

THE FUTURE OF FUNDING FOR THE PAST

HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN COLCHESTER

Philip J Wise MClfA (5108)

Last year, my employer Colchester Borough Council asked me to advise on the acquisition of a section of Colchester's historic town wall, usually referred to as the Roman Wall. This unusual circumstance of purchasing a Scheduled Ancient Monument set me thinking about how monument management has changed over the last 20 years. While inevitably the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact, I believe this is only part of the story and that there are long-term processes at work that will have significant implications for the management of archaeological monuments in historic English towns like Colchester.

I arrived in Colchester in 1998 and amongst my principal responsibilities was the management of the town's rich and varied portfolio of historic sites and monuments. I inherited a well-funded management regime from my predecessor Mark Davies, who had initiated the

establishment by Colchester Borough Council of a special fund, the Heritage Reserve. The objective of this fund was to enable the Council to 'Provide funding for an ongoing programme of care, maintenance, display, and interpretation of historic sites and buildings, ancient

monuments and museum collections for which the Council is responsible'. The strength of the Heritage Reserve lay in the fact that it was an imaginative way of breaking free from the strait jacket of normal council expenditure. As a rolling fund, it was possible to build up financial



The stretch of Colchester's Roman Wall recently purchased by the local authority. Credit: CIMS

The Balkerne Gate, the largest surviving gateway from Roman Britain. Credit: CIMS



St Botolph's churchyard, with 19th-century tombs amid the ruins of the medieval priory. Credit: CIMS

resources over several years to tackle major projects, including the maintenance and repair of the Roman Wall.

Unfortunately, this couldn't last, and it became harder for the Council to pay into the Heritage Reserve each year. The last straw was the global financial crisis of 2007–08, after which the Council was usually only able to be reactive and fund emergency works on the Roman Wall, or major capital projects such as the redevelopment of Colchester Castle in 2012–14. These examples benefited from external funding from English Heritage/ Historic England, the Heritage Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Heritage Fund) and an EU European Regional Development Fund INTERREG IVA project, *Norman Connections*.

The funding landscape was already changing in 2010, and the Friends of Colchester Roman Wall was founded by the town's mayor to promote and fundraise for the interpretation of this monument. The Friends raised £25,000 from their membership and from corporate and other sponsors including the Colchester Sixth

Form College, a firm of local solicitors and the family of the town's former MP, and were able to fund the installation of 14 panels around Colchester's historic town wall.

The Colchester Civic Society also became increasingly involved in heritage conservation and interpretation. In 2014 it began its *Concrete Legacy* project, which celebrated the work of the Colchester artists Henry Collins and Joyce Pallot who pioneered the use of cast concrete panels in public art in the UK and produced murals for the four subways under Colchester's Southway, constructed in 1972–73. These commemorate important figures in Colchester's history, including the Roman emperor Claudius, the Norman baron Eudo and the pioneering Elizabethan scientist William Gilbert. This project also received a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, ensuring these remarkable features of Colchester's public realm were fully conserved.

More recently the Civic Society has been working with Colchester Borough Council on a project to interpret the historic

churchyard of St Botolph's Church, which contains the graves of three remarkable 19th-century Colcestrians: Capt Jesse Jones, a veteran of the Battle of Waterloo, Dr Roger Nunn, the town's first hospital doctor, and William Hawkins, an MP and railway pioneer. As well as a new interpretation panel, there are plans to conserve Capt Jones's grave and install a new bronze memorial plaque.

This brings us to Colchester Borough Council's purchase of a stretch of Colchester's Roman Wall in 2020 from the multinational company JCDecaux. After the company lost the right to use the land for advertising hoardings, it decided to put it up for sale for £5000 plus costs. As a Scheduled Ancient Monument, the future of this stretch of the Roman Wall was never under threat. However, it was felt strongly by many in the local community that it should be in public ownership and £4000 was made available by the Colchester Civic Society, the Friends of Colchester Museums and the Colchester Tourist Guides Association.

There is no doubt that local authorities will face real resource implications, both in terms of funding and specialist expertise, in the future management of the historic environment in historic towns such as Colchester. Councils can no longer go it alone as they once did and the experience in Colchester has shown that great success can be achieved through partnership working with heritage organisations in the local community. Encouragingly there remains a clear interest among the community and the town's politicians in their heritage. The way forward is for the council to be an enabler,

encouraging people to become involved and do things themselves with specialist heritage management expertise provided by the council as required. This also has the advantage that future projects will be at least partly determined by the local community and will reflect its interests rather than being imposed by the council.

Philip Wise

Philip read archaeology and anthropology at Downing College, Cambridge and subsequently studied curatorship at the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester and heritage management at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL. He has worked in a variety of local authority museums since 1983 and is currently the Heritage Manager with Colchester and Ipswich Museums. Amongst his responsibilities is the management of Colchester's archaeological sites and monuments.

He was Chair of the Society of Museum Archaeologists 2006–09 and the UK Archaeological Archives Forum 2007–11. He is an Associate of the Museums Association and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.



One of the murals from the Concrete Legacy project. Credit: Colchester Civic Society

Colchester's Roman Church, one of many sites managed by the local authority. Credit: CIMS

