

The No-Steps Self-Guided Tour of Chester

Chester is an amazing city to explore — compact, safe and packed with history. What's more, for a city with 2,000-years of history and lots of old buildings, it's surprisingly accessible.

This no-steps trail makes the most of those accessible areas around the city with drop kerbs and pedestrian crossings; it also helps visitors to discover new areas sometimes overlooked on traditional walking tours. Let's go!

Checkpoint 1 Exchange Square

We start in the public space outside New Chester Market (great for lunch) and the Picturehouse cinema (check out the al-fresco balcony).

Follow the Coachworks Arcade, the name a reference to the sandstone facade of the former Edwardian Coach and Carriage Works, then walk into Town Hall Square. Chester radiates out from here.

Then, cross over and give Janya a pat, the baby elephant is a nod to the legacy of George Mottershead, the founder of Chester Zoo, Britain's most visited zoo.

Checkpoint 2 Chester Cathedral

The Cathedral dates from around 1092, making it a mere 1,000 years old. Stand outside the Great West Window with the main entrance to your left. This modern, stained-glass window depicts images of the northern saints, including St Werburgh, the patron saint of Chester who celebrates her feast day on February 3.

A visit to the Cathedral is by donation and there's an accessible route with a ramp up to the toilets and refectory. Check out, too, Chester Cathedral in Lego, a volunteer-run project to raise funds for the upkeep of the Cathedral by recreating a scale model. Most famous of all is the Chester Imp, a carving of The Devil in chains, a warning left by medieval monks to ward off evil from the dark corners of the building. He sits high up to the left of the altar, and he's got his eye on you ...

If you're saving a visit for later, then continue along the smooth pavement down St Werburgh Street, passing the war memorial with St Werburgh, and head down towards Eastgate Street.

Checkpoint 3 Eastgate Clock

It's photo stop time. You're looking at the famous Eastgate Clock, the great symbol of Chester. It's the most photographed clock in Britain after London's Big Ben and is marked with the words VR 1987 — the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria. She was our longest-serving queen until Elizabeth II beat her to it. But long before Chester's Victorian heyday, the sandstone Eastgate was the main entrance to the city for the incoming Roman army — you get 2,000 years of Chester history on this spot.

It wasn't always a tourist attraction, however. In the Middle Ages, heads would have been displayed on spikes above the Eastgate as a warning to Cestrians, that's the people of Chester. Following the Battle of Shrewsbury in 1403, when Henry 'Hotspur' Percy challenged King Henry IV, Chester is said to have displayed Hotspur's decapitated head, looking down from atop the Eastgate.

It's a famous battle in British history and was captured by Shakespeare in his play Henry IV Part One. The Bard invents the character, Sir John Falstaff, who claims they, "fought a long hour by Shrewsbury clock." But, ultimately, Hotspur lost his head!

Checkpoint 4 Roman Amphitheatre

Don't lose yours. Instead, walk underneath the clock and turn right, the flat pavement leading down St John Street. There are two pedestrian crossings with drop curbs at the bottom, so you can cross safely over to Chester's Roman Amphitheatre.

Chester, or Deva as it was known, was a westerly outpost of the Roman Empire, which stretched across the modern-day Mediterranean. For the soldiers newly deployed to Britannia, the climate would have come as a shock. The Amphitheatre was the hub of community life in Roman Chester. First built of wood and earth, then later in stone, it had, by around 200AD, reached its blood-splattered heyday. Gladiators fought here, too. These days the floor of the Amphitheatre is made of stones but, in Roman times, it was made of sand. Why? To soak up all the blood, of course!

By around 400AD, however, the Romans had gone — and the games of the Amphitheatre with them. The site was left to crumble and left undiscovered until works on Dee House, situated to the rear of the amphitheatre today, revealed the amphitheatre below in 1929. The excavations lasted all the way through until the early Seventies.

Follow the walkway to the rear of the amphitheatre and head left towards the Church of St John the Baptist. This place is home to one of Chester's great mysteries.

Checkpoint 5 St John's Church

While Chester Cathedral is the best-known place of worship in Chester, St John's long pre-dates it. St John's dates from the swirling mists of time of the Anglo-Saxon age. Unlike Chester Cathedral, however, St John's was never founded as a monastery. It was an ancient holy site and was known as a collegiate church.

It's known in Chester as the 'thin church'. That's not a reference to the spindly ruins of the eastern flank, but to the language of early Celtic Christianity when people talked about the 'thin places'. These are places whereby the world we know today, and another world we can't quite grasp, are at their thinnest point. Try to reach across ...

It's the mystery that lies within its ruined walls, however, that makes this place infamous. Situated high up on the eastern flank is a single, tapered piece of oak marked with the words 'dust to dust'. If it looks like a coffin, that's because it is! What's more, it has been deliberately placed there. All of this begs the question: if it's a coffin, then who was originally buried in it? The honest answer is we don't know for sure — but Chester folk tales offer suggestions.

Checkpoint 6 The Groves

Follow the flat pavement from the eastern side of St John's and enter the gates of the Grosvenor Park. The Second Marquess of Westminster, whose statue now stands at its heart, gifted the land to the city with the landscape architect Edward Kemp laying out the grounds in the 1860s. The park is a lovely spot to explore with smooth paths and manicured borders of season-changing flowers. Follow the ramp down to the gates by the Queen's Park Suspension Bridge and head onto The Groves.

The riverside promenade on the banks of the River Dee was laid out in the 1730s and, by the era of Queen Victoria, was Chester's favourite place to stroll, take the air and enjoy genteel pursuits. It has cafes and public toilets today — but also has a sense of darkness.

In the days of public executions, finally outlawed by the Victorians with the 1868 Capital Punishment Amendment Act, criminals would be paraded through the streets of the city, heading out to the modern-day suburb of Boughton. The gallows were located here for many years, making it Chester's answer to London's Tyburn. One of the most famous hangings in Chester was of the alleged thief, John Clare, in 1801. Clare had tried to escape the gallows by throwing himself into the River Dee, only then to die by drowning. He was then plucked from the water to swing from gallows.

Checkpoint 7 Edgar's Field

Walk along the river, passing the little pier where Chester Boat excursions depart, and head towards the Old Dee Bridge, the medieval bridge that spans the River Dee to the modern-day suburb of Handbridge. Cross the road carefully by the traffic lights on the Handbridge side of the bridge and head right into the park — it's home to one of Chester's hidden gems.

To the rear of Edgar's Field is a mound with an ancient sandstone-carved effigy of the Roman goddess Minerva. She was the patron of arts and craftsmen. In Roman times, this was the quarry for stone to build the fortress of Deva and the weathered rock shrine a site of worship. You can still pick out her figure, holding a spear and wearing a helmet, an owl over her shoulder.

Edgar's Field dates from the Saxon period and gets its name from King Edgar, the great-grandson of Alfred the Great, who held a council near here in 973AD. The king then visited nearby St Johns Church, rowed up the River Dee by eight Saxon, Welsh and Viking princes. It was laid out as a public park by the first Duke of Westminster, Hugh Lupus Grosvenor, who presented it to the City of Chester in 1892.

Finally, retrace your steps back over the bridge and head straight.

Checkpoint 8 Lower Bridge Street

The home straight, heading back towards the centre of Chester at the Cross, takes you through the Bridgegate and along Lower Bridge Street — home to three of Chester's most interesting pubs. Closest to the river is The Bear and Billet, a site of pilgrimage for Beatles fans as the birthplace of John Lennon's grandmother, Annie Jane Millward. In the middle, raised at Row level, is The Brewery Tap, formerly Gamul House, where Charles I stayed on the eve of the Battle of Rowton Moor in 1645 during the English Civil War. Finally, just beyond Castle Street, is Ye Olde King's Head, which is said to be one of the most haunted buildings in Chester.

Make your way up the hill where there's a pedestrian crossing at the top to cross into Bridge Street, which is packed with cafes, many with accessible toilets. The Town Crier will deliver a daily proclamation at noon at the Cross during summer months and, from here, it's close to Town Hall Square.

This self-guided accessible tour has been created with local Green Badge Tour Guide, David Atkinson, and is a part of a project in development to improve accessible events in Chester city centre. We are still developing our offerings and would appreciate your feedback about how we can make anything better or anything you would like to see that's not out there right now.

Please send your feedback or suggestions to: info@acecheshire.co.uk