



SAMPLE PAGES

The 48-page, A4 handbook for Historic Chester, with text, photographs, maps and a reading list, is available for purchase, price £15.00 including postage and packing.

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interesting breaks with interesting people

Introduction

In many ways the most physically distinctive historic town in England, Chester is not quite what it seems. Its name reveals its Roman origin, and the concentration of later buildings in the historic core means that the revealed remains of Roman date are fragmentary but remarkable. Its whole *raison d'être* came from its position as the port at the bridging-point of the Dee and the gateway to North Wales, though there is little reminder now of its status as a sea-going port, except for the pleasure-craft on the Shropshire Union Canal, gliding below the town walls. Its famous Rows, the split-level medieval shopping streets, are without exact parallel, and their fabric dates from every century between the thirteenth and the present. It is a city fiercely proud of its conservation record, taking seriously the consultant's comment that "Chester's face is its fortune" to which someone at a meeting added "...but some of its teeth are missing," – rightly so, for in the midst of much charm there are some appalling solecisms of modern development.

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Edward Hubbard, in *The Buildings of England: Cheshire* (Penguin 1971), comment, "If one...tries to make up accounts, Chester is not a medieval, it is a Victorian city." If so, it is a Victorian city that grew from an ancient port, with a Roman plan, its characteristic building-design conceived by the practical needs of medieval merchants, its strategic importance underlined by an earldom traditionally given to the Prince of Wales, a county town that became the seat of a Tudor bishopric, a key point in the transport arteries of the turnpike, canal and railway ages. Chester is not a place to judge quickly.

Origins and early history

The Roman fortress of *Deva* dates from the time around AD 76 when the legions were advancing against the Ordovices of North Wales. Its position at the lowest bridging-point of the River Dee, between the mountains of Wales and the foothills of the Pennines, at the head of the flat, rich lands of the Cheshire plain made it ideal both as a frontier post and, later, a military base. The Second Legion who occupied *Deva* were concerned with Agricola's campaigns in Scotland, but from about fifteen years after they arrived in the north-west their main role was, literally, to hold the fort between the Ordovices in North Wales and the Brigantes in northern England, and to guard the sea approaches from pirates from Ireland. Accordingly, a more permanent base was constructed at *Deva*, mainly in the local sandstone, round about the year AD 100. After the northern border of the Roman Empire was firmly established by the building of Hadrian's Wall, *Deva* was occupied by the Twentieth Legion, and evidence of periodic rebuilding through to the beginning of the fourth century suggests that the base was in a fairly continuous state of activity.

Much of what is known about Roman Chester has been quite literally unearthed in the course of redevelopment. The fragments and artefacts most visibly exhibited are



Roman Amphitheatre



Column-base from Roman legionary headquarters, in the basement of 23 Northgate Row West

After the Restoration the walls were reinstated and have been used ever since as a promenade. When the medieval gates were removed as traffic obstructions they were replaced by bridges to maintain continuity.

Eastgate was constructed in 1768-9, and surmounted by John Douglas' delightful ironwork clock for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897; **Bridgegate** was designed by Joseph Turner in 1782; the **Watergate** dates from 1788, and **Northgate** was the design of Thomas Harrison (1808-10). The **Newgate**, spanning the first phase of the inner ring-road, was designed by Sir Walter Tapper & Michael Tapper and completed in 1938. **St Martin's Gate** (1966), by the City Engineer, A H F Jigger, in association with the Building Design Partnership, spans the Inner Ring Road, completed in the early 1970s.

It is perfectly possible to perambulate the **Walls** in short stages, for at no point do they extend more than ten minutes' walk from The Cross. There are any of a number of guides and trails to guide the visitor: perhaps the most useful, well-illustrated though sometimes loosely written, is Marian Sugden, *Chester* (Pevensey Press 1993): its maps are particularly helpful.

The following list indicates some of the main features to be viewed in an anticlockwise circuit, starting at Northgate:

Morgan's Mount, just before St Martin's Gate, is a lookout post dating back at least to Civil War times.

From St Martin's Gate, there is an excellent view of the superbly restored terrace of **King's Buildings** (1776).

The **Goblin's Tower** or **Pemberton's Parlour** commemorates the Murengers, the committee of citizens who were responsible for maintaining the Walls from 1702 onwards.

Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower is connected by a spur wall, built c1322, to the **Water Tower**: the relationship of these structures shows the recession of the Dee at this date.

The superb **Grosvenor Bridge**, a suitably dignified entry to the city from the North Wales road, was designed by Thomas Harrison and at the time of its completion by the engineer Jesse Hartley (more famous for his work at the Liverpool Docks) in 1833 was the largest stone span in the world.

From Castle Drive is the best view of the surviving medieval parts of **Chester Castle**, the so-called **Agricola's Tower**. Most of the outer

medieval **Abbey Gateway** still remains, leading from the market place to another surprise, the tranquil red-brick eighteenth-century **Abbey Square** which stands on the site of the peripheral monastic buildings: the cobbled road-surface is original, and the “wheeler” tracks for carriages were intended to deaden noise rather than to provide smooth riding.

The exterior of the Cathedral has been so repeatedly and heavily restored, by Thomas Harrison (1818-20), R C Hussey (from 1844), George Gilbert Scott (from 1868) and Sir Arthur Blomfield (after 1882), that it is difficult be sure if any of the visible fabric is earlier than the nineteenth century. Certainly the apse at the end of the south choir aisle, with its exaggerated roof, is pure Scott. This most notorious of the Victorian “Scrape” school of restorers, obsessively committed to tidying up and purifying the style of medieval churches, has been heavily criticised for his work at Chester, yet some of his contributions, such as the **choir screen** and its wrought-iron gates (1876) are now highly-regarded designs in their own right. He was not the only author of Victorian depredations: Dean Howson, regrettably, ordered the removal of five medieval misericords, of which the subject-matter was considered to be “very improper”. In contrast, the most modern, uncompromising yet least obtrusive addition to the Cathedral



George Gilbert Scott's restoration of Chester Cathedral:
[*left*] east end; [*right*] north transept organ screen

Providence is mine inheritance". He said the property had lately changed hands, and it was about to be altered, but the present occupier, with a commendable regard for the venerable spot, and in deference to the public wish, had determined to preserve the front part, and keep up as much as possible of its ancient character. Mr James Harrison, he said, had effected the happy design before them, by which he had adapted the premises to modern improvement and uses, but had left the ancient work in all its purity.

ibid, pp 399/405. See also *The Builder*, Vol 21 (1863), p 392.

In the following decade James Harrison rebuilt not only God's Providence House and but also the Leche House, and Lockwood rebuilt Bishop Lloyd's House, each to varying degrees altering the design but incorporating the original timbers in the façade: descriptions of these schemes make it quite clear that the aim was a cosmetic restoration of the general appearance rather than an archaeological preservation. In 1863-6 the Grosvenor Hotel was built to the designs of T M Penson, completed after his death in 1864 by the practice of Kyrke, Penson & Ritchie.

Following Penson's death the 2nd Marquis of Westminster began to commission work both in the city and on the Eaton estate from John Douglas. Edward Hubbard states that in the lifetime of the 3rd Marquis, who succeeded in 1869, became 1st Duke of Westminster in 1874 and died in 1899, Douglas designed for him –

4 churches and chapels,
8 parsonages and large houses,
approximately 15 schools and institutions,
approximately 50 farms in whole or in part,
approximately 300 cottages, lodges, smithies and houses,
2 factories,
2 inns
and 12 commercial buildings.

The 3rd Marquis' predilection for the traditional timbered architecture of the local area was later commented on by C H Minshall:

Among the patrons of the building arts none was more susceptible to the peculiar charm of this "nogging work" than the late Duke of Westminster, who caused to be erected on his Eaton estate numerous buildings faithfully reproducing the forms and features of the Cheshire prototypes. In this work his Grace was fortunate in having at command the services of an architect, Mr John Douglas, than whom no-one has been more successful in recapturing the spirit of the old timber-work.



Shoemaker's Row, Northgate Street (John Douglas, 1900)

buildings of the historic core, which was found to be related to problems of access to rear buildings which required re-establishment of pedestrian routes which had been eroded by modern development

reinstatement of the cobbled surface of **Abbey Square** (1981)

restoration of the façade of the **Westminster Coach & Motor Car Works** as part of the construction of a new bus interchange and public library (1984)

revelation of the façade of **Pepper Street Methodist Chapel** as part of a shopping complex (1984)

successful restoration, after twenty years' deterioration and with the aid of £300,000 of grants, of **Nos 2, 3 & 4 King's Buildings** (November 1985)

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The Falcon, Lower Bridge Street