L. Gorse Stacks

Figure 4.8.6



Key

- Sub Areas
- Critical
- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

"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
Character Assessment

Scale: NTS Job: 5363
Reviewed by: ACDrawing: CAS008

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