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13 From (12), walk under **Bridge 123L** to the foot of the ramp mentioned in (9), and look around. This is the beginning of the Chester Canal, built before Telford's involvement, but upon which he later engineered many improvements. The area around the bottom of Northgate Locks would have been recent in Tom Rolt's time, as this was largely reconstructed with the widening of the railway line from 1902. The canal offices mentioned in (13) can be seen above the canal on the opposite bank.

14 Go under the railway bridge, and walk up past Northgate Locks. There are now three, but Telford's engineering reduced these from a five-lock staircase. At the top lock there is a lock cottage of a Telford design, one of several on the system, and a plaque commemorating 200 years of the Chester Canal.



15 The Ring Road Bridge of 1966 dominates the scene here. Although Tom was enthusiastic about early motor cars, by the late 1930s he was appalled by the general impact of the car and its strong influence on landscapes. He was, however, commissioned to write a booklet to commemorate the opening of the M1 Motorway in 1959, and travelled this in his vintage Alvis car. He would also write a booklet about the Wallasey-Liverpool Mersey Road Tunnel.

Go under the bridge, walk up the ramp, through the arch under the Walls and turn right, to ascend the Walls by St Martins Gate. (If you do not seek to return to the Cathedral, or seek a longer route, you may follow the Canal through the cutting, on the site of the Roman ditch, and ascend the Walls beyond the King Charles Tower, following these south to the back of the Cathedral).

Follow the Walls west onto the Northgate; stop here and look down Northgate Street towards the *Blue Bell*, which would have been demolished in the 1930s if plans to widen the street had succeeded. Tom was not involved in the 1930s campaign to save this now Grade 1 listed building, but he drew attention to many other threatened buildings around the country, and was part of a movement to ensure the retention of some of our historic built environment.

16 Descend the Walls at this point, and walk along Northgate Street back to the Cathedral.



Walk around Chester in the footsteps of Tom Rolt



Lionel Thomas Caswall Rolt (1910-1974) was highly influential in writing about, and campaigning for, the historic environment, notably canals and rivers, railway preservation, vintage cars, industrial archaeology and engineering history. In 1979, the secretary of the Newcomen Society for the Study of the History of Engineering and Technology, in which Tom was involved, described him as *"one of the two major influences in changing public indifference to industrial history..."*.

Although his name is not well-known in Chester, he was born and spent his infancy here, and was inspired by many boyhood visits until the 1920s. *"I think I was born just in time, for which of our modern cities, I wonder, could make such an impression upon a child?"* he wrote about Chester.



This trail links places that he knew in boyhood with features that reflect his later interests.

1 The anticipated starting point is the Visitor Information Centre at the Town Hall, opposite **Chester Cathedral**. (If you collect this leaflet from Chester History and Heritage, walk up Bridge Street and start and end the walk at **The Cross**.) Like many, Tom would be doubtful about the Victorian "restoration" of the Cathedral, and in his writings would criticize many church restorations.

Tom Rolt was born a mile away from here. He was an Anglican, and was buried in a Gloucestershire church yard; but he did have mystical feelings, many of them centred round Llanthony Priory and the Black Mountain, with which he became acquainted after his family moved to Hay-on-Wye in 1914.

One Christmas Eve, probably 1916, Tom's family attended a carol service at the Cathedral, and found that it was snowing outside. The first part of this trail follows the probable route of their walk home.

2 Go down **Northgate Street** and turn right. Stop at **The Cross**, and look east along **Eastgate Street**.

Electric trams ran down this street from 1903, and in later boyhood Tom would take these to visit Chester General Station, where he began to photograph locomotives.

Looking south, Bridge Street runs towards Handbridge, in the suburbs of Chester, where Tom was born at 7 Southview, Eaton Road, Handbridge. Much further beyond Handbridge is the Grosvenor Estate, where the infant Tom first saw *Katie*, the narrow gauge locomotive that would inspire a lifelong interest. This would lead to his founding of the Tallylyn Railway Preservation Society.



7 Southview, Eaton Road, Handbridge

3 Climb up onto **Watergate Row South**, using the steps flanked by signs that mark Watergate Street and Bridge Street. At Christmas 1916 Tom's family walked along this section to avoid the snow. Then, several courts ran off this Row; these were dwellings and small commercial premises, accessed only by passages. Doorways in the first section, up to No.29, mark the sites of closed passages, but only one public passage now survives, between numbers 43 and 45. The courts featured furniture workshops, with shops fronting the Row. Although the shops were mostly shuttered, there were sounds of craftsmen at work in the workshops. Later Tom stated that *"what I perceived then was an embodiment of the continuing life of an ancient city, labyrinthine, dark, mysterious yet not sinister but intensely human."* He felt a continuity with the mediaeval period, although even at that time most of the mediaeval structures had been replaced by Victorian ones. This sense of affinity with the past would be followed into most of his writings.

4 Parts of the Row have been rebuilt entirely, including a section at the lower end that was known as The Gap after part was demolished in the 1950s. Descend at the end of the Row, and follow **Watergate Street** down until you reach **Nicholas Street**, now the Inner Ring Road.

When Tom knew it, Nicholas Street was very much quieter for two reasons. Only the wealthiest citizens, like his uncle, Dr George Taylor, owned motor cars, and only in 1966 was Nicholas Street dualled to form part of the Inner Ring Road, demolishing the whole east side. Tom's uncle had lived in one of these cleared properties; he was a member of Chester Archaeological Society from around 1912 and into the late 1920s, although it is unclear whether he directly influenced Tom.

The surviving Georgian properties (now mostly offices) were once known as Pill Box Promenade (see the Blue Plaque on No. 8), as many of these were occupied by physicians. Crossing the ring road, (using the left hand pelican), turn left and walk past these properties; then turn right into **Grey Friars**. This road has been much enlarged since the 1920s. Walk down to the house on the left hand, south side, at the end.

5 This is **Grey Friars House**, which belonged to Dr Taylor, and where Tom would spend every Christmas until the 1920s. He described it in detail in *Landscape with Machines* (1971). *"For an impressionable young boy there could have been few more romantic houses, and certainly no more romantic city, in which to spend Christmas."* Mediaeval in origin, it was much altered in the Victorian era, and has since been converted into apartments. **With great care** (there is no footway), cross Nuns Road to the footpath overlooking the Racecourse and stand opposite the house, where there is a gap in the railings. First look back at the house - the date 1885 is recorded on the left hand bay. From the bay, Tom would look over the Racecourse at the Roodee, watching trains on the viaduct through binoculars.



6 Turn to look out over the **Roodee**. Tom would imagine himself as a Roman centurion on the Walls (although, unfortunately, this section of The Walls is a 12th century extension).

In the distance is the viaduct and the footbridge over the Dee that Tom would cross to watch trains; he would make his way across the Roodee from *Grey Friars House*, but this is not now possible. It is possible to walk down from the Watergate to Crane Bank and then to the footbridge, via a path to the left of the railway viaduct.

7 Follow the Walls, keeping the Racecourse on your left, north over Watergate and to the point before **Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower** where the walls were breached by the building of the Chester and Holyhead Railway. Glimpses of the railway viaduct, and trains, can be seen from various points *en route*. Look west from this **first bridge**; there are two sets of railway viaducts over the Dee, partially obscured by trees. Those on the right, still with rails, carried the London & North Western, from Crewe to Chester and Holyhead; those on the left carried the Great Western, with the route south through Shrewsbury. Tom would travel to Chester from Hay-on-Wye on the GWR route.



After 1955 Tom began to write biographies of engineers, following the Victorian writer Samuel Smiles. This included a volume on *George and Robert Stephenson* (1960). Robert Stephenson was responsible for the engineering of the Chester & Holyhead Railway, including the Dee bridge that collapsed on 24 May 1847, shortly after the line opened.

8 Walk past Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower, and leave the Walls by turning down the steps on the left before the second bridge over the railway; at their foot, turn right, opposite the entrance to Water Tower Gardens. Follow the ramp down and then turn sharp left to follow the **Shropshire Union Canal** towpath under Bridge 123L, which carries the road over the canal. Carry straight on towards the Dry Dock, and cross the canal by the turnover bridge. As you approach this, you can see a **large black plaque** on the far side of this bridge; go to view it.

The plaque was placed there in 2000 by the Chester & District Branch of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA); Tom's widow Sonia prepared the wording and attended its unveiling. It records that he co-founded the Inland Waterways Association in 1946, which furthered the development and restoration of inland waterways in Britain, but does not record his expulsion from the IWA by one of his co-founders! It stresses his influence on many other fields: *"His energy and the influence of his writings extending into the wide and varied sphere of what became industrial archaeology continue to enrich the lives of many."*

9 Go back onto the bridge, and look north at the boatyard opposite. This is now known as **Taylor's Boat Yard**, but before that it was the Shropshire Union Railway & Canal Company's yard. Most of the large fleet of boats owned by this company was built here, until the last one in 1917, and the whole fleet was repaired and maintained from here. The Company ceased carrying in 1921, after which all carrying passed to independent firms and individual traders.

One Shropshire Union narrow boat that was not built here was *Cressy*, built at their much smaller yard at Trefor, at the north end of Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, now part of a World Heritage Site. *Cressy* was subsequently operated by A and A Peate until 1929, carrying grain past this point from Ellesmere Port to their mill near Oswestry. Then Tom's uncle, the engineer Kyrle Willans, acquired *Cressy*, and converted it for holiday use.



Tom's first canal trips, in 1929 and 1930, were on *Cressy*, which he would acquire himself in 1939 to convert to a floating home. He saw canals as *"so many secret ways leading into the heart of England, peopled by men who were themselves a part of the English tradition."* and wrote the book *Narrow Boat* about his journeys in 1939-40. After this was published in 1944 it raised considerable public interest and led to the founding of the Inland Waterways Association in 1946.

Narrow Boat did not aim to encourage pleasure boating, although after 1945 Tom would help people who aspired to own boats. Pleasure boats were built and maintained at Taylor's Boat Yard for use on both the River Dee and the Shropshire Union Canal; holiday hire boating on English canals began near Chester at Christleton, although there is now no hire base in the area.

10 Stay on the bridge, and turn to look south back towards the Walls. This turnover bridge was built to allow horses to cross the canal as the towpath changed sides; horses were still being used to pull narrow boats past here until 1955. Tom was interested in engines and followed an engineering apprenticeship, but he did approve of horse-drawn timber boats rather than the motor-driven steel boats that increasingly replaced these from the 1950s. The new building development on your left stands partly on the site of a field on which boat horses were rested.

11 Retrace your steps towards the road bridge, but stop opposite the building now known as **Telford's Warehouse**. This dates from the 1790s, and accommodated a passenger boat that ran north to Whitby Locks (now known as Ellesmere Port, and the site of the National Waterways Museum) until the 1830s. Tom Rolt wrote a biography of *Thomas Telford* (1958); he was the engineer for the Wirral Line of the Ellesmere Canal, which ran from Ellesmere Port to join the older Chester Canal just beyond this point.



12 If you divert to visit Telford's Warehouse along Raymond Street, you will be close to the former **Canal Offices**, used by the Shropshire Union Company, then the London Midland & Scottish Railway Company and finally British Waterways - now empty. Tom visited these offices in 1947 to obtain a permit for his journey up the canal to Llangollen (then known as the Welsh Canal). Tom led the early IWA campaign to reopen this canal, which had been closed in 1944, and his journeys in 1947 and 1949 are recounted in *Landscape with Canals* (1974).