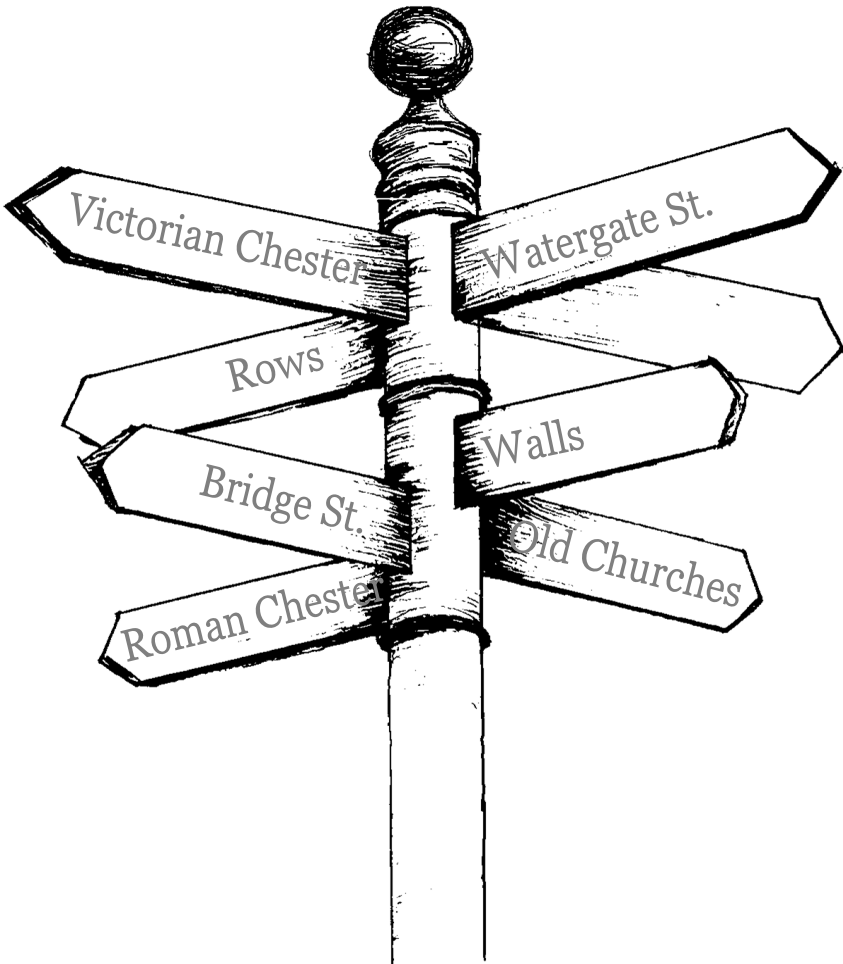


Medieval Chester

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 this guide, we'll be taking a look at Chester in the Norman and later medieval periods, from around 1070 to 1500. But please excuse us if we don't stick too rigidly to these dates.... Chester's history often isn't that neat, and you are in a city where Roman, Medieval, Tudor, Stuart, Georgian & Victorian influences jostle for position along streets nearly 2000 years old. Sometimes they happily rub shoulders in the same building!

Medieval Chester was an important port, merchant city, religious centre, military stronghold, and administrative centre. This walk of a little over 2 miles/3 km will help you discover more about the city in this important period in its long history.

Our Walk

Our Walk starts at the Visitor Information Centre and we begin by heading across the Town Hall Square towards the Cathedral.

As you walk towards the Cathedral, look a little to your left, where you will see the red sandstone arch called the Abbey Gateway. Dating from around 1300 (the upper storey was rebuilt around 1800) its name gives away its original use. In the medieval period, what we now call Chester Cathedral was in fact the Benedictine Abbey of St Werburgh. Chester did have a Cathedral for at least some of the middle ages, but that was across the city at the church of St John the Baptist, which we will visit a little later.

The abbey was established in the late 11th century, following the Norman conquest and the present cathedral



was built as the abbey's church. The English Reformation in the 1530s saw the dissolution of the monasteries, including the abbey. However, it soon took on a new life as Chester's new cathedral, becoming the seat of the new Bishop of Chester in 1541.

What you can see inside the cathedral is way beyond the scope of this guide, but you should save time during your visit to Chester to explore its rich history, including magnificent examples of medieval architecture.

Keeping the Cathedral on your left, walk along St Werburgh's Street, passing by what is now the rear entrance to Superdrug on your right. This building has had various uses and alterations, but is best known as the Music Hall, a guise it wore from Victorian period until 1961. However, it began life as a medieval chapel dedicated to St Nicholas before becoming a Common Hall (a forerunner of the town hall) and later a theatre.

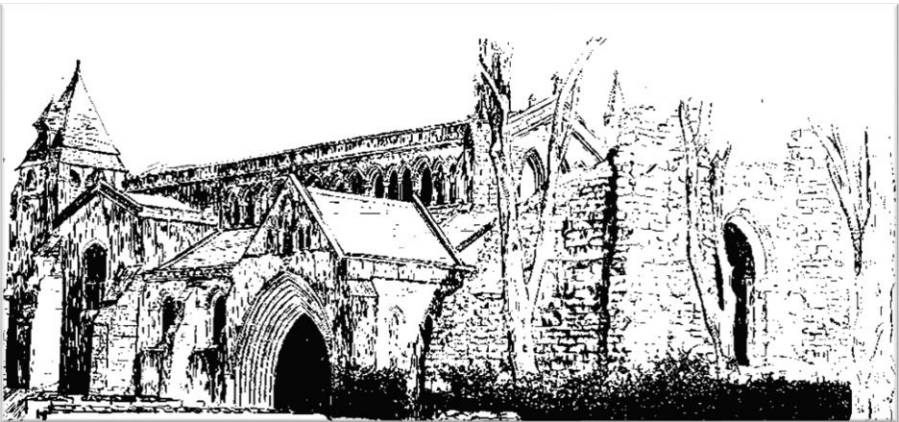
Just to one side of the Music Hall is the entrance to Lean Lane, one of Chester's narrow medieval lanes. But we are going to take the lane a few metres further left, called Godstall Lane. Now an attractive short street with shops and bars, it linked the abbey to Chester's main street, Eastgate Street. Walk along Godstall Lane until it meets the renowned Chester Rows at its southern end. The Rows are the covered galleries that line Chester's main streets at first floor level. First mentioned at the end of the 13th century, they are unique to the city and today give Chester its distinctive 'double decker' townscape.

Descend the steps from the Rows down to street level, where you will find yourself facing the Crypt Building. It certainly looks like something from the middle ages but is in fact Victorian. However, its original stone vaulted medieval crypt was retained during its rebuilding.

Turn left and walk along Eastgate Street, passing under the famous clock that stands above the Eastgate. The medieval gate

here survived until the 18th century and hid much of the old Roman gate within its fabric. Turn right into St John Street and continue along the street until you meet the inner ring road, beyond which is the Roman Amphitheatre. Although it once held 8000 spectators, by the late middle ages the amphitheatre had become a handy source of building materials and somewhere to dump rubbish. It was built over and only rediscovered less than 100 years ago.

If you look to your left, you will see the church of St John the Baptist, a little way beyond the amphitheatre. There is a pedestrian crossing opposite the church, so stroll round and cross to the building's North Porch and certainly find time to peek inside.



St John's is reputed to date back to AD 689 and became a Cathedral in the late 11th century, being rebuilt by the Normans. It later became known as the 'Cathedral and Collegiate Church of the Holy Cross and St John the Baptist' and still has impressive medieval features inside. Much like the present Cathedral, a much more detailed description is needed than what we can provide here. Thankfully, guides are available inside.

At the eastern end of the church, take the path between the church and Grosvenor Park, which passes ruins and descends steeply to the River Dee, passing by the Anchorite's Cell on your

right. This was once a retreat for a hermit or monk and dates to the 14th century, although it does bear later additions. Attached to this small building is one of Chester's bigger legends – that King Harold 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.

When you reach the river, turn right, and walk along the Groves, Chester's pleasant riverside promenade. Ahead you will see the stone arches of the Old Dee Bridge and the red sandstone city walls. Spanning the river, a little way before the bridge is the weir. Constructed in the late 11th century for Hugh d'Averanches, the 2nd Earl of Chester, who also known as Hugh Lupus (meaning Wolf). It was designed to provide power for the water-mills that once stood close to here.

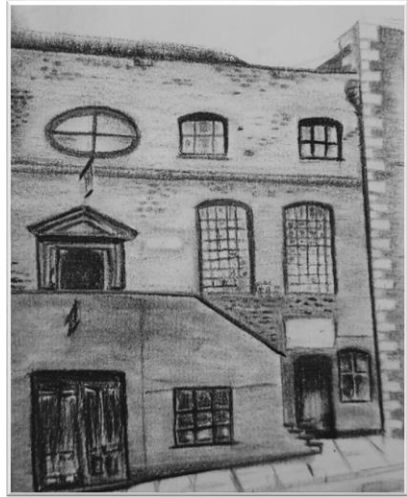
The Old Dee Bridge dates to the 14th century, but a bridge was built at this point by the Romans. From the Roman period right up until the 19th century this was the route from Chester into Wales.

At the city end of the bridge stands the Bridgegate, another Georgian structure that replaced the earlier medieval gate. Walk through the Bridgegate and start walking up Lower Bridge Street, taking the pavement on your right. After a minute or two and just after the now redundant concrete car dealership from the 1960s, you will come across the small church of St Olave's. The current building dates to the early 17th century, but the site has been home to a church dedicated to the



Scandinavian saint since the 11th century. As its name implies, a thousand years ago this was once Chester's Viking quarter.

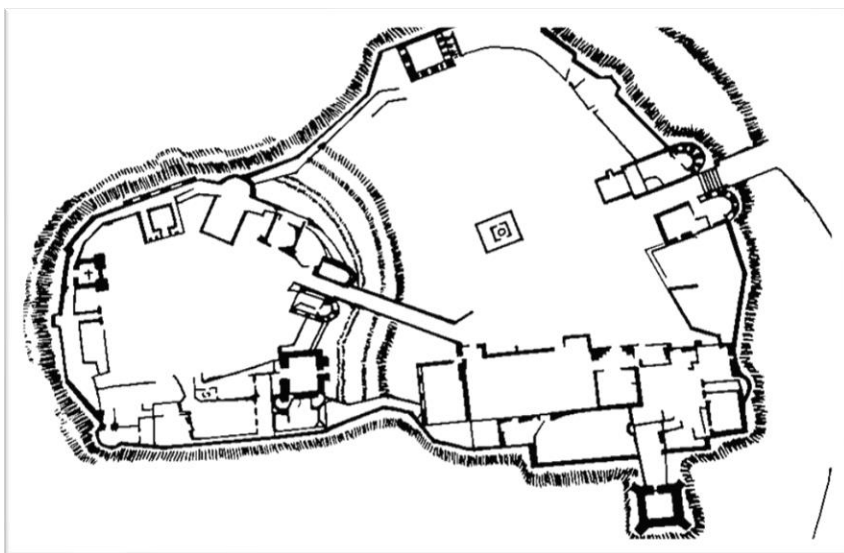
Directly opposite the church is Gamul House, now home to the Brewery Tap bar. Although it now has a late 17th century brick facade, this hides an earlier hall within. The steps up to the house's main entrance also give a clue that the Chester's Rows once extended further than they do today.



Cross Lower Bridge Street to the same side as Gamul House and turn left into Castle Street. This was once Castle Lane and the main route from the city centre to the castle. As you reach the Golden Eagle pub on your right you enter an area called 'Gloverstone'. The stone that gave the area its name vanished in the rebuilding of the castle over 200 years ago and the area quietly disappeared from memory and maps. But for hundreds of years, including much of our period, it marked the boundary between the authority of the city and the county (in the shape of the castle). It became a home to traders and craftsmen who were outside the reach of the city's merchant guilds and could avoid local tolls. Chester's trade guilds or companies regulated manufacturing and retailing in the medieval city. Gloverstone was also where the castle authorities handed over prisoners to the city's jurisdiction.

If you look to your left, you will see the tower of St Mary's on the Hill, another of medieval Chester's parish churches. Now an arts centre, 14th & 15th century features survive despite later restorations.

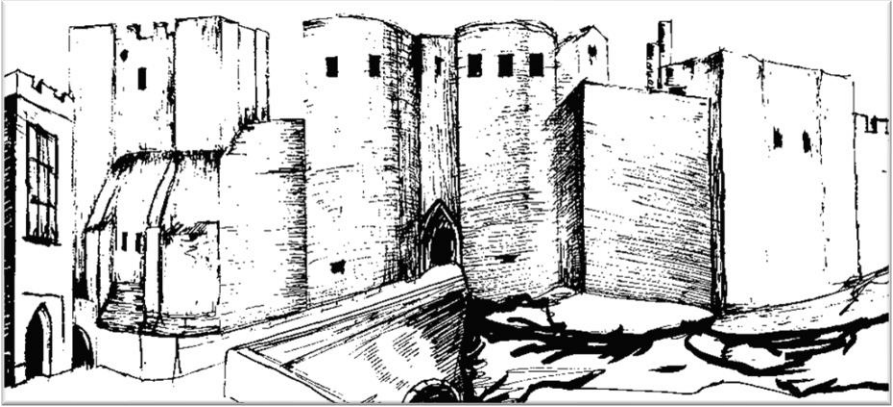
Ahead of you lies the castle. Founded in 1070 by Hugh Lupus, the castle was comprehensively remodelled in the Greek Revival style we see now some 200 years ago by the architect Thomas Harrison. Look ahead beyond the castle car park and in the left-hand corner you will see the 13th century Agricola Tower rising above its neighbours from more recent times. This is the largest surviving fragment of the medieval castle. The Agricola Tower, along with the castle's inner bailey, is normally closed to the public but may be open to view during heritage events.



The castle has had a long and rich history, including the seat of government for the county of Cheshire during the middle ages. Medieval visitors included King Edward I, The Black Prince and Henry 'Hotspur' (who later lent his name to a certain London football team). Edward I launched his conquest of Wales here in 1277, while over a century later King Richard II was a frequent visitor to Chester and so favoured the city that he elevated Cheshire to the status of a Principality in 1398. This did not last long though – he was usurped by his rival Henry Bolingbroke

who became King the following year and revoked Cheshire's Principality status.

Cheshire during the medieval period was ruled by the Earls of Chester and had considerable autonomy from the rest of England. The county even had its own Magna Carta in 1215 as England's did not apply here!



Turn right into Grosvenor Street, which was built in 1829 and was the first major alteration to the city's medieval street plan, providing a new route to both the castle and Wales. On your right is the Grosvenor Museum – Free to visit and well worth exploring. Continue along Grosvenor Street until you reach the pedestrian crossing just before the crossroads. The Falcon Inn will be on your right. A glorious black & white structure, the Falcon has been remodelled and rebuilt over the years, but its beer cellar is a medieval undercroft and at the front, on the first floor, is an enclosed stretch of Row – another clue that these galleried shops extended further than at present (another clue lies on the opposite side of Lower Bridge Street from the Falcon – an isolated short stretch of Row still in situ).

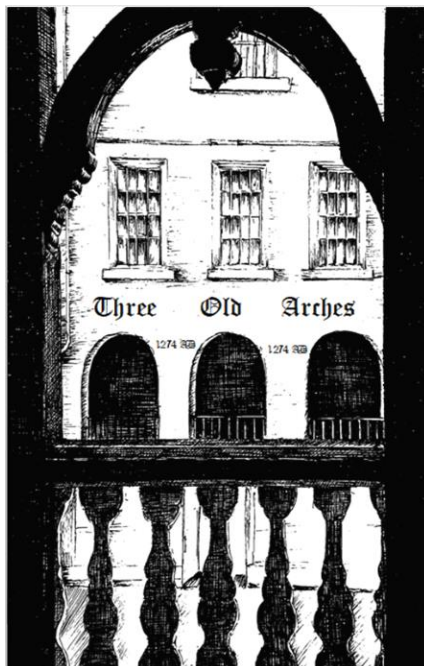
Take the pedestrian crossing by the side of the Falcon towards Bridge Street. On your left, by Cafe Nero, is Whitefriars. This narrow street takes its name from the Carmelite monks (known

as White Friars) who had a friary close by until the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s. Other streets not too far away are named Blackfriars and Greyfriars after the Dominicans and Franciscans, respectively. Three friaries in the city together with the abbey, St Johns and the various parish churches illustrate just how important religion was in medieval Chester.

Opposite Whitefriars, on the other side of Bridge Street, is St Michael's, another one of Chester's medieval churches. Like many old churches it has seen alteration and rebuilding over the centuries, but late medieval features remain inside. No longer used as a church, it became the location for Britain's first heritage centre in 1975.

As you start to walk up Bridge Street and a few yards further up than Whitefriars are the Three Old Arches (best viewed from the centre of Bridge Street). Forming part of Bridge Street Row, they are dated 1274 and are one of England's oldest shop fronts.

A little further ahead on your left are Pierpoint Lane and Commonhall Lane (renamed Street in the 19th century), another two of Chester's ancient narrow lanes. Another, Feathers Lane, lies opposite on the eastern side of Bridge Street.



Continue along Bridge Street until you come to St Peter's Church and the High Cross, where Chester's principal streets all meet. The heart of the medieval (and today's) city, a High Cross sat

on this site from the 14th century until 1646, when it was destroyed by Cromwell's troops during the civil war. 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. Don't be fooled by the Georgian costume though, the Town Crier was keeping locals & visitors up to date in our period too.

St Peters sits on the site of the Roman Principia or headquarters building and again displays features from throughout its history, including the medieval period. From the late middle ages until the early 19th Century a wooden structure stood outside the church, leaning against its wall opposite Bridge Street. Called the Pentice, it played an important role in administering justice and local government in medieval Chester.

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 during the middle ages. Numerous buildings still boast stone built medieval undercrofts or crypts. Some now house restaurants, coffee shops or bars, adding a distinctly medieval flavour to whatever takes your fancy.

Watergate Street meets the inner ring road shortly after the Rows have come to an end and where The Guild Bar lies. Formerly Holy Trinity church, another of the city's medieval parish churches, it was originally built in the 12th century, but the present building is Victorian. It later served as the Guildhall, the meeting place of Chester's merchant guilds.

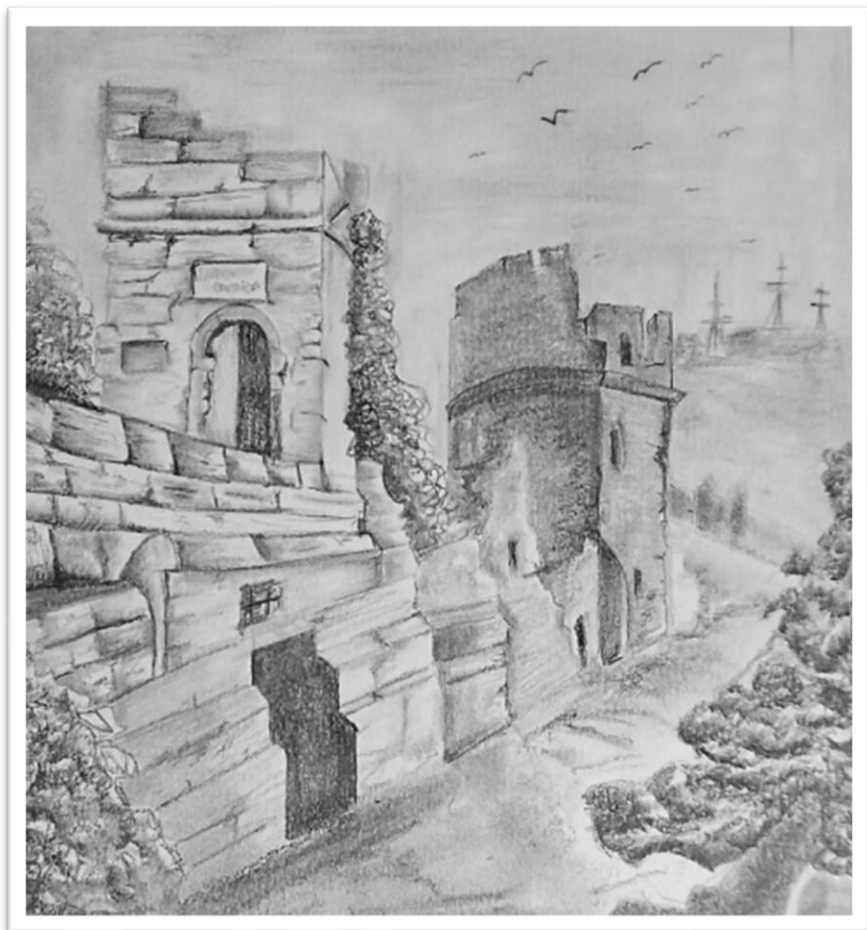
Use the pedestrian crossing to what is often now called Lower Watergate Street and head past half-timbered Stanley Palace towards the stone archway. Stanley Palace dates from 1591 but occupies the site of the old Dominican Friary (the Blackfriars we briefly met earlier). The arch ahead is the Watergate and beyond

stood the old port. It is perhaps difficult to imagine now, but during the middle ages the River Dee lapped at the city walls at this point and 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 early period, but here it really has changed beyond recognition.

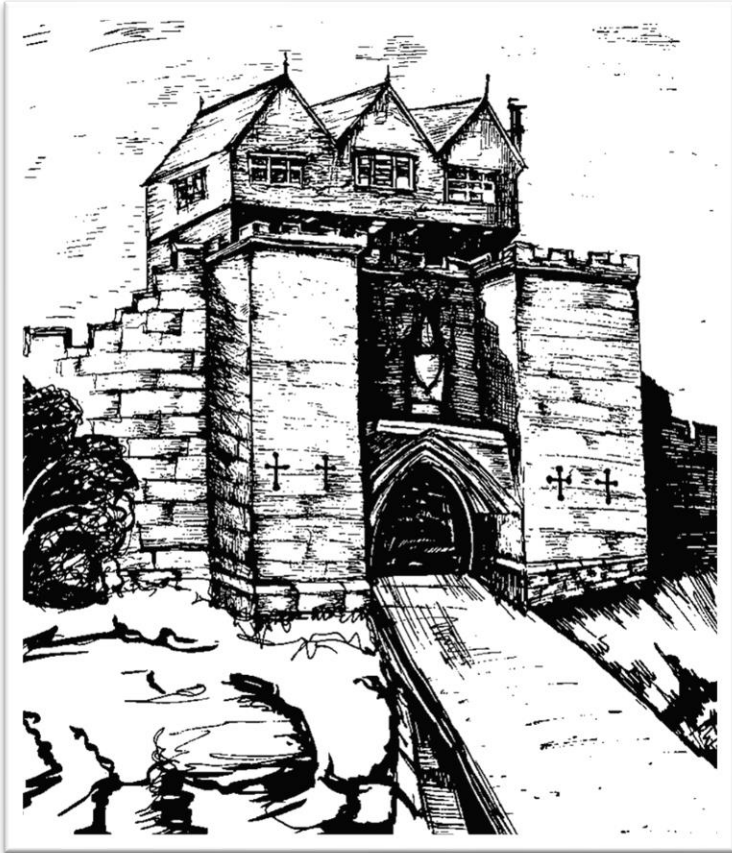
Head along the wall, passing by where medieval ships would have anchored below on what are now school playing fields. Within a few minutes you will arrive at the two towers that stand at the north west corner of the city wall, just beyond where the 19th century railway bisects the wall.

The nearest structure to you, the splendidly named Bonewaldesthorne'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 Bonewaldesthorne'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.



At Bonewaldesthorne's Tower the wall turns sharp right, forming the northern defences of the medieval city. Carry on along the wall and pass by Pemberton's Parlour – the present late 18th century tower replaced a medieval structure called the Goblin Tower. You will cross the inner ring road by means of the 1960s bridge and pass Morgan's Mount, built during the civil war siege.

You will soon arrive at the Northgate. Now an elegant Georgian structure dating to 1810 it replaced the medieval Northgate, which housed a notorious jail. Take the steps down to street level and turn towards the city centre.



You are now on Northgate Street and if you walk on the right-hand side you will pass through the Bluebell Inn. The building dates to the late 15th century and began life as two houses.

A little further down, on the opposite side of Northgate Street, is Little Abbey Gateway. Now tucked away and easily missed, it is another surviving fragment of the medieval abbey.

Carry on down Northgate Street, which soon opens into the Town Hall Square, where we started our medieval journey. This area is dominated by the Town Hall, which although opened as recently as 1869 takes its inspiration from the magnificent medieval cloth hall in the Flemish city of Ypres.

We hope you enjoyed discovering medieval Chester. If you want to dig a little deeper and uncover more about Chester in this period, why not visit the Grosvenor Museum or maybe take a guided tour with a Freeman of Chester from The Visitor Information Centre.

If you visit again you could catch Chester's wonderful Midsummer Watch, a colourful parade through the city whose origins lie in the 15th century and is held at the end of June. Or if you are coming back for a spot of Christmas shopping, the Winter Watch, one of Chester's festive season parades.

The Chester Mystery Plays are held every five years and return in 2023 and 2028. Dating to at least the early 15th century, the plays are based on biblical texts and were revived 70 years ago.

If it is looking at medieval Chester from the comfort of your own home that you are after, then there is plenty information online - but definitely look at mappingmedievalchester.ac.uk

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