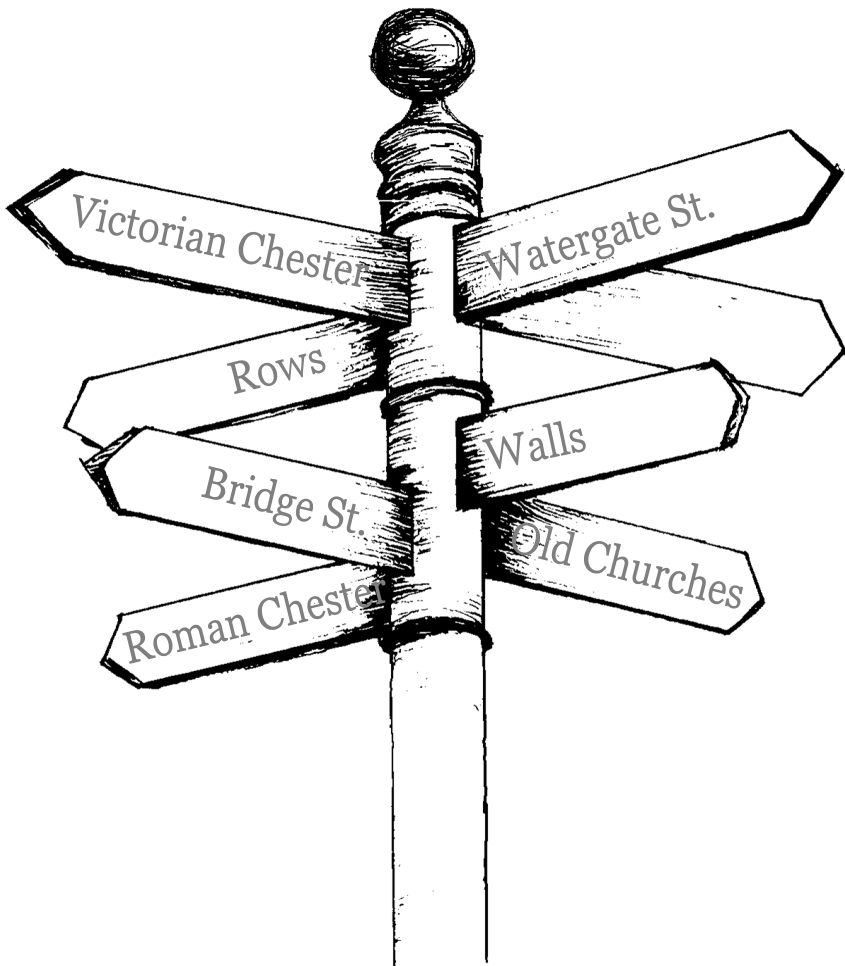


Chester in the Civil War

Chester

Our Guide



Visitor Information Centre Team

“Our series of friendly Guides written and illustrated during lockdown by the team here at the Visitor Information Centre to give you a warm welcome to our much-loved City of Chester”.

In the mid-17th century, England was ripped apart by civil war. A series of bloody conflicts pitted King Charles and his Royalist supporters against Parliament for the right to govern the country.

Chester, then the largest place in the North West, was a major regional centre and a prosperous city on the main route into North Wales and a key port for Ireland. Chester was always going to be prized by both sides and its Royalist defenders were prepared to hold the city for the King.

The city and its people suffered terribly during the civil war and its aftermath. Siege and plague were words no one wanted to hear, but both hit the city hard in the 1640s.

This short guide will take you around many of Chester's civil war sites and look at life and death in the city nearly 400 years ago. So, pick up your musket and let's explore one of the most difficult periods in Chester's long history – warts and all.

Our Walk

Our Walk is a little over two miles (3km) long and begins at the **Visitor Information Centre**, located in the Town Hall.

We begin by turning left and heading up Northgate Street towards the North Gate itself. You are now walking along one of Chester's old Roman streets. As the street narrows, on your left are two old pubs, the Pied Bull and the Red Lion, sitting either side of the entrance to King Street (or Barn Lane as it was during the 17th century). A little further along the pavement runs through the Blue Bell Inn, whose first licence dates to the 15th century. The building is said to be haunted by the ghost of a young woman who still awaits the return of her lover from the Civil War battle of Rowton Heath which was fought just outside the city (more of which later...)

Ahead of you lies the **North Gate**. The elegant structure we see now was built in 1810, replacing the medieval gateway that would have stood here in the 17th century. The old North Gate housed a notorious jail which witnessed the final hours of many a wretched prisoner.

Climb the steps to the right-hand side of the gate and you are now on Chester's famous walls. Turn right and continue along the wall. You will see **Rufus Court** on your right, a small courtyard accessed from the walls with independent shops, cafes, and bars while on your left, if you peer over the wall, is the Shropshire Union Canal. This lies deep below the north wall of what was once the Roman Fortress of Deva, and which later provided the city with its impressive defences.

Ahead, at the North East corner of the wall, is **King Charles Tower**. It is from here that the King is said to have watched the defeat of his army in 1645 at the nearby battle of Rowton Heath (also called Rowton Moor). A Royalist force was hoping to relieve the siege but on the 24th of September they were routed by the Parliamentarians at Rowton Heath, with the fleeing Royalist soldiers seeking refuge within the city walls.



The tower is also known as Phoenix Tower and above the doorway to the lower tower chamber is a carved phoenix. This dates to 1613 and is the emblem of the City Guild of Painters, Glaziers, Embroiderers and Stationers who once occupied the tower as a meeting place. During the siege the tower housed guns on both platforms.

On your right is the Deanery Field, once the site of Roman barracks, while ahead lies the **Cathedral**. Once a medieval abbey, it became Chester's new cathedral in 1541 following the English Reformation. The Cathedral Tower would have provided a much higher vantage point than the Phoenix Tower and it is speculated that it would have been here that the King actually stood to watch his defeated troops scramble for safety following the battle of Rowton Heath. A Captain standing close to Charles was killed by a shot from a Parliamentarian sniper. It would have been an impressive shot if the King was stood on the Cathedral Tower – maybe he was stood on the Phoenix Tower after all?

Continue walking along the wall, towards the famous **Eastgate Clock**, sitting above the East Gate, Chester's principal entrance for almost two thousand

years. When you are under the clock and have finished admiring the magnificent view down Eastgate Street, turn to face eastwards and take in the view of the city outside the walls. This is Foregate Street and in the 17th century it was lined with houses. The city built outer defences around its suburbs in 1643-4, but these timber & earth ditches and ramparts were over run during the siege, while the buildings that occupied Foregate Street were levelled by the Royalist defenders to prevent them providing cover for the attacking Parliamentarians.

Continue along the wall until you see the **Roman Amphitheatre** below you, sitting outside the city wall and descend the steps, turning to walk through the 20th Century **Newgate**. In the 17th century the amphitheatre would have been built over (it wasn't rediscovered until 1929). The church beyond it is **St John the Baptist**. It served as Chester's original cathedral and later found an important role in the civil war siege of the city. As it lay just outside the city walls, it fell into the hands of the Parliamentarians besieging the city, providing them with an excellent gun platform from which to try to bombard Chester into submission. The church itself also suffered during its period as a military stronghold, with much of its interior damaged.

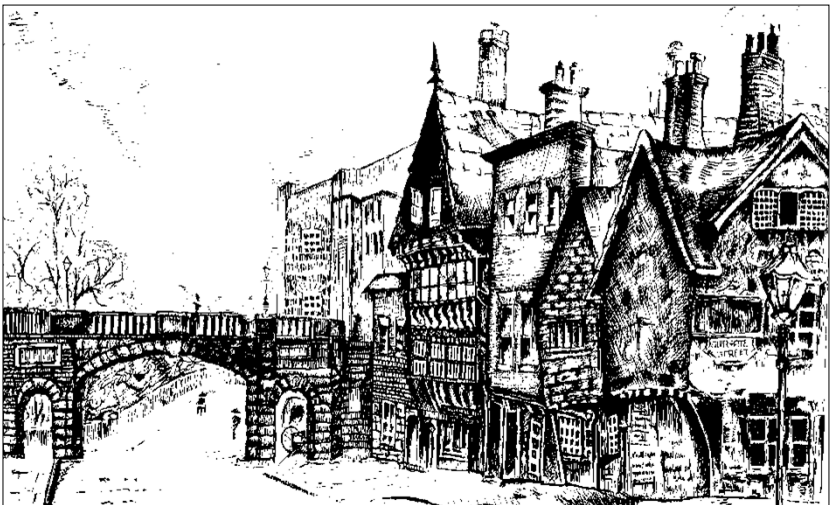


As the Parliamentary forces closed in on victory during the first Civil War, they laid siege to Chester. The remainder of Cheshire was in Parliament's hands and Chester was now targeted, with the Parliamentary Commander in the county, Sir William Brereton, particularly eager to secure the city. This lasted from November 1644 and only ended with the city's surrender in February 1646. By this point Chester was overcrowded, with many of its

citizens facing starvation while huddled amongst the ruins wrought by the bombardment.

Walk back towards the Newgate, but just before you reach the gate, turn left into the Roman Gardens. Now a pleasant spot featuring reconstructed Roman stonework from around the city, it was here that in September 1645 Parliamentary forces breached the walls during the siege. The Royalist defenders fought hard and managed to beat back the attackers before they could pour into the city. You can still clearly see the location where the wall was breached, and an information board allows you to line up the exact spot.

Follow the path down through the gardens until you reach the **Groves**, Chester's riverside promenade. Turn right along the Groves, heading towards the stone arches of the **Old Dee Bridge**. It was across this Bridge that King Charles escaped from the city following the battle of Rowton Heath. He made his way west to the walled town of Denbigh, which, like the remainder of North Wales, still lay in Royalist hands in September 1645. The bridge provided a vital link into North Wales throughout the siege, allowing some supplies to reach Chester. At the far end of the bridge lies the suburb of Handbridge, where the Royalists constructed a fort to protect the southern approach to the bridge.



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Turn right and head through the **Bridgegate** and back through the city walls. As you head up Lower Bridge Street you will see **The Bear & Billet Inn** on your left. Built in 1664 as a town house for the Earl of Shrewsbury, it is an example of how the city needed to rebuild in the years following the civil war. A little further along, where there is a first-floor walkway running along the frontage of the buildings, lies **Gamul House**. Now home to the Brewery Tap bar and boasting a late 17th century brick facade, Gamul House was once home to Sir Francis Gamul (or Gamull), Colonel of the Town Guard during the Civil War. It was here that the King stayed during his visit to the city while the battle of Rowton Heath raged just a few miles east.

Just after Gamul House, take a left turn into Castle Street. Once known as Castle Lane, this was once the main route from the city to the castle and remained so until the 1820s, when Grosvenor Street (a little further north) gave the city a new route to both the castle and the river.

As you approach the castle, on your left is **St Mary's Church**, one of Chester's old parish churches and the final resting place of many victims of the war and subsequent plague. Also on your left is the **Cheshire Military Museum**, a place to explore the history of the county's soldiers from just after the Civil War until the present.

The castle itself is much altered from the design that occupied the site in the 17th century, although the medieval **Agricola Tower** still peeps over the Greek Revival buildings that have dominated the view for the last 200 years. It was at the castle that the defenders eventually surrendered the city to the Parliamentarians in February 1646 following the siege. The winter of 1645-6 was particularly hard on the city and its defenders. Cold and hunger, coupled with the bombardment, forced Chester's Governor, Lord Byron, to seek surrender terms. Lord Byron and his men were allowed to march unarmed out of the city and into North Wales. The victorious Parliamentarians then marched into the shattered city.

The castle also played a role at the very end of the Civil War in 1651. Royalist attempts to restore the monarchy had ended in failure at the Battle of Worcester and it was following this battle that James Stanley, the 7th Earl of Derby, a prominent Royalist supporter, was captured. He was tried and

condemned at the castle, being held prisoner there before his eventual execution at Bolton, Lancashire.

At the castle, turn right into Grosvenor Street and head back towards the heart of the city. On your right is the Grosvenor Museum, another great place to explore Chester's rich history.

As you approach the pedestrian crossing you will see **St Michael's Church** standing opposite, while on your right is the timber framed **Falcon Inn**. Although much rebuilt since, during the siege the church was reputedly used as a prison. It is now home to '**Sick to Death**', an attraction that charts the often-gory history of medicine and provides a place to peer into other tales of Chester's dark past.

The Falcon is a glorious black & white structure, remodelled and rebuilt over the years. On the first floor, is an enclosed stretch of Row. The Rows, Chester's unique double decker shopping streets, once extended a little further than they presently do, and it is the Falcon, then a town house, that boasted the first stretch of Row to be enclosed within a building. This took place in 1643, as England edged towards civil war.



Carefully cross the road and head up Bridge Street, lined on either side by the Rows.

The devastated city saw much rebuilding following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and on your left (the west side of Bridge Street) are fine examples of houses from this period, including Nos 20-24, known as the **Dutch Houses**, and **Cowper House** at No 12, dating to 1664 and taking its name from Thomas Cowper, the Royalist Mayor of Chester in 1641/2.

Bridge Street ends as it meets **St Peters Church** at the area known as the Cross, where Chester's principal streets all meet. The heart of the city in the 17th century, as it is today, a **High Cross** sat on this site from the 14th century

until 1646, when it was destroyed by Parliamentary troops following the city's capture. Fragments were kept and used in its 20th century restoration, with the High Cross returning to its rightful place in 1975. Today the High Cross is the location for the Town Crier's proclamations during the summer months.

Turn left into Watergate Street, another street that is home to the Rows. One of the city's most atmospheric streets, it once led down towards the port of Chester and was the home of wealthy merchants. One of the first buildings we come across on the left is **God's Providence House**. This timber framed house is famed for its inscription at Row level reading:

"Gods providence is mine inheritance"

It is said to be thanks for keeping everyone in the house safe from the plague that hit the devastated city in 1647-8 as it was trying to recover after the long siege. The plague first arrived in June 1647 and lasted until the spring of the following year. Around 2000 people died, perhaps as much as one third of Chester's population.

Continue along Watergate Street, passing by Leche House and **Bishop Lloyd's Palace**, two half-timbered town houses that would have witnessed the tumultuous events of the mid-17th century.



Where Watergate Street meets the inner ring road, cross to what is popularly known as Lower Watergate Street and head towards the black and white building ahead. This is **Stanley Palace**, originally built at the end of the 16th century and has a family connection to James Stanley, the 7th Earl of Derby, who we met earlier. Continue past Stanley Palace, heading towards the archway ahead.

This archway is the **Watergate** and beyond stood the old port. It is perhaps difficult to imagine now, but the River Dee once lapped at the city walls at this point, when Chester was the principal port for North West England & North Wales and was second only to Bristol on Britain's west coast.

Just before the Watergate turn left into Nuns Road and after around 20m cross the road and join the city wall (via a very short set of steps or where the wall and road meet at the same level a little further on). Turn right and walk over the Watergate. At the northern end of the gate arch is a useful guide to the old port. Much of Chester nicely lends itself to imagining yourself stepping back in time to an earlier period, but here it really has changed beyond recognition.

Head along the wall, passing by where ships would have anchored below on what are now school playing fields. Within a few minutes you will arrive at the two towers that stand at the North East corner of the city wall, just beyond where the 19th century railway bisects the wall.

The nearest structure, the splendidly named **Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower**, was first recorded in 1249 and eventually became a gatehouse to the nearby Water Tower. The 14th century Water Tower stands outside the northwest corner of the walls, joining Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower by a spur wall and once stood in the river, protecting the port. However, due to the silting up of the river it now stands firmly on dry land. The Water Tower was originally known as the New Tower and was damaged during the civil war.

At Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower the wall turns sharp right, forming the northern defences of the city. Carry on along the wall and pass by **Pemberton's Parlour**. The current tower dates from the 18th century tower, but replaced a medieval structure called the Goblin Tower. You will cross the inner ring road via the 1960s bridge and soon reach **Morgan's Mount**, named after a Captain Morgan, who reputedly commanded the gun here during the siege. Climb to the top of the tower and you will see the view that the defenders had of the River Dee as it headed out towards the Irish Sea. Below the tower is a life-sized sculpture of a ruined civil war cannon.

Walk a little further and you are back at the North Gate, where we end our walk. But...if you are up for a little detour, take the steps down from the wall and head north, taking care at the Fountains Roundabout. A little way beyond the George & Dragon pub is a lane linking Parkgate Road and Liverpool Road. Known as Rock Lane or Prince Rupert's Trench, it is a surviving feature of Chester's outer civil war defences. The lane was cut into the rock and

provided a way of moving men and artillery pieces between the outer defences while giving cover from Parliamentary guns. It takes its alternative name from Prince Rupert of the Rhine, the King's nephew. He was regarded as the archetypal dashing Cavalier and reorganised the city's outer fortifications in 1644.

If you've enjoyed your walk around Civil War Chester, why not dig a little deeper. The following books will give you more details of this fascinating period in the story of Chester:

Chester - A History by Simon Ward

The Great Siege of Chester by John Barratt

There are of course many online resources to help you discover more about Chester's role in the conflict and this period in English history in general.

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