

A walking tour of central Chester



Michael Pierre de Villiers

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Title page: Chester Eastgate Street seen from the Eastgate and the clock.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

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Introduction

Chester was first settled in AD 79 by the Romans next to the River Dee where the remains of a Roman amphitheatre can be seen, as well as a garden with the remains of building columns and a restored mosaic floor. The roughly rectangular wall surrounding the old central part of Chester dates back to Roman times, although it has been periodically rebuilt.

The main streets of the old central part of the city have many timber framed buildings, which give the inner city its distinctive and very attractive, one may say beautiful, appearance. Some that date back to the 13th and 14th centuries. One must be wary of thinking that all the black timber and white fill buildings are very old. The vast majority of them are mock Tudor, or to use the correct term, Tudor Revival architecture, dating from late 19th century and deliberately built to maintain the aesthetic timber frame character of the inner city. Falling into this category are most of the buildings seen with oriel windows and decorative timber-work which are 19th century (Great Britain, 2005). An oriel window is a type of bay window which usually protrudes from an upper floor of the main wall of a building, not reaching the ground.

Chester is famous for its Chester rows (Leapman, 2005). These are rows of ground floor shops with 1st floor shops set back from the road behind (and accessed from), a covered 1st floor walkway or gallery. They pre-date modern multi-story shops by several centuries. The rows, as they are called, are present to varying extent along the four main streets that radiate from the Chester Cross along Watergate Street, Northgate Street, Eastgate Street and Bridge Street, being most prevalent along both sides of Bridge Street, most of Watergate and Eastgate Street, but for a short part of southern Northgate Street mainly on the eastern side.

According to British Listed Buildings (2023a), the Chester City Ward has 511 Grade II listed buildings, 177 Grade II* and 85 Grade I. The author found that, at a rough count, 143 of those listed are along Chester city centre's four main streets, namely Northgate, Eastgate, Watergate and Bridge, where 101 (about 70%) are Grade II listed, 30 Grade II* and 12 Grade I. A listed building may not be demolished, extended or altered without special permission from the local planning authority in consultation with the relevant central government agency. The building must be man-made and at least approaching its original state. Keeping this in mind, all buildings built before 1700 are listed and most up to 1840. It becomes much more difficult for more recent buildings to be listed, particularly after 1945, they must be at least 30 years old and be exceptional to be listed. Structures such as bridges, monuments, sculptures, war memorials, milestones and mileposts may also be listed. Ancient structures, such as Stonehenge, are usually classified as Scheduled Ancient Monuments. The listing in descending order of importance is Grade I, Grade II* or Grade II. Grade I buildings are of exceptional interest. Grade II* groups particularly important buildings of more than special interest. While Grade II lists buildings that are of special interest, usually private residential buildings and consist of about 92% of listings. There was a non-statutory Grade III until 1970 (British Listed Buildings, 2023b).

Information for listed buildings was obtained from the Historic England website, although British Listed Buildings could have been used as both provide the same information with slightly different search methods. Medieval Chester and Bridge Street refer to pamphlets.

This article contains a limited selection of places that were of interest and pleasure to the author, there being too many to include all of them. The author has by far, many more photographs of central Chester than ever taken anywhere else, in total around 250 during two visits. The article is in the form of walks made in the city centre on the 13th September 2014 and again from the 10th to 12th September 2023. My wife and I thoroughly enjoyed the first trip but never got around to visiting again until 2023.



A rough sketch map of central Chester. It is street guide to the walks mentioned in the text, as well as a means of determining the location of places of interest.

Walking the Wall



Newgate seen from Pepper Street.

The first walk, anti-clockwise along the wall, begins near to our corner of Pepper and Bridge Streets hotel at **Newgate** (Grade II) on the eastern end of Pepper Street. Newgate is the newest gate in the wall. An information board states that “the original gate at this position in the wall possibly dated from before 1066. The earliest recorded was in the late 12th century and named Wolfeld’s Gate. Named after someone possibly with Scandinavian connection. Later it became known as Peppergate. The gate has been rebuilt many times. For the last time 1768. By

the 1930s traffic congestion had become a problem. The result was the wider neo-Gothic design Newgate that opened to traffic in 1938. Completed with ornamental arrow slits and heraldic shields, it was designed to blend with the wall”.

From the top of gate one can see, next to the outside of the wall, the **Roman Garden** (Grade II). Established in 1949 it contains Roman items excavated elsewhere in the city, comprising mainly the remains of building columns and a reconstruction of a mosaic floor (O’Hanlon, 2000). Clearly visible a short distance to the east is the remaining half of a **Roman Amphitheatre** (Grade I) framed to the north by curved Little St. John’s Street. Probably built soon after AD 79 in the AD 80s, it became derelict when the resident Legion was posted north to build Hadrian’s Wall, but rebuilt when they returned in AD 275. It was a functioning amphitheatre until abandoned around AD 350 (English Heritage, 2023). Next to the outside of the wall, immediately north of Newgate, is the base remains of the south-east angle tower, which was part of where the 1st to 2nd century Legionary Roman Fortress stood.



The Roman Amphitheatre showing sand arena and the remains of terraced seating on the left. To the right, off photograph, is the Roman Garden next to the wall (photograph right).

Continuing north along the wall one arrives at **Eastgate and the clock** (Grade I). Eastgate has always been the main entrance to the walled city. Over the years it has changed considerably, but it is still the entrance to the city’s busiest thoroughfare, albeit pedestrianised. Today, it is not an impressive structure, the original gatehouse having been replaced with the present archway in 1768-69. However, it does have a wrought-iron clock that was erected on the wall



Eastgate seen from Foregate Street looking toward Eastgate Street.

the Abby Church became Chester Cathedral a year later”. Initially a Benedictine monastery, the cathedral dates from between 1093 and the 16th century, having been modified a number of times. In the later 1800s major restoration work was done amid considerable controversy. It was accused of being a rebuild rather than restoration. It does have beautiful stained glass windows and interesting frescos. During the 20th century a free standing **Bell Tower** (Grade II) was added. More about these buildings during the next walkabout. On a previous walk in September 2014, looking down from the wall there was a sandwich board for the Bell Tower Coffee Bar which read in bullet form “Husband Creche (overlooking Cathedral). Leave him with us. You go shopping in peace. Return to Bell Tower for Refreshments/Lunch. He carries bags home. WIN WIN. PS you MUST return!” Unfortunately, the sign is no longer there.

in 1897, presented to the city by Edward Evans-Lloyd (citizen and Freeman) and public subscription (Historic England).

Further northward, on the left inside, the wall one passes the **Cathedral Church of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary** and its former monastic buildings, both Grade I listed. An information board states that a “church has existed at the site since the 7th century. In 1092 Hugh Lupus (the name means wolf), Earl of Chester, founded the Benedictine Abbey of St. Werburgh (the patron saint of Chester). In 1540 Henry VIII seized control during the Dissolution of the Monasteries and



King Charles I Tower seen from outside the wall.

A little further north, not visible from the wall above, is a doorway in the wall named **Kaleyard Gate** (Grade I). The doorway was cut through the wall circa 1275, authorised by King Edward I, so that monks of the then St Werburgh's Abbey could have direct access to their vegetable garden. It was closed nightly (Historic England). The doorway is still in use for pedestrians.

Walking to the north-east corner of the wall, one reaches the **King Charles I Tower** (Grade I). The tower was once a medieval watch-tower, circa 13th century, damaged during the Civil War 1644 to 1646, rebuilt 1658 and more recently repaired at times during the 19th and 20th centuries. An information board informs one that the “King Charles Tower was once a medieval watch-tower, but by the 17th century had fallen into disrepair. Not enough ‘murage’ tax was being raised for its upkeep, or to maintain the rest of the City Walls. To solve the problem the city’s guilds were invited to lease the principal towers as meeting houses and undertake to them in good repair. This tower became known as the Phoenix Tower after the

emblem of the Painters' Company, which met here. You can still see a stone phoenix from 1613 above the door. It is reputed that King Charles I witnessed the defeat of his Royalist forces at the Battle of Rowton Moor from this tower in 1645". Also known as the Battle of Rowton Heath.

Another information board inside the tower tells of the battle. "The siege of Chester occurred during the first English Civil War, between February 1645 and February 1646. The city of Chester was an important stronghold in the English border country. The city controlled all river traffic as well as the important crossing of the River Dee into North Wales. With strong city walls, dating originally from Roman times, Chester was a Royalist stronghold from the outset of the Civil War. Between 1642 and 1643, the city walls were strengthened and a new ring of earthwork defences added.

From the beginning of the war, the city of Chester was held by forces loyal to the king. It was first besieged in late 1644 and in February 1645. Parliamentary forces under the command of Sir William Brereton mounted a determined assault on the city. A force of his men tried unsuccessfully to scale the walls near Northgate. That attempt repulsed, Brereton laid siege to Chester. With fighting continuing throughout the country, the city was briefly relieved in March 1645 by a Royalist force led by Prince Maurice of the Palatinate. However, having broken the siege, a few weeks later, the Prince moved on and took with him a large part of the city garrison, including 1200 hardened Irish fighting men. Chester was left with only 600 regular soldiers, together with its own civilian militia to defend the city.

By September, the siege was once again pursued in earnest and continued in intensity until the following January. At the Battle of Rowton Heath, a Royalist force led by King Charles failed to lift the siege and suffered a disastrous defeat. The Royalist garrison at Chester was under the command of Lord Byron, who led his surviving forces there after the defeat of his Royalist army at the Battle of Nantwich in January 1644.

Byron, especially in the final few months, defended the city and inhabitants with great skill against overwhelming odds. But in January 1646, faced with starvation of Chester's citizens and with no hope of relief, Byron had little choice but to accept surrender terms. The city was handed over to Sir William Brereton and occupied by his Parliamentary forces of the New Model Army. The siege of Chester was at an end."



Northgate seen from the canal towpath looking east. Beneath it is a waterpipe. In the foreground is the Bridge of Sighs.

Heading westward along the northern part of the wall one crosses over **Northgate** (Grade I). The present archway replaced the medieval Gatehouse in 1810 (Historic England). Further west is the modern footbridge in the wall over St. Martin's Way. Of more interest is the section of **Chester Canal** alongside the outer length of the north wall. Apart from walking the wall, we also walked the towpath where the canal was alongside the wall. Once again there is an excellent information board, next to the **Northgate Locks** (Grade II), that tells of the amazing and interesting cutting of this picturesque section of the canal.

“The dramatic rock cutting taking the canal along the City Walls was meant to be a tunnel but the canal builders found the remains of the Roman ditch and a cutting could be made instead, although much rock still had to be cut out. This Triassic Chester Pebble Bed Sandstone was laid 250 million years ago when this place was where the Sahara Desert is today. The small ‘Bridge of Sighs’ (Grade II – author) over the cutting was built so prisoners in Northgate Gaol could cross to St John’s Chapel in the Bluecoat School.

Beyond the bridges the wall above the canal (opposite the towpath side – author) is the best preserved stretch of the original Roman Wall in Chester. Archaeologists believe that this was built around AD 100. The wall and rock face can be seen clearly from this viewpoint looking down from the bridge that carries Northgate Street over the canal.”

Another section of the information board tells of the history of the canal. “In the 18th century, Chester and Deeside was a manufacturing and trading centre whose transport links were critical. The Port of Chester and its outports stretched along the River Dee for 12 miles, but with competition from Liverpool and the advent of canals elsewhere in England, demand rose for a canal link from Chester to other English towns. Despite still opposition from rival canals, the Chester Canal Act was passed in 1772 and construction work started in May of that year.

The first traffic was carried in 1775, but business was poor, since the canal went only as far as Nantwich and there were major engineering problems. By 1790, the Chester Canal was facing



Northgate Locks.

ruin, but was saved by a link with the Ellesmere Canal Company. This had been set up in 1793 to connect Ellesmere in Shropshire and the industries of North Wales to the River Severn at Shrewsbury and to the River Mersey at Netherpool/Whitby, now known as Ellesmere Port.

The Wirral Line of the Ellesmere Canal joined the Chester Canal below Northgate Locks. The two canal companies merged in 1813. By 1835 the canal had been joined to the national network at Wolverhampton and Middlewich and in 1845 it became part of the Shropshire Union system. These waterways are now very popular with leisure boaters as well a towpath users.”

At the western end of the canal the three locks, originally 5, lower the canal 10 metres (32 feet) to the canal basin and almost to the level of the River Dee. Apart from the canal going northward to join the Manchester Ship Canal, another two locks at the canal basin enables narrow boats to access the River Dee.

At this part of the canal a double track railway line passes overhead the canal and passes twice under the wall at its north-western corner. In both instances the wall on the bridges over the railway line has been rebuilt to closely resemble the old wall so that one does not notice any difference in the ancient wall.



Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower and the Water Tower right, including the damaged spur wall.

Located at this north-west corner of the wall is **Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower** (Grade I) and the much bigger 22 metre (72 feet) high **Water Tower** (Grade I) with its connecting spur wall. Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower, was first recorded in 1249. It eventually became a gatehouse to the nearby Water Tower (O'Hanlon, 2000; Medieval Chester). An information board located at Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower informs one that: "The Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Normans all greatly valued Chester as a strategic port. These two towers, the smaller Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower and the larger Water Tower, were both built to defend the port. Anglo-Saxon Queen Aethelflaed established Chester as one of a string of royal fortified towns (burhs). She may have extended the City Walls to the River Dee and built Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower to protect the port. The later Water Tower, originally known as the New Tower, was built between 1322 and 1325 by John de Helpston, a mason who had worked on the king's castles in Wales.

The River Dee slowly silted and by the 1320s ships could no longer reach the old Chester port (where the Roodee racecourse is today). To overcome this problem, the Water Tower was built standing in the river. This enabled sailors to dock their ships around its base and unload their cargoes.

The City Walls have been a constant feature in a surrounding landscape that has changed a great deal over time. In the late 18th century, the canal basin reached almost to the base of the Water Tower.

After the port declined the railway took over as an important means of trade and transport. The railway line from Chester to North Wales was cut through the City Walls in 1846. Instead of diverting the railway towards the river, the engineers cut right through the City Walls, something quite impossible today with the very high protection they receive as a Scheduled Ancient Monument."

Approximately halfway south along the wall is **Watergate** (Grade I) and another information board. "The River Dee was once deep enough for ocean going vessels to reach the port of Chester. In medieval times the port, protected by the City Walls and towers, was second only in importance to Bristol on the west coast. Water Gate was the main entrance to the city for goods arriving at the port and was a vital place for tolls and the regulation of trade" and "Herring, wine, rich linen, corn, brushwood and slate were all imported and were often taxed on entry into the city. The Georgian Water Gate was erected in 1788, replacing a narrow, fortified gateway with a broad and elegant entrance and promenade". Unfortunately, we did not leave the wall to photograph the gate.



Roodee Racecourse seen from the wall. No entrance fee.

is now part of a complex consisting of the Chester Crown Court, Cheshire Military Museum and University of Chester.

South of Watergate one passes the aforementioned **Roodee (Chester) Racecourse** situated on the level plain outside the wall. When we visited on a Saturday in September 2014, we watched a horse race where the track passes close to the wall. Dating back to 1539, it is believed to be the oldest racecourse still in existence in the world.

Inside the south-west corner of the wall is the motte and bailey **Chester Castle** (different parts of the castle are Grade I and Grade II listed). The motte being a defensive mound of earth surmounted by the keep, or castle. It



Chester Castle.

An information board. Says “William the Conqueror built Chester’s first castle in 1070, a timber tower atop an earth mound. During the 12th and 13th centuries the castle was rebuilt in stone and extended by successive Earls of Chester, who were some of the most powerful nobles in the country. It became the royal base for the conquest of North Wales and even the meeting place for the Irish parliament during times of unrest in Ireland. In Norman times Chester Castle was the seat of power of the Earls of Chester. The first earl, Hugh Lupus (Hugh the Wolf) held his parliament here. The last Norman earl died in 1237. Since 1301 the earldom has been held

by successive Princes of Wales, heirs to the throne, In recognition of Chester’s political and military importance. Chester Castle was built in a prominent position controlling the River Dee, the port of Chester and the road to Wales across the Old Dee Bridge”. We tried to visit the castle. A notice board at the entrance said that it was closed and prior booking was necessary.



Watergate and the Old River Dee bridge.

Heading east along the southern part of the wall it shifts to between Castle Drive and the River Dee in the form of a low waist high intervening wall until it reaches the **Bridgegate** (Grade I) intersection where the present Bridgegate archway, built during 1781 and 1782 (Historic England) marks the resumption of the wall eastward. It is also at the entrance to the **Old Dee Bridge** (Grade I), the oldest bridge in the city. The bridge was built in the 14th century after several early timber bridges had been swept away. The unequally spaced arches indicate the difficulty finding firm ground rock for foundations (O'Hanlon, 2000).

This part of the wall rises high above the promenade below with a good view down to the Old Dee Bridge as well as the **Weir and Salmon Leap** (Grade I) immediately upstream of the Old Dee Bridge. The weir with a sloping spillway and salmon leap was built late in the 11th century for the 2nd Earl of Chester, Hugh d'Averanches, to provide power for the medieval mills with six mill-wheels by 1270, all of which were demolished between 1910 and 1970 (British Listed Buildings, 2023c).



The River Dee weir and salmon leap distant right. Six Park Street houses right

From the south-east corner of the wall, it is a short walk back to the starting point at Newgate, passing the **Six Park Street Houses** (Grade II), all that remain of the original attractive nine joined together almshouses. Built in the 17th century they consist of a sandstone ground floor with jettied timber framed 1st floor and gabled roofs. The cottage on the far left is slightly larger (Historic England).

Walking the four main streets

The four main central streets, Northgate, Watergate, Eastgate and Bridge, converge at the **Cross** (Grade II). A cross has stood at this location since early 14th century. It was destroyed by Parliamentarians in 1646 during the Civil War. Salvaged parts remained hidden until the cross was restored in its original position (O'Hanlon, 2000; Historic England). Judging by its appearance, the original parts are the moulded part of the crown and moulded part of the base. The rest of the cross is red sandstone. The photograph shows stairs to the beginning of the Chester Row along the



The Cross.

northern side of Watergate Street above ground floor shops, as well as part of a red sandstone wall of Grade I St. Peters Church.



Mollie's shop building with figurines.

Walking these four central streets can be more of a meander rather than an organised walk. That said, walking northward on the left side of Northgate Street, is **Mollie's Traditional Sweet Shop** housed in a very attractive, probably early 19th century Grade II* listed building, with the frontage rebuilt in 1902, including the decorative capital with figurines.

Alongside Mollie's is an ally. About 20 metres into this alley is the **Roman Strongroom**. Interestingly, while indicated on the British Listed Buildings map, it is not listed. Admittedly the excavated site behind a shopfront window is not attractive. However, it has an interesting history.



Two views of the Roman Strongroom display.

According to an information board; "The ruins are the remains of the spiritual and financial heart of the Roman legionary fortress of Deva (Chester). The underground strongroom served as the legion's treasury. It held the unit's pay chests, as well as the men's savings and perhaps bullion and other valuables and was kept under permanent guard.

The aedes (the dwelling place of a god – author) directly above was the regimental shrine. Here the legion's standards were displayed; there may also have been a statue of the emperor and alters to the gods who protected the Roman state. This was a revered and powerful room, abused and defiled at great peril. The aedes and strongroom were the symbolic heart of the principia (the headquarters building). Situated at the central crossroads, this building was the nerve centre of the fortress, providing offices for the administration of the legion and a setting for military ceremonies. The battle standards were a vital symbol of the legion's strength and identity. They included the aquila, the eagle associated with the god Jupiter and an object of huge reverence; and the imago, a portable bust of the emperor, which served as a reminder to the legion of their oath of loyalty. The standards were a rallying point in battle, but more importantly they represented the honour of the legion and of Rome. It was therefore considered the greatest dishonour a legion could endure if the eagle was captured or lost".

Returning to Northgate Street and walking further north is the **Town Hall** (Grade II*) built between 1865-69, gutted by fire in 1897 and internally redesigned. It is also home to the Visitor Information Centre.

A little further past Princess Street, is the former **Westminster coach and motor car works** circa 1914 building, Apparently, built after the original premises was destroyed by a fire in 1910. Now known as the entrance to the Coachworks Arcade and City market. It is not Grade listed. However, it is an attractive building and most unusual in appearance compared with all the other buildings seen in the city centre.



The town Hall and the Westminster coach and motor car works building.



Pied Bull Hotel.

Further north at the corner with King Street, is the **Pied Bull Hotel** (Grade II*). Another interesting building of contrasting appearance compared with surrounding buildings. The ground floor is made of brown brick with Flemish bond brickwork above (Historic England). A wall plaque informs one that it was “originally named Bull Mansion, this was the residence of Chester’s Recorder in 1633. It was refronted in the 18th century when it became an important coaching inn. George Borrow is thought to have stayed here during his tour of “Wild

Wales” in 1864”. George Henry Borrow was a 19th century English novel and travel writer. The Recorder was a person with legal knowledge (usually a barrister) appointed by the mayor and aldermen to record city and/or borough court proceedings and customs.

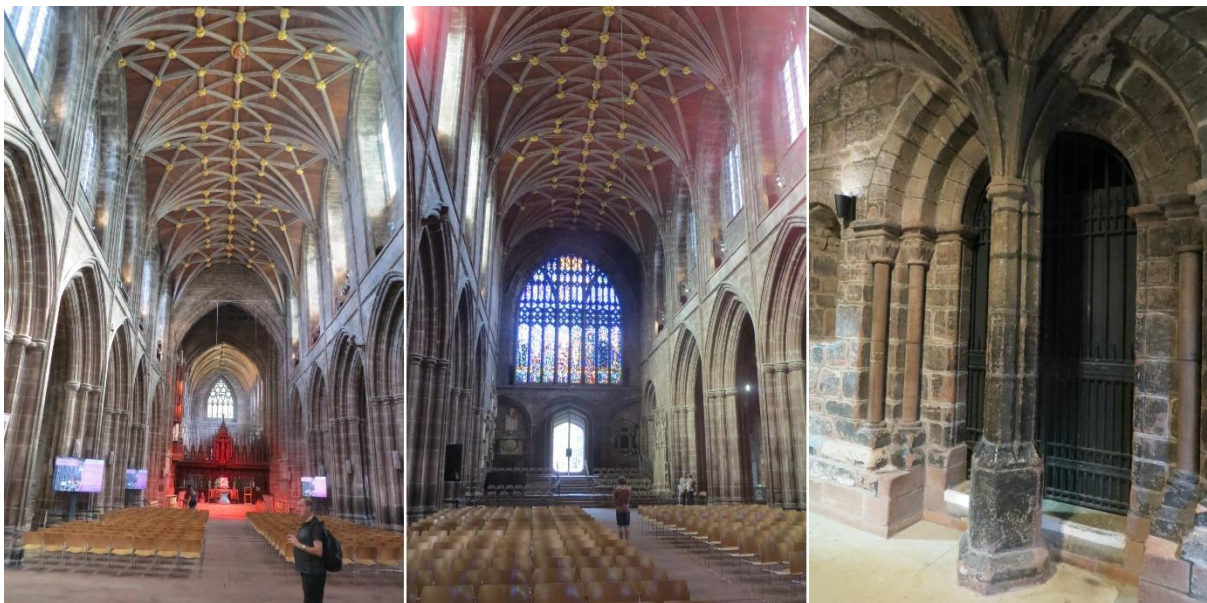
Returning south to opposite the Town Hall and along St. Werburgh Street is the aforementioned **Cathedral Church of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary** and its former monastic buildings (both Grade I). What is now known as the Chester Cathedral was originally the Benedictine Abbey of St. Werburgh. A Benedictine monastery was established at the site in the late 11th century. Prior to this, in the 10th century, there was an Anglo-Saxon minster dedicated to St. Werburgh. Gradual rebuilding began circa 1250 and was barely finished in 1540. However, King Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536 and 1545) put paid to the monastery. Instead, in 1541, the building became the Cathedral Church of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Anglican diocese of the new Bishop of Chester. By the beginning of the 19th



Chester's cathedral and the west main door leading to the nave. The building on the left is now known as the Old Bishop's Palace.

century, it was in a very sad state. Major restoration was executed with Victorian inspiration (Medieval Chester; O'Hanlon, 2000). The author gets the impression that Victorian inspiration is an euphemism for not sticking to the original plans. Hence, the controversy and accusation of a rebuild rather than restoration mentioned earlier, while walking the wall. Nevertheless, it is an amazing and immense structure. Immensity is particularly apparent when standing inside at the western end of the nave looking the length of the church to the far distant alter and chancel, as well as upward at the also far distant exquisite ceiling, as evidenced by the photographs. There is also the curiosity at the west end of the western cloister where there

is a roof supporting pillar immediately in front of an arched doorway. Not a good place for a door. Possibly an example of not sticking to the original plans?



Left, view from the nave west door toward the chancel quire and alter beyond. Centre, view from the quire toward the west door. Right, the western cloister with a pillar blocking a door.

Standing in the south-east corner of the cathedral ground, looking somewhat like an enormous beehive, is the **Bell Tower** (Grade II) or, to give it its proper name, the **Addleshaw Tower** (photograph on the next page). By 1963 it was decided the cathedral's central tower could no longer safely carry the weight of the bells and a new bell frame was needed. Due to structural difficulties this was not feasible. The result was a new separate 25 metre (85 feet) high bell tower. After two years construction the bells were rung in February 1975 (Historic England). The author can attest to their effectiveness when they were rung while walking past on the wall.

Returning to St. Werburgh Row, which becomes St. Werburgh Street and curves southward to Eastgate Street, passing some attractive late 19th century Grade II listed mock Tudor buildings,



Addleshaw Tower

one arrives at Eastgate Street. Turning right (toward the west) is the beginning of the famous **Chester Rows** on the northern and southern side of Eastgate Street. These, basically 1st floor continuous verandas, extend to the western end of the street then continue southward along the eastern side of Bridge Street so that it is possible to walk along a continuous row from the south side of Eastgate Street opposite St. Werburgh Street to the south of Bridge Street at the intersection with Pepper Street. Interrupted rows exist on the western side of Bridge Street. At the Cross intersection, Eastgate Street becomes Watergate Street. Watergate Street has Chester Rows that extend westward to the Trinity Street alleyway. Slightly displaced eastward of the intersection, Northgate Street has a few intermittent rows south of St Werburgh Street. Most of the buildings that constitute the rows along the four streets date from mid to late 19th century. A fair number of buildings date back to the 13th and 14th centuries, but in the wisdom of the time were heavily modified or rebuilt in the mid to late 19th century. Some have been rebuilt to the original design. Some such as the Grade I Crypt Building at 34 Eastgate and Row has a 13th century undercroft with an 1858 rebuilt building above.

An undercroft is another name for a cellar, or crypt in a church.



The cross intersection.

The rows are probably best seen at the junction of Eastgate and Bridge streets at the Cross. The photograph left, at the corner of Eastgate, Newgate on the right and Bridge Street ahead to the left and Watergate to the right (obscured by the red brick St. Peter's Church with the Newgate Street sign) was taken from the row at the opposite corner. The black and white timber frame building at the corner left is the 1888 Grade II* listed number 1 Bridge Street. Supposedly built for the 1st Duke of Westminster, but owned by Chester City Council in 1889 (Historic England). The building forms the corner of

the uninterrupted row along Eastgate from its east to Bridge Street south at Pepper Street. This building is typical of a late 19th century mock Tudor building. A Chester Row on the opposite corner is visible from Bridge Street around the corner to Watergate Street. It is located in the unusual Grade II* listed combination timber frame building and the yellow sandstone, red brick building at numbers 2 to 8 Bridge Street, also built for the 1st Duke of Westminster in 1892 (Historic England).

Another, 11th September 2023 photograph, view of the 1888 Grade II* listed timber frame building at number 1 Bridge Street, compared with a circa 1860 photograph from The Chester Rows Design Guide (2022), shows just how much the Chester city centre has been transformed

by mock Tudor buildings from rather plain and jumbled looking buildings to its present delightfully unique appearance.



In the photograph left, the timber frame building has replaced most of the buildings seen the circa 1860 right (courtesy The Chester Rows Design Guide, 2022). Meanwhile, the adjacent old 4 story building in the photograph right has been renovated with a adjacent white façade. Notice the Chester Row in the old and more recent photographs.

Detouring to Northgate Street, is another good example of a portion of a row (photos 64) on the eastern side and a short distance from Eastgate Street. Number 16 (left in the photograph below) has fragments of hypocaust (Roman underfloor heating) in a former Roman praetorium, then it was probably site of 2 medieval undercrofts and town houses. It was rebuilt around 1913 (Historic England). Numbers 12 and 14 on the right are the site of 2 medieval undercrofts and town houses. The present structure was rebuilt, probably 1912 to 1913 (Historic England). This building has examples of oriel windows. Across the street is this appealing Grade II* building. Seen from across the road from number 16 (photograph below right) is this originally late 16th century timber frame building, partly rebuilt after fire damage in 1914. It has with four decorative oriel windows and three carved figures in between of Justitia left, St Crispin centre (not visible in the photograph) and unidentified on the right (Historic England).



12 to 16 Northgate Street left and the building across the street.

Returning to the Cross and Bridge Street. the two photographs below show views of the modernised row along eastern Bridge Street south to Pepper Street from the approximately mid-point at the Grosvenor Shopping Centre and north to Eastgate. The rows are not all as wide and almost level as seen in the photographs. They can be rather narrow and undulate from building to building. Often with many small upper level shops that cater to a wide variety of

needs. One that caught the author's eye was a sewing, clothing mending and alteration shop that had a staff vacancy. Another was a model enthusiast shop.



Bridge Street row looking south to Pepper Street and north to Eastgate Street.



From a distant position in the row in the left photograph, a photograph was taken of the Grade I Three Old Arches building across the street. The building was a town house, dating from circa 1200 and early to middle 14th century with modifications/restoration in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. "Features of special interest are the 3 stone arches, probably the earliest identified shopfront in England" (Historic England).

The Three Old Arches.



Bishop Lloyd's House (left) and Boots in Foregate Street (right).

At the beginning of this article it was mentioned that decorative timber-work, seen in the Chester Rows buildings, is mostly from the 19th century. An example of more exotic 19th century decoration was seen above at **Mollie's Traditional Sweet Shop** with frontage rebuilt in 1902. Unusual and older rich decorative relief woodcarving can be seen on the Grade I listed 16th century **Bishop Lloyd's House** at 41 Watergate Street. George Lloyd was Bishop of Sodor and Man 1599-1605 and of Chester 1605 to 1615, the year of his death. It was rebuilt early 17th century and heavily restored in the 1890s (Historic England). Perhaps more traditional woodcarving can be seen if one makes a detour eastward to numbers 47-49 Grade II **Boots in Foregate Street**. It has nine herms on posts with different heads and faces. A herm is a

sculptured head and perhaps a torso. Originally a town house, later a hotel, now a shop in 1980 and ancillary accommodation it was built in 1597, rebuilt approximately in original form in 1914 (Historic England).

Walk to Grosvenor Gardens, the river side and Lower Bridge Street



St. Michael's Church.



Grosvenor Park Lodge Café.

Grade II **Lodge Café** building dated 1865 to 1867 and the Union and Grosvenor Park streets intersection. Of particular interest were the four crowned figures with coat of arms shields on the upper story gable.

To digress, at the intersection of these two roads are the impressive six Grade II* listed town houses of **6-11 Grosvenor Park Road**. Built during the later part of the 1870s, they consist of Ruabon red brick, some plaster panels and terracotta with red-brown clay tile roof. Each building is different but “have a disciplined rhythm in Douglas's Germanic manner” (Historic England). Douglas is John Douglas the architect and developer. Adjoining the north end of the buildings is his adjoining Zion Chapel.



6-11 Grosvenor Park Road.

The walk begins at the corner of Pepper, Grosvenor, Bridge and Lower Bridge streets and the Grade I **St. Michael's Church**, which is no longer a church. More about this church later. Heading east along Pepper Street past Newgate, the Roman Amphitheatre and the **Church of St John the Baptist** (Grade I). The church is reputed to date back to AD689, became a cathedral in the late 11th century when rebuilt by the Normans (Medieval Chester). More about this church later in the walk. Carrying on to Vicar's Lane, one arrives at the entrance to **Grosvenor Park**. Believe it or not, the park is Grade II* listed. The 8 hectare (20 acres) park, overlooking the River Dee, dates back to 1867 and is “one of the finest examples of Victorian parks in the UK” (Visit Chester and Cheshire). After lengthy physically tiring, but rewarding walks along the wall and inner city, it was peaceful and relaxing to meander, for about an hour, along the paths among the trees and flower beds, occasionally meeting somewhat tame grey squirrels and less tame crows, while generally keeping to the longer outer edge paths. Along way passing the

Returning to Grosvenor Park, in the south-east of the park is the **Quarry Garden**.

Believed to be a quarry for the original St. Johns Church became the location for some relocated remains of Grade II listed medieval arches. All with an all-encompassing information board. The first arch when approaching from the east, is the **Old Shipgate Arch** (circa 13th century). The arch “once spanned the medieval Shipgate in the City Walls, just to the west of the present Bridgegate”. It was moved from the wall in 1828 and after placed in other locations was reassembled in the garden in 1923. **St. Mary’s Nunnery Arch** was “originally part of St. Mary’s Benedictine Nunnery and is likely to date from the 13th century” and the “arch and walls were removed around 1840 and eventually relocated to the park”. **St. Michael’s Arch** (circa late 12th century) is “from the former west door of St. Michaels’ Church which is otherwise still standing on the junction of Bridge Street and Pepper Street”. This is the church mentioned at the beginning of the walk. The information board goes on to state that it “is now the home of Chester History and Heritage. The church was rebuilt several times over the years including after the Civil War because it had been greatly damaged during the siege of Chester. In 1840 the whole church was declared unsafe and almost totally rebuilt”. It is about this time that the reassembled elsewhere before relocation to the Quarry Garden. There is also very much a newcomer, sandstone arched feature named **Jacob’s Well**. Dated about 1850, it used to be at The Groves before removal to the garden in 1923.



The Old Shipgate Arch (left) and St. Michael’s Arch (right). In the background in both photographs is St. Mary’s Nunnery Arch.

The garden is close to an exit from the park at a pathway and entrance to the most interesting **Eastern Ruins** of the medieval version of the Church of St. John the Baptist. Once again one is indebted to a source of information, this time on a stone and metal plinth with a red face and white relief script.

“These are the remains of the Norman choir and medieval chapels which once formed the east end of St. John’s Church. In the Middle Ages, the church was a magnificent structure, twice the length of the building today. When St. John’s became a parish church in 1581, this end of the building was abandoned and has stood as a ruin ever since.

The ruins have had a curious history. In the 18th century a large brick and stucco house called Priory House was built over part of the site. It was owned by Mrs de Quincey, mother of the author Thomas de Quincy. Robert, Earl Grosvenor lived in this house when he was Mayor of Chester in 1808. Priory House was demolished in 1871.

Until the late 19th century, the ruins were enclosed behind a high stone wall. Large mounds of earth accumulated around the ruins, so that the ground level was over two metre higher than it

is today. Excavations in 1871 revealed many fine stone bosses from the ruined chapels. Some of these can be seen around the site and inside the church.”



Sections of the ruined medieval version of the Church of St. John the Baptist with the chancel end of the new version visible on the right.



The Anchorite's Cell.

Back to the path to descend steeply to The Groves, on the right in the grounds of the Church are the remains of the Anchorite's Cell. According to Medieval Chester, this was “a retreat for a hermit or monk and dates to the 14th century, although it does beat later additions”. The interesting myth is “that King Herald didn't perish at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and instead fled north after the battle to live out his days quietly in the Anchorite's Cell”.



View from the south bank and a sightseeing cruiser.

At the bottom of the path is the Queen Mary suspension bridge across the River Dee. One has the choice of walking to the right along riverside through The Groves with its restaurants and sightseeing boats at the wharf, or crossing the bridge to walk downstream through the parklike grass and trees along the riverside. This is the more pleasant option and one gets a wide view of The Groves on the other side and pass the remains of an old millwheel next to the river before crossing the Old River Dee bridge and under Bridgegate to Lower Bridge Street.

The first place of interest is almost next to the gate on the left, or east, side of the road, the attractive Grade I listed **Bear and Billet**. According to an information wall plaque; “This outstanding timber building was originally the town house of the Earls of Shrewsbury, Sergeants of the Bridgegate in the mid 17th century. Dated 1664, it may have replaced an earlier house destroyed during the Civil War. It has been an inn since the 18th century”. The inn's other claim to fame is that it was the birthplace of The Beatles' John Lennon's grandmother (Bridge Street). They serve very good pub meals. Next door is a Grade II Flemish bond brown

brick ex-townhouse, now a shop and flats. Probably originally 15th century, but altered periodically from the 17th to 20th centuries with the front roof gable concealed by and early 19th century high parapet (Historic England). Next to this building on the Shipgate Street corner is **Ye Olde Edgar**, a Grade II late 16th century restored and altered inn, now two houses (Historic England).



Photograph left, the Bear and Billet, Flemish bond brown brick and Ye Olde Edgar. Right, The Cross Keys.



Gamul House.

Obliquely opposite, on the Duke Street corner, is the Grade II Victorian **The Cross Keys** public house. Rebuilt in 1894 in red Ruabon brick, some of the external features mimic earlier ages, such as imitation 13th century foliar capitals on the entrance door columns (Historic England).

Continuing north, on the western side of the street, is **Gamul House** (Grade II*). Originally medieval, it was altered during 17th (when a brick façade was added), 18th

and 20th centuries and had a varied history, having been a town house, shops, school, hall, now a café, three shops and a restaurant (Historic England). During the Civil War, when it was the home of the Royalist Sir Francis Gamul, he “played host to King Charles I in September 1645, who watched his army’s defeat at the Battle of Rowton Moor” (Bridge Street). Not from the house, but from the King Charles I Tower mentioned during the wall walk. The steps in front of the building indicate that a Chester Row once existed this far south along Lower Bridge Street (Medieval Chester).



St Olave's Church.

Opposite Gamul House, at the Saint Olave Street intersection, is **St. Olave's Church** (Grade II). The church was founded in the 11th century. Its Nordic name reflects that this part of the city was once settled by Vikings. The present building dates from 1611 and was restored in 1849. It is no longer a church (Bridge Street). The Norwegian King

Olaf was a Christian convert who sought to rule a still largely pagan Norway. He became very unpopular. The Danish King Cnut of England travelled by ship along the coast offering bribes and promises of greater freedom to the opposition nobles. Olaf was forced to flee in 1028. In 1030 he was killed in battle attempting to return to Norway. Cnut appointed his young bastard son Swein as king of Norway with his mother Aelfgifu as regent. Her rule, imposing increased taxes, or work and adherence to unpopular Danish laws with severe penalties, proved to be unpopular and a failure. The Norwegians, longing for the days of Olaf, violently revolted. The slain Olaf became a martyr linked to tales of miracles (Bridgeford, 2011). Several churches in England were dedicated to him, often using the name Olave.



Old King's Head.

On the diagonally opposite corner, next to Castle Street and Gamul House, is the Grade II* **Old King's Head** inn. A wall information plaque proclaims that "This was the house of Randle Holme I, Mayor of Chester 1833-4. It was described as a "New building" in 1633. Four generations of the Holme family worked as Chester heralds and historians during the 17th century. Their painted heraldic memorial tablets are a feature of many Cheshire churches". The building, first mentioned in 1208, has undergone many alterations, particularly during 1935 when

there was major renovation, including rebuilding the front. Notice the jettied 3rd story, coved at the centre and left gables. It became an inn in 1717 (Historic England). During this renovation, a sword was found under the floorboards of bedroom number 4. The sword can now be seen in the bar (Bridge Street).

Continuing north, on the right, or eastern, side of the street is a somewhat different building compared with others along the street, namely, **Park House** (Grade II). It was "a classic early Georgian town house built around 1717. In 1818, it was converted into the Albion Hotel, which counted the Duke of Wellington among its guests only a few years after Waterloo" (Bridge Street). That is, the Battle of Waterloo for the uninformed. The building is now home to a half basement shop and wine bar (Historic England).

Back at the start point of the walk, on the corner of Lower Bridge Street and Grosvenor Street are two buildings of note, **The Falcon Inn** (Grade I) and an adjacent Grade II building. The



Park House with 18th century Flemish bond brick buildings in the distance. Photograph right, The Falcon Inn and attractive 19th century building on the left.

Falcon Inn, originally medieval (circa 1180) was extensively rebuilt in 1643 by Sir Richard Grosvenor for use as a family town house. According to the Bridge Street pamphlet, it was now that the Row was enclosed, “a move that inspired other property owners and eventually resulted in the almost total loss of the Rows in Lower Bridge Street”. Steps to the now enclosed Row are visible in the photograph. The building was licensed as The Falcon Inn between 1778 and 1878. By the 1970s, the building was all but derelict. In 1979 the Grosvenor Estate donated the building to the now established Falcon Trust and renovated it between 1979 and 1982 (Wikipedia, 2023). The building on the left in the photograph, dating from 1886, is now a shop with accommodation above, that is now used for storage. There is interior evidence that there was a Row at the upper floor level (Historic England).

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