

The Quiet Self-Guided Tour of Chester

Chester is an amazing city to explore — but it can get busy. Sometimes, we all need a place to sit quietly and decompress, especially families with neurodiverse children.

Enter the Quiet Chester Trail, an insider-knowledge guide to the best places to take some time out. Read on.

Checkpoint 1 Picturehouse Gallery

We start at the Picturehouse cinema. There's a nice little café here but Chester locals know the best spot is the café balcony, overlooking Exchange Square below. Sit, breathe and feel the fresh air.

If you look down towards Chester New Market, then you'll spot the model of a boar, the emblem of the Twentieth Legion, who established Chester as the largest Roman fortress in Britain some 2,000 years ago. But even the Romans took a break. You could later visit the hypocaust, the Roman underfloor-heating system, in the Roman Gardens; it was salvaged from the former Roman bathhouse.

Now, if you're ready to start exploring, let's set off. We're first going to meet a famous Chester architect.

Checkpoint 2 Abbey Square

Walk along the side of Storyhouse, Chester's arts centre, cross Northgate Street and walk along the side of Gateway House, a University of Chester building, turning right into Abbey Square. This tranquil square of fine Georgian townhouses was originally the city's monastic quarter. Modern-day Chester Cathedral was originally founded as a Benedictine monastery in the 11th century.

Have a close look at a house on your right as you enter the square. The blue plaque explains this once belonged to John Douglas, one of Chester's famous architects. Douglas lived in the era of Queen Victoria and designed the Eastgate Clock, now the most photographed in Britain after London's Big Ben and the symbol of Chester, amongst others.

Abbey Square is today home to a school for young people with special educational needs. It remains a beautiful place to bring a picnic. Take the weight off and enjoy the peace.

Checkpoint 3 Cathedral Gardens

Having admired the Cathedral's Gothic-revival façade, reworked by the architect George Gilbert Scott in Victorian times, follow the cobblestones of Abbey Street down towards the city walls ahead. This section of walls is the oldest in Chester, witness to the full sweep of our 2000-year history.

If you follow the wall to the right, then it leads towards the Cathedral gardens. The gardens are shaped like a military medal — a nod to the Cheshire Regiment. Walk along the walls and turn right past the Addleshaw Tower, the free-standing Cathedral bell tower. A controversial building when first opened in the 1970s, the distinctive shape sparked a space-race-inspired nickname: the Chester Rocket.

The Victorian façade of the Cathedral is marked with gargoyles, designed as conduits to drain rainwater from the sandstone exterior, and grotesques, carvings to scare away evil spirits. But there are also caricatures, including a satirical nod to Chester's Victorian heyday. Gladstone and Disraeli, the 19th-century prime ministers, famously spent their time bickering but, today, the gardens are a place of calm. Sit a while.

Checkpoint 4 The Garth

The Cathedral is free to visit — maybe consider a donation to help with upkeep. You can take a stroll around the former monastic cloisters, or visit the shrine of St Werburgh, Chester's patron saint, in the Lady Chapel, lighting a candle as you leave. There's also The Refectory for a cuppa and bathrooms. But our favourite spot in Chester's one-thousand-year-old cathedral is The Garth.

The former monastic herb garden is a tranquil oasis. The centrepiece of this hidden Shangri La is a beautiful sculpture, Water of Life, by the Cheshire-based sculptor Stephen Broadbent. It depicts a biblical scene, Jesus and the Samaritan women, symbolising Christ's love of people from all backgrounds. Jesus said: "The water that I shall give will be an inner spring always welling up for eternal life ..."

Sit, close your eyes and listen to the gentle tinkling of the fountain. This is truly a magical place.

Checkpoint 5 The Amphitheatre

It's a bit of a walk to our next stop – but worth it. From the main entrance of the Cathedral, take St Werburgh Street towards Eastgate Street and walk underneath the famous Eastgate Clock (remember that man Douglas). As you look up, you will see the words VR 1987 – the clock was installed for the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria.

Then take a right and head down St John Street, crossing the road carefully at the bottom by two sets of pedestrian crossings. Ahead is Chester's Roman Amphitheatre, the heart of Deva, the Roman city of Chester. Imagine how this place once looked! We know gladiators fought in Chester because the staircase down to the stony floor of the amphitheatre today marks the site of an old Roman shrine to Nemesis, the goddess of retribution. Gladiators would have made an offering here before entering the arena. But, in Roman Chester, the floor was made of sand. Why? To soak up all the blood, of course.

Gladiators still parade through the amphitheatre but, these days, they're groups of local schoolchildren, learning about Chester's Roman heritage. You'll know when they're close because you'll hear the incoming legion. Can you make out the words in Latin? "Sin, sin, sin, dex, sin." - "Left, left, left, right, left."

Checkpoint 6 St Johns Church

Walk along the passageway to the rear of the amphitheatre and head towards the Parish Church of St John the Baptist. This has been an ancient holy site since the Anglo-Saxon era, the first church built here in the 7th century, and it served as Chester's original cathedral in the 11th century.

As well as the sense of spirituality, St John's is also a great place to take some time out. To the rear of the church, take a pew on one of the benches in the gardens and enjoy an elevated view over the River Dee and the Queens Park Suspension Bridge, connecting to The Meadows, the expanse of nature and riverside walks beyond.

Breathe.



Checkpoint 7 Down to The Groves

Take the steep steps down the passageway to the side of the gardens and walk – carefully – down towards the river.

This is The Groves, the riverside promenade laid out in the Georgian period. If this was an episode of Bridgerton, then you'd now be rocking a parasol and a bonnet.

The Groves is great for strolling, take-away coffees, tasty Cheshire ice-creams (under the bridge), plus there are public toilets here. It's a lovely place to walk, listen to the quixotic quacking of the ducks, or sit on a bench and watch a performance in the Victorian bandstand.

This is one of Chester's favourite places to watch the world go by.



Checkpoint 8 Grosvenor Park - The Belvedere

Behind The Groves is the Grosvenor Park, the public space designed in the 1860s by the landscape architect Edward Kemp from land was gifted by the Second Marquess of Westminster. The latter's statue now stands at its heart. The park is a lovely place to revel in the healing power of nature, taking in the season-changing floral displays. It also hosts open-air theatre in summer, staged by arts centre Storyhouse.

The crowning glory of the park, however, is The Belvedere, the octagonal viewing platform, designed by that man Douglas again. It provides an elevated viewpoint to look across the river to The Meadows and take in the glorious setting of Chester on the banks of the Dee.

Most of all, it proves that, while Chester can be busy with tourists, there are also plenty of places for some quiet time.

Enjoy Chester but, also, enjoy the peace.

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

